

Doon Watch Nature Series for Dehradun Live Hindustan Times by Sanjay Sondhi

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Funky Fungi

The seasons of the year often mirror people's moods. Many people, love the cold winter, with its chilly mornings-just the right time to sit out with a cuppa coffee and the newspaper. Others love the sounds of spring and summer, with hues of flowering trees, accompanied by the singing birds. As for me, the season that gets my adrenalin running is here-the monsoons!

I just love the rains-its the time of the year when the forests are buzzing with life-the tiny buzzing crickets,the croaking frogs, and the occasional rustle of a reptile in the undergrowth. Not all forms of life can make themselves heard, even though they embellish the landscape in their unique fashion. One such living organism is fungi. On a recent stroll through the forests with my family, I was delighted to find that multi-hued fungi had sprouted generously on the moist forest floor.

Despite the fact that fungi cannot move, it more than makes up for it lack of agility by its funky shapes, sizes and colours. As we ambled along the forest path, we came across fungi that were pink, red, yellow, shades of brown and even purple. One of the fungi had a smooth head, while another one was warty. And my wife, Anchal, named them the frog and toad fungi respectively (the warty ones are called toadstools, anyway). My son, Yash, found and photographed three pink fungi, funkily arranged, poking their heads out of the forest floor, and posing raunchily like three musketeers!



At one time, fungi were considered to be part of the Plant Kingdom. However, today, they are classified into the Fungal Kingdom, separate from plants, on account of many differences in life cycle and structure. It is estimated that over 1.5 million fungal species exist on the earth, with only 5% of these having been described by science. Fungi includes mushrooms, toadstools, molds and yeast. They are single or multi-cellular organisms that reproduce through tiny spores. Mostly, fungi are invisible to the human eye. The funny shaped mushrooms or toadstools that we see are the fruiting bodies of fungi, from which emerge spores for reproduction.

Edible mushrooms are fungi as well. If you ever decide to collect mushrooms to eat from forests, be careful, as many mushrooms, especially the brightly coloured ones have toxins that are poisonous. During a field trip in Arunachal Pradesh, the locals taught me a cool trick. Watch whether ants visit the fungi, they said. If they do, the fungi are edible! I have observed this myself, and sure enough, fungi that ants visit are edible.

Over the years, I have seen and photographed fungi in marvelous shapes and colours, but the one that left me amazed was bio-luminous fungi that I saw in Bhimashankar, near Pune. I still remember my first sight of this—we shone our torches in the darkness of the forest, and then turned the torches off. All around us, the fungi continued to glow, like a eerie light on the forest floor. Breathtaking!

For all their funkiness, fungi play a crucial role in our ecosystem by assisting in the process of decay and decomposition. Fungi lack chlorophyll, that most other plants have, and hence are not capable of producing food through photosynthesis. By decomposing organic matter, fungi play a stellar role in keeping the web of life churning. In fact, the presence of fungi points to a healthy micro-habitat. And I am glad to see them in abundance in the Doon Valley.

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Making a difference: Separate out your wet waste and decompose it in a small vermiculture pit. Did you know that you can do this in only a small bin

in your home, with limited effort? With no side effects-no odour, no pests,
no muck.

Photograph caption: Funky Fungi