

Conservation Corner

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So what hidden treasure was the young man searching for in the leaf litter at Whitetail Ridge? If you guessed the prized morel mushroom, you are right. Are you a mushroom hunter?

Mushrooms are members of the Fungi Kingdom. Scientists believe fungi diverged from animals and plants a billion years ago. Today an estimated 1.5 – 5 million species of fungi are found worldwide, but only 70,000 species have been classified. Fungi live everywhere – in the air and water and on land as well as in soil, plants, and animals. Some of the many different types of fungi include the mushrooms, molds, mildews, yeasts, rusts, and smuts.

Fungi greatly impact life on Earth. In fact, the largest organism on earth is a fungus covering 4 square miles in the Blue Mountains of Oregon. Some destructive impacts include food and fabric spoilage and the majority of plant, tree, and crop diseases. If you've endured ringworm or athlete's foot, you've had a fungus growing on you.

Important and beneficial impacts of fungi include their role in recycling nutrients in nature by breaking down dead and organic matter. Symbiotic fungi called mycorrhizae enable plants to absorb essential nutrients from the soil. Some fungi are used to produce vitamins and antibiotics, including penicillin, while others cause fermentation which in turn gives us bread, beer, wines, and cheese. These are all good things.

For many people, however, the best thing about fungi is that some groups are good to eat! Mushrooms, with their variety of flavors, have been eaten since ancient times. Mushrooms are high in protein, carbohydrates, fiber, and vitamins. Edible mushrooms include puffballs, morels, chanterelles, shaggy mane, and oyster mushrooms.

For many people, the best mushrooms are the morels. Warm weather and precipitation signal the start of the spring season. Morels live in symbiotic or saprotrophic relationships with various trees, and some species that serve as the x that marks the spot include black oak and poplar as well as ash, sycamore, tulip trees, dead and dying elms, cottonwoods, and old apple trees. Wildfires may lead to bumper crops the following spring.

Morels are best if eaten soon after collecting. Because they are slightly toxic, they should never be eaten raw. Make sure they're clean and free of decay. As with many foods, freshest and simplest is often the best. We like ours sautéed in butter and seasoned with salt & pepper, but they're also good

breaded and fried or served with meat and in soups. Morels may also be flash frozen or dried to enjoy later.

The danger with collecting and eating wild mushrooms, of course, is that several species are poisonous, especially members of the genus *Amanita*. Never eat any mushroom that has not been positively identified to its genus and species, and never eat large quantities of wild mushrooms in case you are allergic or sensitive to an individual species.

Did you know 70 fungal species are bioluminescent? If only the morels were one of them. Enjoy the hunt!

