

# urban JUNGLE Part 3: SHOOT AUTUMNAL FUNGI

NEW SERIES

It takes a keen eye to spot a perfect specimen from 50 paces but Elliott Neep has made fungi-spotting a veritable art form. Join him on Hampstead Heath as he uses every trick in the book to create stunning natural world studies of life in miniature.



**ABOUT ELLIOTT NEEP**

Elliott is a passionate pro wildlife photographer. Along with British mammals, he travels further afield to shoot images of the natural world. Check out [www.emwp.co.uk](http://www.emwp.co.uk) to see more of Elliott's work.

THE FIRST WILDLIFE SUBJECT I photographed was a birch tree polypore (*Piptoporus betulinus*) in grainy black & white. I can vividly remember looking at the structure for the first time and thinking that it was so odd, like a coral shelf sticking out from a tree. The more I walked through the woodlands, the more weird and wonderful structures I found.

Fungi can be found in most habitats but are most closely associated with woodland. You will find individuals that stand alone, but also tufts, clusters and troops, consisting of dozens of caps. In size they range from the tiny mycena, at just a few millimetres, through to the colossal giant polypore, which collectively extends to over a metre. Fungi provide an accessible subject and with the

right approach and a few basic tips they are easy to photograph well.

**A VERSATILE APPROACH**

So what is the best option when photographing fungi? My answer would be using ALL options available to you. If you have a compact camera with a zoom, then use the zoom's versatility. However, don't just stand in the same position – move around and over the subject. Get close-up with the wide-angle, get low down with the zoom, and use the macro mode. Look at the fungi with a concerted effort to analyse its structure and form. Are there any patterns or abstract compositions that could benefit from close-up focusing? For example, the cap's pattern, lots of small caps together, or the gill structure?

If you are using an SLR with a selection of lenses then the options can be even greater. When I am on fungi forays, I generally take three lenses with me – a 300mm+ super telephoto, 100mm macro, and 16-35mm super wide-angle. Together these three lenses can produce an array of styles to suit the countless species and habitat combinations I might find.

**LIGHTING & CONDITIONS**

I always aim to photograph fungi in bright but overcast conditions after rain, as the soft light and damp help saturate colours on the forest floor. There may also be a splatter of water droplets on the fungi for added effect (although you could add this yourself for a bit of sparkle). Many species of fungi look better when slightly wet as they glisten and shine.

Be careful of photographing in direct sunshine as many cap fungi (especially the agarics) have bright white stems. These can easily burn out, as they will be out of latitude range when compared to the darker leaf litter. For added wildlife interest, exercise a little patience and wait, as many flies are attracted to fungi. They will sit perfectly still on the cap while feeding on the surface.

To add a little punch, I sometimes use a subtle amount of flash to light up the stem and underside of a toadstool. I dial in -2.0 on the camera or back of the flashgun and add the Stofen diffuser. More frequently, I use a reflector to light the underside or add some warmth. My 5-in-1 Portaflash reflector provides a great range of options (turn to page 52 to subscribe and get a free 5-in-1 Portaflash just like Elliott's).

**MAKING A SELECTION**

Be meticulous in your selection of a specimen. There is no point spending time tidying the scene and taking a photograph if the fungi itself is decaying and ragged, no matter how rare. Most fungi do not stand in the leaf litter all year and some begin to decay within a day after being formed.

The toadstool or mushroom that is visible is the fruiting body of a thread-like, fungal mass. This grows out of sight in the leaf litter, earth or rotting wood. Fungi are sensitive to weather patterns and co-ordinate their fruiting growth with damp weather. Autumn is the perfect season for fungi, as there is plenty of decaying matter to fuel their growth. At a suitable time, the fruiting body is grown to release the spores – this is the fungi's method of reproduction.

Timing has to be either remarkably precise or coincidental, ie you stumble across them. As I take many walks in woodland and meadows for

other subjects, I have been able to record locations where particular species grow. When the season arrives, I go back to the locations, checking on their condition and then photographing the fungi when they are fresh and perfectly formed.

It is a good idea to take regular walks and make notes where you see fungi. They are perennial and will spring up in relatively the same place given the right conditions. You can also join a local 'fungi foray' designed for amateur mycologists and would-be chefs wishing to cook wild fungi.



**FLY AGARIC**

At the end of a day's fungi-hunting, I spotted this newly emerged agaric. I laid the camera on the ground and composed the shot. I had to remove a few leaves, brush off dirt on the cap, and trim away longer blades of grass before the scene was perfect.

Location Hampstead Heath, London | Camera Canon EOS-1Ds Mark II w/ angle-finder | Lens Canon EF 300mm f/2.8 IS plus 1.4x converter | Exposure details Av, ISO 100, 1/25sec at f/4

**HUNGRY?**

The largest fungus on record is an endangered species, *Bridgeoporus nobilissimus*. This monstrous variety can grow as big as 75cm long by 100cm wide by 50cm tall, and can weigh over 100kg.