



Wild food gathering policy

1. Introduction

There is increasing interest in and media coverage of gathering, preparing and consuming wild food. Whilst this can undoubtedly encourage an interest in the natural environment uncontrolled foraging can impact negatively on ecosystems. This is particularly the case with the collection of wild fungi. This policy provides context and guidance for management of wild food gathering on Surrey Wildlife Trust sites.

2. Legislation

Section 4 (3) of the Theft Act 1968. states that "a person who picks mushrooms growing wild on any land, or who picks flowers, fruit or foliage from a plant growing wild on any land, does not (although not in possession of the land) steal what he picks, unless he does it for reward or for sale or other commercial purpose; i.e. it is an offence to uproot plants for commercial purposes without authorisation. For purposes of this subsection "mushroom" includes any fungus, and "plant" includes any shrub or tree".

Under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) it is illegal to uproot any wild plant without permission from the landowner or occupier. Uproot is defined as to "dig up or otherwise remove the plant from the land on which it is growing". In addition, it is illegal to pick, uproot, destroy or sell, and/or collect and cut any plant listed under Schedule 8 of this act. For the purposes of the legislation, the term "plant" includes algae, lichens and fungi as well as the true plants - mosses, liverworts and vascular plants.

Many of Surrey Wildlife Trust's sites are Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and Natura 2000 sites. Under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) it is an offence to forage on a SSSI. In addition, anything above "de minimus" collecting is likely to require formal consent from Natural England and any fungi or plants listed as notified features of a SSSI will receive special protection.

3. Fungi

3.1 Background

There are at least 12,000 species of fungi native to the UK. They can be found in all habitats and are an essential component of the biodiversity of our nature reserves and countryside sites. Fungi are a vital part of functioning ecosystems playing a key role in decomposition, recycling of nutrients and provision of food and habitat resource to many other organisms. Whilst some fungi species may be found in abundance others are rare, threatened or in decline.

Fruiting bodies of some species of fungi are valued as food and actively collected for the pot by individuals for their own consumption or by groups collecting commercially for the restaurant trade.

Some Surrey Wildlife Trust sites have been regularly subjected to indiscriminate and intensive collecting for many years.

3.2 Collection policy for fungi

Collection of any fungi from sites under management by Surrey Wildlife Trust is not permitted unless part of an authorised scientific or educational survey or event or as otherwise authorised by law

This policy is founded on the following principal reasons:

- Legal – see above;
- The critical ecological role of fungi and their relationship to a host of other species, some of which are dependent on fungi;
- The effect that collecting of fruiting bodies may have on the reproductive capability of fungi. Some of these species are likely to be rare or threatened;
- Visitors to our sites are entitled to enjoy the sight of fungal fruiting bodies in situ;
- Groups of collectors can cause damage to sensitive habitats and other species through trampling in concentrated areas.

3.3. Enforcement

- It is acknowledged that practical enforcement of a ban on fungi collecting can be difficult as the activity often takes place at first light or in remote parts of a site. However, by making our position clear to all site visitors it is hoped that the impact of this activity will reduce over time.
- Signs in multiple languages (eg English, Italian, Polish, Romanian) should be erected in the Autumn at those sites deemed most at risk from intensive fungi collecting. These signs should state that no species can be taken from site without possession of a licence from Surrey Wildlife Trust.
- Collectors who are encountered by site managers will be politely asked to desist and given an explanation as to why Surrey Wildlife Trust does not allow the activity. Collected specimens will be confiscated.
- Persistent offenders should will reported to the police and a crime reference number obtained. On sites where the problem is acute site managers may wish to proactively raise the issue directly with the Wildlife crimes officer or local neighbourhood police to ask for support in monitoring the activity.

3.5 Formal Surveys of Fungi

Collecting of individual fruiting body specimens is a legitimate aid to species identification for scientific reasons, and to provide back-up voucher specimens for some records.

Where authorised formal surveys are taking place it is accepted that mycologists take such specimens to enable ex-situ identifications. Prior permission from Surrey Wildlife Trust should be obtained.

3.6 Fungal Forays

Well managed fungal forays are valuable in adding to species records for a site, monitoring populations, especially of species of conservation concern, and informing and enthusing the public. Fungal forays will always be supervised by suitably qualified mycologists and take place with the permission of the site manager. As with formal surveys de-minimus collection of some fruiting bodies for identification will be allowed at the discretion of the foray leader and site manager.

4. Plants

4.1 Background

Small scale, non commercial gathering of some fruits, nuts and leaves is a traditional use of the countryside. It is unlikely to cause harm to the plant itself provided it is carried out in moderation and the plant is common. However, the complete stripping of fruits from a shrub or tree will obviously affect food availability to other species.

4.2 Plant gathering policy

The collecting of fruits, nuts and leaves from plants that is above de-minimus, clearly large scale and commercial is not permitted on Surrey Wildlife Trust sites. Uprooting of plants is never allowed except in regulated management activities.

Any collection of fruit, nuts and leaves on SSSIs requires prior agreed permission from Surrey Wildlife Trust

Any promotion by Surrey Wildlife Trust of the value of wild food should be carried out via organised events.

Any collecting of plants should follow responsible guidelines, for example those within the Mushroom Pickers Code of Conduct.

5. Animals

5.1 Vertebrates

There is a presumption against the taking of any vertebrates on Surrey Wildlife Trust reserves for human consumption, unless as part of an organised Surrey Wildlife Trust activity.

The following exceptions may apply:

Angling

On some Surrey Wildlife Trust reserves there are formal angling agreements with recognised fishing clubs which may allow for keeping catch for the pot.

Unauthorised taking of any other vertebrates for food is regarded as poaching and offenders will be reported to the police. All wild birds, their nests and eggs are protected by law.

On sites where the problem is acute site staff will proactively raise the issue directly with the Wildlife Crimes Officer or local neighbourhood police to ask for support in combating the activity.

4.2 Invertebrates

Roman Snail

Issues relating to foraging for wild terrestrial invertebrates as food are mainly confined to the taking of Roman Snail *Helix pomatia*. This species was introduced by the Romans and can be found in Surrey on the chalky soils of the North Downs. It is protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended), making it illegal to kill, injure, collect or sell these snails. There have been some incidences of collection of Roman Snails for the restaurant trade in Surrey. All such incidences will be reported to the police.

Chinese mitten crab and Signal Crayfish

Chinese mitten crab *Eriocheir sinensis* and Signal Crayfish *Pacifastacus leniusculus* are invasive species present on river catchments within the county. Although regarded by many as delicacies, animals removed from the natural environment for conservation reasons should not be consumed due to the species' potential uptake of toxins.

Other

Foraging for other wild invertebrates is negligible but could potentially become a problem with the growing worldwide interest in the farming of insects as a source of protein.