

Beaming, a foreigner asked us "Did you see the Orikeets?" We realised that she meant, not some tropical bird, but the Orchids!

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1985, THE YEAR OF THE CORAL STINKHORN

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In April-May each year I receive 'phone calls concerning a strange plant, and a question that goes like this — Mrs R, I have found a most PECULIAR thing in the bush/garden. I wonder whether you can tell me what it is? Then follows a description of a flower-like structure on a pale pink tube. Its six arms radiate from the centre, each arm bifurcated at its tip. It is red, and it is covered with a brown mucus. It has an odour, something between sickly sweet and rotten. It is the colour and the smell that draws attention to it.

It is of course Aseroe rubra, the coral stinkhorn, a fungus that has been particularly abundant this year. Inquiries about it have been numerous. In one small area of my rough lawn, the piece that is scythed rather than closeshaven with a mower I have had no less than twelve of them. I have noticed that they spring, literally, from a case that looks like a flattened puff-ball with a light brown mosaic pattern on top. When mature the outer skin ruptures and the stinkhorn erupts from its case, unfolding and stretching forth its arms. The puffball stage is usually 2 cm across, the "flower" 6 cm - 7 cm across and the tube or "horn" 3 cm - 4 cm long.

This year I have had some enormous examples worthy of inclusion in the Guinness book of records. My largest coral stinkhorn measured — puffball 7 cm, horn or tube 11 cm, and flower 18 cm across. Its huge size made it less flowerlike in appearance. Rather it looked like something grotesque from the Animal Kingdom.

Flies visit coral stinkhorn feeding greedily on the slimy brown mucus which carries the smell and the spores. So far this season I have not found basket fungus, Clathrus cibarius which is propagated in a similar fashion.

Abundant rain and mild conditions over summer and autumn have been kind to fungi generally, and there have been many strange, beautiful - and edible - examples in forests, farms and gardens.

For me 1985 will stand out as The Year of the Coral Stinkhorns.

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