

# Nature Trails

## Morel Morsels

by Stanley Good

Springtime is invigorating. The long days of winter have passed. Deep within me an urge arises to search the woods for something elusive. I catch the impulse to comb the western Virginia mountains in search of morels. Mountain folks have long claimed that morel season occurs when white oak leaves are the size of a squirrel's ear. My favorite time to hunt these spring mushrooms is immediately after a warm rain when they seem to pop up overnight. *Hunting* is the right term, because many times a lot of acres are covered before any of these fungi are found.

If you have never hunted morels and plan to give it a try, let me give you a few tips. Morels can be found almost anywhere, including lawns, but are more frequently found in deciduous and mixed woodlands; along old logging trails; around ash, poplar, or apple trees; and near areas where mayapples exist. Once you spot a morel, move slowly, and keep a sharp eye in all directions. Where there is one, you will frequently find more. You are apt to become a hunter for life after finding a few of these tasty morsels. Their wrinkled, brain-like image becomes indelibly stamped on your memory.

All edible morels are in the genus *Morchella* species.

They are referred to as the sponge mushrooms. The colors of this species vary from yellow, or white, to black.

They have a cap with pits and ridges that completely surround the cap and are supported by a hollow stem. Any mushroom appearing to have these characteristics should be checked at the stem. If the supporting stem is not hollow but contains solid or cotton-looking tissue,

it is inedible and is known as a false morel. Although the false morels do not grow in our area, there are regions where they thrive.

Rare gastrointestinal disturbances have been reported from ingesting the edible mushrooms. However, personally I have



Tim Kemberley/istockphoto.com

not known anyone who has actually experienced such a reaction from eating them. Be sure to check a field guide for information and photos regarding the morels you collect. If you are unsure of the variety you have accumulated, have an acquaintance familiar with these mushrooms to inspect your cache before eating them.

After the excitement of the hunt comes the reward of eating this savory delicacy. To prepare this gourmet fare, first soak it in salt water for approximately fifteen minutes. Next split, roll in flour, fry in butter, and salt to taste. Place on a slice of bread and enjoy! As you munch, you may catch yourself planning the next hunt. ◀



I like making at least two wildflower pilgrimages up John's Hollow and through a back road back to my house in April. John's Hollow, named after a great uncle, has the most varieties of wildflowers of any other place that I know.

Early April gives me a chance to see bloodroot, coltsfoot, mouse-ear chickweed, ground ivy, henbit, saxifrage, hepatica, trailing arbutus, spring beauty, Dutchmen's breeches, toothwort, and several varieties of violets.

Among the flowers of a later April hike, I find Solomon's seal, squirrel corn, wild ginger, trout lily (if I'm just at the right time), rock cress, red trillium, jack-in-the-pulpit, star chickweed, pussy toes, columbine, cinquefoil, and rue anemone.

by Janet Vance

In April after a warm rain, Dad and I like to start hunting for morel mushrooms on my granddaddy's mountain land. Often they will pop up overnight and be



large enough to gather. Other times, if the ground isn't quite warm enough, they are very small. Then we usually leave them to grow bigger. There are many good places to look for them, but we seem to find the most under ash trees and dead elm trees.

Travis Vance, 12  
Seneca Rocks, WV



## The Mailbox

### Dear Nature Friend,

Last year some of our friends were bird hunting in woods near their home and our church. When they were back in the woods, they came across a huge black bear just waking up! Three of my siblings and I went back in and saw him. He was very sleepy.



Since then we have seen him several times. He comes out of the woods around 8:10 every evening and eats grass in the pasture. Over one hundred sheep have been in the same pasture, and he has not bothered them. Some people say he is probably 400 pounds!

Mary Christenson, 13,  
Athens, WI

### Dear Nature Friend,

In the article, "Heron Island" in

December, it said that there are no storks in North America. I looked it up and found out that there is a stork in North America called the wood stork.

Also, I have pet ladybugs. I feed them milk. Is there any other kind of food I can feed them?

Rebecca Lapinek, 9  
Valdosta, GA

Dear Rebecca,

You are right about the wood stork. The wood stork is also called a wood ibis, and is a true stork, according to our encyclopedia.

Ladybugs eat aphids and scale insects. That is the reason gardeners and fruit growers appreciate them very much.

—Nature Friend