



Waxcap Watch

Activity Pack for Group Leaders

Introduction

The UK is home to some of the most important waxcap grasslands in the world. However, many species are becoming rare and declining. Waxcap Watch is a citizen science activity that helps conservation organisations to find not just rare species, but the habitats they might be found growing in.

This year we want more people than ever to take part, and as a group leader, you can help. Whether you're leading community groups, volunteer teams, or educational sessions, this pack provides guidance, activities and resources to help you support others to take part in Waxcap Watch.

In this pack you will find:

1. An example session plan that you can adapt for your group
2. Equipment list
3. Frequently asked questions...and their answers
4. Health and safety guidance
5. Resources that you can print and share, that will support your session.

Session Plan

You know your group best so use this session plan as a starting point and adapt it to meet their needs. The session is designed to be delivered outdoors, but elements could be delivered indoors or online.

Aim

The aim of this session is to inspire and enthuse your group and give them the confidence and skills to take part in the Waxcap Watch survey.

By the end of the session participants will:

- Understand the purpose of Waxcap Watch and how to take part in the survey
- Know the kinds of places where they might find grassland fungi
- Be able to recognise some of the growth forms of grassland fungi and their identifying features

Session Outline

Topic	Activity
Participant arrival.	Gather people away from areas with traffic, welcome and introductions.
Share session aims and structure.	Explain types of activities that will happen e.g. hands on, practicing skills, individual and small group work. Share practical info such as finish and break times.
Health and safety	- Highlight known site hazards e.g. steep or slippery ground, streams, cattle, electric fences, potholes etc. - Identify first aiders and location of first aid kit. - Check participants are prepared e.g. appropriate clothing and footwear, carrying food, drink and any medication needed. - Make participants aware of facilities (or lack of them) for toilets and handwashing. - Risk of ticks, tucking trousers into socks, long sleeves and tick check at home. Notify GP if you feel unwell after a bite. - Let group leader know if you need to leave early for any reason.
Preparation for site visit	Check participants have the Waxcap Watch app on their phones (if not, pair up people so they have sight of the app) Distribute resources e.g. recording sheets

Topic	Activity
Introduction to the site	If you can, provide an overview of the site, its features and management. It's not essential but it can help volunteers to think of more survey sites if they understand the features of a grassland that's good for waxcaps. The site manager or owner may be able to help with this.
What makes grasslands good for fungi (this site and other sites volunteers might want to survey)	Explain features of grasslands in general, and this site, that make it good for grassland fungi i.e. short mossy grass that has been grassy for many years. Mention other places that are good for grassland fungi e.g. gardens, playing fields, churchyards, road verges, fields grazed by sheep. Try and use examples that participants can see in the site to explain e.g. grazing animals, changes in vegetation Ask if participants can think of other places they might go and look for waxcaps?
Spotting fungi	Dedicate a small area of the site for participants to walk around where everyone can see each other. Give participants flags or other markers, ask them to spread out as a group and place flags wherever they spot fungi. Resources – Flags or other markers visible from a distance
Fungi features	Have a look at the fungi that people have found and choose one or two examples of fruiting bodies ('mushrooms') and use these to show the key features of gilled fungi e.g. gills, gill spacing, gill attachment, cap colour, cap texture, stipe etc. Resources (optional)– Recording sheets which have illustrations of the features on the back. These illustrations are useful for showing the diversity of features, and volunteers who are keen to identify to species level might find them particularly useful. Hand lenses/magnifying glass to observe features more closely.
Waxcap and non-waxcap features	With the species you've found on your site, choose a waxcap species and at least one other non-waxcap species to compare it with. If possible, choose at least one non-waxcap species that <u>has</u> gills, to compare more subtle features. See the waxcap and non-waxcap grassland fungi image guides in this back for examples of different types of grassland fungi you might come across. Examples features could include:

Waxcap	Not a waxcap
“Toadstool” shape, with a stem, cap, and gills	Fungi with other shapes e.g. round ball-shaped puffballs, club and corals growing directly from the soil
Widely spaced gills	Gills that are very close together
Relatively thick, chunky stem (stipe)	Very thin, tall stems
Waxy and relatively smooth cap and stem	Very textured caps e.g. caps with shaggy textures, “bits” stuck to them, or very wavy edges
	Veils or web-like structures underneath the cap. These might look like “skirts” or lace/spider-web like remnants around the stem of the fungus or under the cap

Resources (optional) – It may be useful to share example images of fungi with participants (such as those in this activity pack), to show the variety of different species of fungi they might find. This can be particularly useful if you don’t find many different waxcap/non-waxcap species on your site.

