

How to hunt a morel:

Morel morsels head for cover

Picking mushrooms isn't as easy as an afternoon walk in the forest

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Maybe they don't want to be found.

Likely as not, first-time morel mushroom hunters will be foiled in their efforts, says Gerry Ivanochko, northern director for Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food.

"It's really hard finding morels when it's daylight," Ivanochko told a handful of wanna-be mushroom pickers at Mistasinih Place last Monday evening. "It's even harder when it's dark!"

With that, Ivanochko wrapped up his slide show on mushrooms, and the group drove out to a patch of muskeg just across from the La Ronge Cemetery, to search for morels in the Mallard fire burn.

"It takes a while to adjust your eyes to the morels.... Then you'll look and you'll see all the morels you've been stepping on," Ivanochko had cautioned earlier. His proteges soon realized the truth of his words.

"These guys hide, don't they," said Jeanne Langhorne, after Ivanochko had finally pointed out a few mushrooms clustered around the base of a tree, including one caught beneath a searcher's ash-covered shoe. Joked Langhorne, "They want to live forever!"

Morel mushrooms are masters of camouflage. Even the prototypical morel — caramel brown and cone-shaped, with a hollow centre and deep depressions in its sides — seems to make itself invisible. Its preferred spot is in depressions near dead trees, in underbrush or beside fallen logs. Its edges look slightly charred, and that together with its colour makes it tough to spot



Photo by Carmen Pauls
Susan Hanssen carefully harvests a morel from its favourite habitat, an area that burned the year before.

in a burn.

"I'll be darned," said Langhorne, after finally finding a few of the dimpled mushrooms. "I'd be walking on these forever, without knowing they were there."

Morels also come in several different shades, from the blonds to "fire morels", the thicker-skinned, black mushrooms found in

areas where all competing vegetation has been burnt away, Ivanochko said. Their shape also varies, with some morels resembling a ball rather than a cone.

This can cause problems for the less-experienced picker, such as a woman who called Ivanochko about what she thought were morels that had survived the winter. It turned out that what she'd found were poisonous "brain mushrooms", a wrinkled, reddish-brown fungi. "She was touching herself on the lips (after touching the toxin-coated mushrooms) and she was really burning," Ivanochko recalled.

"You can eat them, but they'll destroy your liver," he said. "It's kind of (like playing) Russian roulette."

Ivanochko's advice for mushroom pickers is simple: if you're not familiar with it, don't pick it. "You don't have to worry about poisonous mushrooms if you only handle those that you know are safe."

As for morels, they're worth the hunt, and now is the best time to be out looking. Morels grow best the year after a "hard" burn like the Mallard fire, and their season is from late May to the end of June.

If you're having trouble, just look for the small, reddish cup mushrooms that grow nearby — or, in the right spots, Ivanochko has tied yellow flags on trees. After all, when dealing with the mushroom world's masters of disguise, even the most experienced morel picker sometimes needs a helping hand.

Carmen Pauls

Tips for morel hunters:

- Early in the season, morels grow in swampier areas, but later in the season, they move to higher, even sandy ground.

- Never put your morels in plastic, even while picking them, as they will "sweat" and go bad. Use a shallow, open basket or a cardboard box with holes in the bottom. Morels can be stored in sealed paper bags.

- If a morel breaks apart easily, it's likely worm-infested.

- Use a sharp knife to cut morels. "If you tear out the mushrooms (by the roots), it's comparable to cutting off the branches to pick fruit," says Gerry Ivanochko.

- Don't wash fresh morels (but do wipe dirt off), and don't pick in the rain. Wet mushrooms don't last as long.

- Morels should not be eaten fresh, such as in a salad — they will make you sick. Dry them first, preferably in the sun. Once picked, a fresh morel lasts only a day or two.

- Dehydrated mushrooms should be thoroughly rinsed, then soaked in water for one hour. Save the water — it's good for gravies and soup stocks.

Staff