

# hunting the elusive Morel Mushroom

By Kenneth L. Kieser

M

orels will soon be popping up, especially with a combination of wet ground mixed with sunshine. Hunting morel mushrooms is a tradition for many across the United States. Every state has a version of this popular mushroom including Hawaii, so check on your state's variety at your local Conservation agency.

Hunting morel mushrooms has been a lifetime experience for my brother and me. My first morel mushrooms hunt happened May 8, 1953 or 63 years ago with my mother. I was born the next day. She has never missed a mushroom season since. My brother and I always go with her now. Mom does not handle creek banks or hills as easily these days at age 85, yet still manages to hunt through creek bottoms. Morel mushroom hunting is her only addiction.

"I guess you learn a few tricks after over half a century of hunting morels," she says. "I always carry a heavy walking stick to move vegetation out of the way and to hit stinking snakes. You never know when one of the slimy things will just suddenly be there. But I have spots that have to be checked. I have several old red oak stumps and trees I look around every year. Some years they produce and some years they don't. But I always have to go back and look."



## HUNTING THE ELUSIVE MOREL MUSHROOM

Normally a hunter will walk miles while finding a mushroom here and there—or occasionally the mother lode. Morels are seldom easy to find. Chances are this tasty gem has met your shadow during springtime walks in the woods. They are masters of concealment in dead leaves and under or around spring foliage. The average hunter may find 10 and walk past 100. My parents once found about 300 in the same small patch, an unusual occurrence. We return to the same spot annually, but now only find a few mushrooms.

Some of you may have had the same experience my folks enjoyed. A close friend of my family hunts morels in different states. He has a couple of honey holes in Iowa where he constantly finds a bucket full. This is somewhat unusual and may depend on a number of conditions. That is certainly not always the case, at least in our experience. There are many reasons why morels grow in certain spots. Everyone has a theory including botanists who have scientific explanations that seldom agree, proving what mysteries morels can be. Let's examine a couple of theories that may help you find a grocery sack full: Many believe you should always cut or pinch morel mushrooms off at the bottom. Leaving the roots is said to produce new mushrooms when conditions are correct. Others say the best mushroom producing grounds are in direct line with wind currents that carry mushroom spores through the air.

Mushroom hunters, including my family believe this and carry their morels in net sacks so spores can float through the material and on the ground. Spores that create new morels come from the mushroom's head. When the sun comes up, morels dry out and release their spores, the seeds for new morels. Some catch a wind current and float to meet another spore from another morel to create more, occasionally making them grow in unexpected places.

The rough texture of the bag helps release the spores. Some stay in the mesh and release later. We use the same bags over and over, season after season without washing. We start looking for Midwestern morel mushrooms in late March or early April when woodlot plants appear. Half-grown mayflowers are a good indicator of the required soil warmth when early morels start to pop up. My grandfather always claimed you could find morel mushrooms around mayflowers.

Dying elm trees are said to produce a rotting root system that feeds morels. You may not find morels in the same spot after the roots are rotted away. Don't limit your search to only elms, check unlikely areas. Morels could pop up anywhere. Apple trees are possibilities because constantly rotting fruit can help produce morel mushrooms.



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Areas with good leaf matting, typically under trees that drop their leaves and bark earlier in the fall and have longer to decay consistently produce. Light-colored barked trees like birch, sycamore and cottonwoods are good examples while the earlier mentioned dying elm trees may only produce morels for a year or two.

Plenty of moisture mixed with temperatures in the high 60's to low 80's is perfect conditions for good mushroom growth. April and early May provides all of this with warm rain and mid overnight temperatures. Morel mushrooms are temperature sensitive.

Early-season hunters should start by checking southern hillsides and creek bottoms open to sunlight that quickly warms the soil. Warming trends make eastern areas productive. Morels do not grow by the sun, lacking chlorophyll the chemical that absorbs sunlight as energy to reproduce. Morels start popping up at dusk and grow through the night, but you will occasionally see one pop up during daylight hours.

Northern spots are best when air temperatures heat up at the end of morel season. Dry springs seldom produce exceptional morel mushroom numbers. More grow when it is wet, but some will grow no matter what. You might still find morels in good numbers, but they may not grow as large.

## **MAKE SURE IT'S A MOREL MUSHROOM:**

There are poison mushrooms in the woods. Most notably, a false morel looks similar to a good morel. One of the easiest ways of determining the false morel is by slicing it long ways. False morels are not hollow, which is the most definite tip that you have stumbled up one of these bad boys.

The false morel is heavier than a good morel and almost solid in the stem and meaty. The insides of a false morel may resemble brains while the good morel is smooth inside. Avoid parasol-shaped mushrooms, or mushrooms that look like wide-open umbrellas with white rings around the stem and white, milky gills.

When in doubt, take your find to a local game and fish commission to make sure your mushrooms are edible.

## **WHERE TO GO:**

Most states offers unlimited public access where filling a bread sack with morels is possible.

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You will likely have competition so keep looking. No one can find them all. Dedicated hunters search from early morning to dusk. Most search to dine on the succulent morsels. Others sell morels at farmer's markets, mom and pop grocery stores, taverns or even door to door. Fresh morel mushrooms bring \$5.00 a gallon in some areas and often more.

Hunters might find a likely looking spot while driving and stop to ask the landowner permission to hunt. This often means sharing your find with the owner. I have known of hunters on backroads observing morels growing in a ditch, stopping their car and picking the mushrooms. This, too, could be a good case for asking permission to make sure you are legal.

## EQUIPMENT:

You will need a good pair of walking boots, light colored clothing in case early ticks make an appearance, a mesh bag, a good walking stick and your best pair of eyes. Then walk slowly and search. When the first morel is found, kneel down and look a little longer. My father always said: "Where you find one, you will find two or more." He was always right.

## EXERCISE:

Morel hunting is a relaxing challenge that provides a good excuse to take a long walk in the woods. Start exercising before taking the long walks required for mushroom hunting. Walking daily will get you started. Make sure you consult a doctor before beginning any type of exercise program.

## DISABLED HUNTERS:

Wheelchair or disabled morel hunters are limited to paved paths at wildlife areas. Morels can occasionally be spotted from these trails, sometimes with binoculars. You may need a helper for picking out-of-reach mushrooms. Driving slowly down logging paths is another good way for disabled hunters to mushroom hunt.

## COOKING MORELS:

Soaking in salt water is good for fish, but not morel mushrooms. This does not kill or remove the bugs and the mushroom's texture will become slimy and salty. Instead, only soak morels in cold water. Most wild mushrooms are difficult to digest when raw. If you do find wild mushrooms that you trust, make sure to cook them well. It may seem like an oxymoron, but if you're picking mushrooms you only want whole, firm, and fresh mushrooms with thick stems and no damage to the body from insects or other animals. If you think a mushroom may have had a bite taken out of it, leave it alone.

Try cutting your morels in little pieces to mix in omelets. Most mushroom hunters cut each morel in half and dip them in eggs. Each "shroom" is fried in cornmeal, flour or crushed crackers. Either way, fry until golden brown and don't invite company that night. Few entrées taste better.



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