The Waxcap Watch survey

Choose an area of the site where participants can practice their own Waxcap Watch survey.
Demonstrate to the group how to carry out the survey on your own smartphone/tablet, talking through the different questions and how to fill them in. Ask people to follow you on the app if they can.
Ask pairs or small groups to fill in the survey for the area.
Check in with people to see how they are getting along.

Survey debrief

Check in with participants to see how they found the survey and identify any areas of difficulty. Use knowledge in the group to answer questions and problem solve.

Next steps

Discuss next steps with the group. Are participants identifying places to survey or do you have sites in mind? Do people need any additional support?
Signpost people to the Waxcap Watch web page which has lots of additional resources available.

Equipment list for Group Leaders

This list covers the basics to run the course but should be adapted to suit your group needs and site.

Essentials

- Printed session plan
- Smartphone/tablet with Survey123 and the Waxcap Watch survey downloaded
- Flags/other markers
- Health & Safety equipment – Group register and emergency contacts lists, First Aid kit, charged mobile phone, site map

Optional

- Printed species recording sheets
- Hand lenses
- Additional grassland fungi ID resources e.g. ID books

Frequently Asked Questions from Participants

“I couldn’t download the survey” / “I can’t find the Waxcap Watch survey”/ “The Waxcap Watch app isn’t working for me”

The Waxcap Watch page on the Plantlife website has links to:

- Written instructions of how to download the survey
- A short YouTube video with a step-by-step guide of downloading the survey
- A pdf Survey123 troubleshooting guide with common problems, and how to resolve them

If these online resources don’t resolve the problem for participants, they can email the Waxcap Watch inbox (waxcapwatch@plantlife.org.uk) and we will try and troubleshoot their problem.

“I went to do a survey, but didn’t find any waxcaps”

Sometimes a grassland site just won’t be home to any waxcaps, or the weather conditions mean that no waxcaps were fruiting on the day a participant visited. Encourage participants to still complete a “null results” survey, as having data on where waxcaps aren’t fruiting is equally as important as knowing where they are.

“I don’t know anywhere near me that would be a good waxcap habitat”

At the start of this training session there is time to discuss features of grasslands, and the different types of places that waxcaps might grow. Encourage participants to think of places near them during the course, as this helps people to get out do a survey. Perhaps they could arrange to meet up with other volunteers on the course to do some surveys together to give each other more confidence?

“There isn’t any phone signal where I want to do my survey”

Once volunteers have the Survey123 app and the Waxcap Watch survey downloaded onto their device, they will be able to complete surveys without a phone signal. In areas with no/poor signal, the app will prompt volunteers to “Save to Outbox”, which saves the information locally on their device.

When volunteers can reconnect to Wi-Fi or mobile data, they will need to submit surveys held in their Outbox. To do this, navigate to the survey summary page where you will see an ‘Outbox’

folder. Completed surveys will be visible and can be submitted by clicking “Send” in the bottom right corner of the screen.

“Is this fungus a waxcap?” / “What species is this waxcap?”

Offer lots of opportunities for course participants to practice their identification skills, and compare waxcaps with other species you find. Waxcap Watch does not require volunteers to be able to identify waxcap species, however you will find that many people start observing features of fungi and are naturally curious! Closely observing features such as colour, texture, gill spacing, gill attachment, and smell are all key skills in being to identify waxcaps to species. We have a resource list below for course participants who are interested in building their skills further beyond the course.

“Are waxcaps poisonous?” / “Will touching mushrooms/waxcaps hurt me?”

