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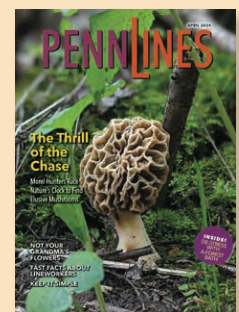
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ON THE COVER
Spring has sprung in Pennsylvania, and tasty morels – the mysterious mushrooms prized by chefs and home cooks alike – should be making an appearance soon, too.

PHOTO COURTESY OF STEVE PIATT

THE THROLL OF THE CHASE



Morel Hunters Race Nature's
Clock to Find Elusive Mushrooms

STEVE PIATT

Penn Lines Contributor





Some folks — the lucky ones — strike gold in Pennsylvania each spring. They may simply be out for a walk in the woods, or in the field during the state’s popular spring turkey or trout seasons. Or they may be serious searchers, with the kind of knowledge necessary to consistently strike it rich.

The “gold” is out there, somewhere — or, at times, seemingly nowhere. And that is the mystery, the frustration, and, occasionally, the reward of finding morel mushrooms in the wild.

Each year about this time, the coveted, tasty fungi attract legions of dedicated hunters, as well as those who have the fortune of simply blundering across them during outdoor activities.

“Morels are kind of the gateway for people getting into foraging,” says Josh Mowris, a Crawford County resident whose family has been a longtime member of Northwestern Rural Electric Cooperative (REC), based in Cambridge

Springs. “They’re probably the most popular of mushrooms.

“They’re super tasty, and a symbol of spring, so people are out there, excited that winter is finally over.”

On the hunt

Mowris, a health and fitness fanatic, initially plunged into foraging with the knowledge that certain mushrooms could serve as food supplements. His interest really took off upon joining the Western Pennsylvania Mushroom Club (wpamushroomclub.org).

The morel-hunting season in Pennsylvania and across the U.S. is a short one, he says.

“Certain mushrooms — like chicken of the woods — you can find five months out of the year,” Mowris says. “But with morels, you’re generally looking at a three- or four-week period where you can find them, and that’s it. In Pennsylvania, that’s typically mid-April to mid-May.”

Those times coincide with other Keystone State traditions like trout and turkey seasons. That means hunters and anglers can score some morels in addition to catching a few trout, perhaps tagging a longbeard, or stumbling upon the shed antler of a whitetail buck. Any way you look at it, it’s a great time to simply be out there.

“I’ve been known to take a pause during a fishing excursion or a spring turkey hunt to harvest the morels I come across,” says Grey Berrier of Pulaski, Lawrence County. “I’m serious enough to routinely carry along a mesh bag on trout and turkey trips.”

But while chance encounters with morels are special, serious hunters have learned the mushrooms aren’t found everywhere, and they’re able to confine their efforts to the likeliest of locations. Many, however, draw the line at sharing the exact location of productive hunting spots, which tend to be a closely guarded secret. Instead, they prefer to speak in generalities.

“Morels seem to favor certain tree species,” says Ryan Reed, an avid “shroomer” who works as a natural resource specialist with the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR). “I’ve had great luck around sycamores, apple, crabapple and poplar.”

Mowris agrees, adding that most morel enthusiasts would say elm trees — big, dead and dying ones — are the No. 1 location for morel potential, along with old apple orchards and, as Reed notes, tulip poplar trees. Ash, black

WHAT IS A MOREL?

Grown primarily in the wild, morel mushrooms have an earthy, nutty flavor and a meaty texture, making them a highly desired ingredient among chefs and mushroom enthusiasts.

Difficult to find, they’re only available for a short time in the spring.

Morels also vary in size and appearance. Their shape can range from oblong to bulbous, and their color from blonde to gray to dark brown.

Morels are easily identified by their cap, which resembles a honeycomb.

Keep in mind, too, several look-alike species exist, including verpa and gyromitra mushrooms, and they can be toxic.

Experts say the easiest way to identify a true morel from a false one is to cut the mushroom in half and look at how the cap attaches to the stem. Real morels have hollow centers, with the cap and stem connecting as one at the base. Some look-alikes, such as verpas, have free-hanging caps, which means the cap is attached at the very top of the stem and the rest of it hangs down like a skirt.

If you’re interested in doing more research, websites, such as thegreatmorel.com and morels.com, can be valuable resources for new and experienced mushroom hunters.



cherry and bitternut hickory are also worth a look.

“Not just morels, but mushrooms in general associate with trees,” Mowris says.

Trees, weather and timing

Curt Guyer, a longtime Valley REC member who lives in Juniata Township, Huntingdon County, has honed his morel-hunting skills over the past 20 years. But it wasn’t until he started linking them with certain tree species that he began reaping the rewards of his efforts.

“I was looking all over the place the first 10 years, just haphazardly getting lucky once in a while, but not really knowing what I was doing until I started identifying trees,” says Guyer, who has developed a solid network of productive spots on a mix of public and private land. “Poplars and elms around here; mostly elms.”

Ironically, one of Guyer’s best tactics for finding morels is to look up.

“Elms are the first to leaf out, so I’m always looking up in the air for those little leaves,” he says. “I carry a little pair of binoculars with me and when I find them, I’ll check around those trees.”

Morels are often difficult to spot on the forest floor, and Guyer says a slow pace is a must. “I’ve almost trampled on them,” he says. “And if I find one, I’ll sit right down and look all around.”

And it’s more than just location. Conditions have to be ideal for morels and other mushrooms to appear.

