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Bearded tooth - *Hericium erinaceum*

The bearded tooth (or hedgehog fungus, as it is also known) is a species of fungus. Fungi are a separate kingdom of organisms from plants and animals– they differ from plants in that they have no chlorophyll (the chemical that allows plants to obtain food from the sun) and from animals in not being mobile. They obtain their food by living in or on their food supply and spreading into new food as the local environment becomes depleted of nutrients. Many fungi produce obvious fruiting bodies, variously called mushrooms, toadstools, puffballs or brackets, depending on their shape. However, the fruiting body is only part of the whole fungus - most of the organism lives underground, as a network of filaments (rather like the electricity cables that connect street lamps in a town), forever searching out and growing into new food supplies.

The bearded tooth grows mainly on the wounds of old living trees and on the ends of felled trunks in deciduous woods. It often grows high up on its host trees, which are usually beech (*Fagus sylvatica*), but may also be oak (*Quercus spp*). The 'mushrooms' (or fruiting bodies) appear in late summer to autumn and are up to 25cm across, normally with one or more large clusters of long, fleshy, hanging spines, which start off white and become yellowish brown with age. In this respect, the fruiting bodies look somewhat like hedgehogs climbing the trees, hence the old name of the fungus.

The bearded tooth has an extremely local distribution in Britain, possibly because it is restricted to areas of woodland where there has been a long continuity of trees. It is scattered but locally common in southern England, rare in the Midlands and is absent from other parts of the British Isles. The fungus is classified as endangered in Great Britain and is a UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) priority species. It is specially protected under Schedule 8 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, meaning that the species is protected from being picked, uprooted, destroyed and sold, and is included on the provisional European red data list for fungi.

In Kent, the bearded tooth has been recorded on dead and living beech trees at Lullingstone Park, Shoreham Woods, and on dead beech on

Southborough Common. The species is therefore rather scarce, and the main threat to its survival is the unwitting 'tidying up' of woodlands by land managers. The species was lost from one site in the New Forest because the forest manager cleared away the half-rotten tree on which the fungus was growing. To counter this threat, an identification book has recently been published by the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew (Peglar et al, 1997), and fact sheets like this one should raise awareness amongst land managers as to the existence of the fungus and its habitat requirements. The UK Biodiversity Action Plan aims to maintain populations of the species at all current sites and devise a management plan for each site to ensure the long-term continuity of suitable host trees, by the protection of suitable young trees, the establishment of new pollards and re-pollarding existing host trees where appropriate. It is hoped that, with these measures in place, the bearded tooth will continue to grow on our old trees, and providing us with an annual display of 'hedgehog tree-climbing'.

FURTHER INFORMATION:

UK Biodiversity Action Plan: www.ukbap.org.uk

English Nature: www.english-nature.org.uk

Kent Wildlife Trust: www.kentwildlife.org.uk

Kent Biodiversity Action Plan: www.kentbap.org.uk

The Kent Red Data Book, available from Kent County Council: www.kent.gov.uk/biodiversity

Kent Landscape Information System: www.kent.gov.uk/klis

Kent and Medway Biological Record Centre: www.kmbrc.org.uk

Starting point for information about fungi and their study in the field and laboratory (mycology): fungus.org.uk
The mycology department at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew: www.rbgkew.org.uk/scihort/mycolexp.html
Bearded tooth identification book: Peglar, DN, Roberts, PJ & Spooner, BM (1997) British Chanterelles and Tooth Fungi – an account of the British Cantharelloid and Stipitate Hydnoid fungi. Royal Botanic Gardens: Kew

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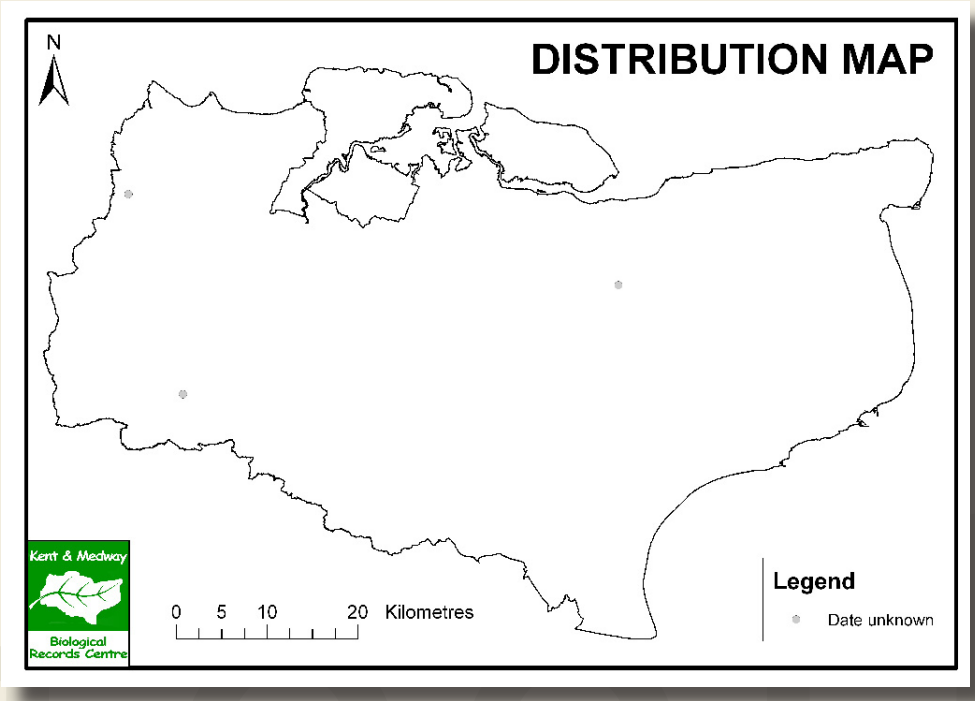

Data courtesy of Kent and Medway Biological Record Centre

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