There are no species of fungi in the UK that are harmful to touch. It is safe to handle fungi to identify them. After touching fungi/soil, we recommend washing hands before eating for good hygiene.

“Are waxcaps edible?” / “Can I eat them?”

Most waxcaps are not harmful to eat, however we would not recommend eating them. Many species of waxcaps in the UK are internationally threatened with extinction, and therefore we want to protect their populations. For any fungal species, we would never recommend that beginners forage without expert assistance. Many apps and AI guides available online do not offer accurate identifications and may offer dangerous information.

“I want to learn how to identify what species these waxcaps are” / “Where can I carry on my learning?”

Plantlife has lots of resources for volunteers who want to build their skills further:

[Free Online Training Courses:](#)

- Waxcap Watch mini course. This course is aimed at newcomers to Waxcap Watch and will repeat most of the content covered in your course, but may be good for those want a refresher to boost their confidence
- Grassland Fungi ID and Management (4 units). This is more advanced, and builds on skills started in the beginner’s course.

[Waxcap Watch YouTube playlist](#) (includes short videos on species ID, webinar recordings and more)

[Waxcap Watch Facebook Group](#) (Community-led, for advice on grassland fungi ID and management)

[Explore the Waxcap Watch 2020-2024 dataset](#)

For books/field guides specifically on grassland fungi we recommend *Grassland Fungi: A Field Guide 3rd edition* (Wood and Dunkelman)

“My site had a really high score, how can I be sure it is going to be protected?”

By submitting your site survey to Waxcap Watch, your data enters our system at Plantlife. We analyse and make this data is publicly available, and we work collaboratively with other conservation organisations to use Waxcap Watch data to protect fungi on the ground. By contributing to Waxcap Watch you are not only helping to protect your local sites, but also grassland fungi across the UK.

Health and Safety

Risk Assessment

When leading any group, you should assess the potential hazards and the risks involved. You should take steps to reduce the likelihood of an incident happening, or the severity of it if it does.

In addition to the expected hazards when working with groups or being outdoors, like weather, walking on uneven ground, or illness, here are some that you should particularly consider when you are leading this session:

Hazard	Risk	Control measures
Livestock	Trampling, fear, infectious disease	Only survey in public areas or have landowner permission. Check the area in advance to see if livestock are present. Have a Plan B in mind if livestock are unexpectedly in the survey area. Certain groups of people (e.g. people with poor immune systems and pregnant people) are more at risk from illness when in contact with livestock.
Tick bites	Tick related disease i.e. Lyme disease, Tick-borne encephalitis	Ticks thrive in grassy places. Require people to cover their limbs with long sleeves and trousers which should be tucked into socks. Encourage tick checks after the session and share NHS advice on management of tick bites and symptoms of related illnesses.
Flags or other markers	Injuries to eye, face or other body part.	Warn participants to be mindful when looking at the ground around a flag or marker so that they don't poke themselves in the eye or face. Encourage careful movement around the site so that they don't trip onto a flag.
Traffic	Serious injury from being hit by a car.	Don't carry out surveys in high-risk areas e.g. narrow road verges. Ensure there is space/a barrier between people and traffic. Carry out the initial group briefing away from a parking area.
Handling and eating fungi	Poisoning	Advise participants not to eat any fungi that they find. Encourage hand washing before eating as a matter of good hygiene. There is no risk of poisoning from just touching fungi.

Non-waxcap Image Library

Examples of different species and families of fungi you might find in grassland habitats that are not waxcaps. Common groups of other fungi you may find include: Pinkgills, Clubs, Corals and Spindles, Parasols, Bonnets, Fieldcaps, Inkcaps, and Puffballs. Image credits: Sarah Shuttleworth and Aileen Baird.



Waxcap Image Library

Example images of different waxcap species you may find on your site, grouped into the 8 colour categories found in the Waxcap Watch survey. Remember that Waxcap Watch does not require you to identify species. Practicing observing small features of fungi will help participants to distinguish between waxcaps and non-waxcaps, and is the first step in learning to identify fungi to species level. Image credits: Sarah Shuttleworth, Steve Hindle, Lukas Large, Rich Wright, and Aileen Baird.

