

Luminous fungi

The next time you go down to the woods at night - turn off the torch and walk in the dark. You might see the ghost fungus, *Omphalotus (Pleurotus) nidiformis*, glowing eerily on a rotting log. It is beige coloured, turning darker with age, and can be either a parasite on living trees, causing a white rot, or a saprophyte on dead wood. It is widespread, growing on wattles, peppermints, banksias, eucalypts, WA Christmas trees, and even pines and plane trees.

The amount of luminescence varies, but persists for a while even after it has been picked. Sometimes it even glows so much you can read by it! The luminescence is apparently caused by chemical action between fungal enzymes and oxygen.

The first time I saw this fungus it gave me a bad scare - I thought I'd had too much plonk around the campfire! It must have had a reputation as some sort of 'bad medicine' with Aboriginal people (who were nervous of things which occurred in the dark) but I have been unable to find any recorded stories.

PS: Don't eat it! It has a mild taste, but after a few hours will cause you to vomit the entire contents of your stomach!

Penny Hussey



Ghost fungus by Katie Syme from 'Fungi of Southern Australia' by N. Bougher and K. Syme.