“Soil temperature is very important,” DCNR’s Ryan Reed says. “It must be near a 50-degree average for morels to pop up. And morels seem to love disturbance — ground that was recently pushed over by a skidder blade or bulldozer can reveal a bonanza of mushrooms.”

Mowris, too, checks the weather often and has learned through experience when the timing is right for morels.

“Morels need ample rainfall to appear, so in addition to soil temperature, I’m waiting for rainfall and checking the weather for 55- and 60-degree temperatures,” he says. “And you can’t give up on a spot; check it multiple times. A lot of people, because of soil temperature, like to check south-facing slopes that get more sunlight.”

Morel hunting can, Mowris admits, be a frustrating effort.

“It’s just a matter of building your skills and knowledge of the habitat,” he says. “Once you’re able to get some experience and find your spots, [morels] will reappear for the most part every year.”

True or false?

But how do you know when you’ve stumbled across the real thing — and that it’s edible?

COURTESY OF JOSH MOWRIS



WOODLAND TREASURES: Josh Mowris of Crawford County says he has the best luck finding elusive morel mushrooms near trees — elm, in particular.

Hannah Huber, a conservation mycologist for DCNR, has some tips, noting there are several look-alike species, some of which can be toxic. (Mycology is the branch of biology that studies fungi.)

“Verpa are the ‘early morels’ and they’re considered edible, but some people are sensitive to them,” Huber says. “Gyromitra are the ‘false morels’ that are generally considered somewhat toxic.”

“It’s a good idea for folks trying any new mushroom species, even when positively identified as edible, to go easy and avoid gorging in case they are uniquely sensitive to the species.”

Experts say the easiest way to identify a true morel from a false one is to cut the mushroom in half and look at how the cap attaches to the stem. Real morels have hollow centers, with the cap and stem connecting as one at the base. Some look-alikes, such as verpas, have free-hanging caps, which means the cap is only attached at the very top of the stem and the rest of it hangs down like a skirt.

“While some people have ways of cooking [look-alikes] to render them seemingly edible, caution is recommended,” Huber says.

In fact, most morel hunters dismiss false morels entirely.

ON THE HUNT FOR MORELS: HOW TO STAY SAFE — AND COMFORTABLE

Properly identifying morels is just one safety step mushroom hunters should take. Here are a few others:

For starters, it's very possible you'll be doing your search during Pennsylvania's popular spring turkey hunting season. (This year, April 27 is the start of the youth hunt, and May 4-31 is regular season.) Therefore, it makes perfect sense to wear a blaze orange hat or vest, or both.

Also, any time you're in the field the presence of Lyme disease-carrying ticks is possible, even likely. Spraying your clothing with permethrin offers the best measure of protection. Insect repellent is also a good idea.

As far as gear goes, you can head afield as light or as heavy as you'd like, but there are a few must-haves.

One of them is water. Morel hunting can be hard work and may involve some serious legwork, and it usually takes place on warm and maybe humid spring days. Therefore, be sure to load up your day pack with as much water as you think you'll need to remain hydrated; keep some in your vehicle for your return, as well. A dehydration headache is no picnic. A power bar or other snack may keep you going, too.

Depending on the tract of land you're searching, it might make sense to take along a map and compass – and know how to use both. Also, onX Hunt, a mapping app, can keep you "found" and make sure you don't stray onto land where you don't have proper permission. This technology provides great peace of mind while allowing you to keep your head down and focus on the forest floor.

Another tip: Make sure you gas up your vehicle and return to it before dark.

As far as clothing, long pants and long sleeves are the way to go, even on the warmest days. Chances are you'll be busting your way through some briars at some point, and ticks will likely be present. You don't want to make things easy for them.

You'll also want to plan for success, and that means carrying along a mesh bag to store your morels. A mesh bag is much better than a plastic one, which creates the kind of moisture that will accelerate the deterioration of your morels. Do your best to keep them as cool as possible after picking. Also, a theory exists that a mesh bag will allow spores to fall and perhaps restore your morel hotspot for the future.

Many morel hunters also carry a walking stick, which allows them to move grass and plant life during their ground search. And always bring a camera; you never know what you'll encounter out there – including, perhaps, a newborn whitetail fawn.

From field to table

The hardest part of morel hunting is finding them, but don't worry, you'll be rewarded because the best part is eating your discoveries. And the old phrase, "release into the grease," is pretty much on target when it comes to preparing morels for consumption.

Morel mushrooms sautéed in hot butter for several minutes or fried in bacon grease for a few minutes longer are tough to top. This cooking method helps to bring out their delicious meaty flavor while maintaining their firm texture.

Reed soaks his freshly collected morels in a salt brine for about 15 minutes; that removes any bugs they may be holding. He then rinses them off, lightly coats them with flour and fries them in hot butter until golden brown.

"They don't keep well," he says, "so I usually eat them the day I find them or the next."

But the options are many, and morels can hold their own in main dishes, such as chicken cutlets with morels, morel meatloaf and morel pilaf. You can also use them as a topping on steaks, in soups, and as part of an omelet. Scores of recipes can be found online.

That said, if you're fortunate enough to have a surplus of morels, it's best to take care of the leftovers promptly. Drying them in a dehydrator is perhaps the best option, though some morel hunters lean toward freezing or canning them.

And, of course, don't forget your morel-less friends. 🍷



MEATY FLAVOR: Morel mushrooms are highly prized by chefs and home cooks alike. One of the best ways to prepare these spring treats is by sautéing them in butter or bacon grease. But they're also delicious as a topping for steak, in soup and added to an omelet. Lots of recipes can be found online.