FAIRY RINGS

DO YOU BELIEVE IN FAIRIES?

(If the answer is a scornful ‘No’ then start reading half way down)

Have you
ever noticed rings of dark green
grass on lawns or in fields? They will probably
be Fairy Rings and if you look carefully you should see
two rings of darker green grass separated by a narrow brown strip
where the grass looks compressed and dead. For hundreds of years
people thought that this brown ring was caused by fairies or elves dancing
around their magic circle. It was thought lucky to have a Fairy Ring near your
home but not very safe to step inside one as this might bring bad luck. It was not
until 1792 that an English botanist, William Withering, suggested that it was not fairies
that caused these rings but the growth
toadstool with the common name
scientific one of Marasmius
cause rings and some are very
fungus Calvatia growing in
between 250-400 years old.
room we looked at in January
from the millions of spores
the cap? Now we are filling
and mushrooms. Each spore
it puts out a small tube which
and making a great network of
and altogether as mycelium. The growth will be more or less circular and the fruit-
bodies (or toadstools) are produced around the outer edge. If you look near the
dark green grass of Fairy Rings in the autumn you will probably see the small
(4-6 cm high) pale brown, leathery fruitbodies of the ‘Fairy Ring Champignon’.
It is not really possible to see the fungal network or mycelium without
wrecking the grass and we will think of ways of looking at mycelium
another time.

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Fig. A spore and mycelium. From Kendrick, B,
A Young Person’s Guide to the Fungi.
Mycologue Publ. (1986).

Next time: Fungus Foray 2.