The Waxcap Fungi

The waxcap fungi are a group of very attractive small fungi which are fairly widespread and can be quite common, with a lot of different species growing together where the conditions are favourable. They require old grassland which has not been managed by the application of artificial fertilizer, weed-killers or herbicides and the grass has been kept short by the light grazing of sheep and rabbits. Good sites may be due to the exposure to harsh weather conditions, or just poor soils. Places to find a good range of species include the short turf at St Abbs Head, especially above the Mire Loch and along the roadside between Lauder and Stow on Lauder Common. Places with poor soil include the edges of sand dunes where short grass has become established such as on Holy Island and Aberlady Bay, they can occasionally become established in old lawns where the grass is cut and the clippings removed but where no soil improvements are made, but they can turn up almost any where such as along road side verges and in open woodland.

Waxcaps come in a wide range of colours from bright red, through yellows and amber to pink, white and shades of green. A few can change colour as they mature such as the Blackening Waxcap, *Hygrocybe conica*, illustrated, which comes in variable shades of red, orange and yellow and turns almost black at maturity. They are small fungi, most growing little more than two inches tall, have a flat or a conical cap which may turn up along the edge of the cap at maturity.

Waxcaps get their common name from the waxy texture to the cap surface and this is an important feature in their identification. On a dry day is the waxy surface moist or dry? Also, is the stem or stipe dry or moist to the touch? At least one species is very sticky to the touch, *Hygrocybe glutinipes*, it will stick to a finger like flypaper. Without knowing those feature it is difficult to identify most species with confidence. People often send in photos for identification but without being able to feel the texture of the cap and stem accurate identification is impossible. Some species such as the white ‘Snowy Waxcap’ and soft pink ‘Pink Waxcap’ are quite distinct but most others require a specimen and a book with a key to identify them with confidence. There are about 60 species found in Britain, this is an attractive group of fungi to look out for as they are fruiting just now.

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