

LIKE A CLUMP OF FAIRY UMBRELLAS, MARASMIUS MUSHROOMS BURST FROM A BED OF MOSS ALONG THE SOUTH SANTIAM RIVER IN THE CASCADES EAST OF CORVALLIS

# Wet, Dirty, Sometimes Fruitless Mushroom Hunting

The joy in the pursuit of fungi

BY JESLYN LEMKE

PHOTO COURTESY BUDDY MAYS PHOTOGRAPHY

If you've never battled your way through wet Oregon undergrowth for hours and hours, hoping to collect two to four ounces of mushrooms to take home, then this is the story for you.

As someone who has successfully found chanterelles and porcini mushrooms on about four trips out of 30 in the past four years, you should take all of my advice.

The dank forests to the west of Eugene (around Walton and Mapleton) and the drier Willamette National Forest to the east of Eugene hold mushrooms. Elusive? Yes. Delicious? Definitely. Expensive at the store and sinfully free when collected via sweat and hiking? Priceless.

On May 3, I headed east on Highway 126 West, hoping to catch the tail end of yellow-foot chanterelle season or the early beginnings of the spring porcini season. I drove about 50 miles, far into the Willamette National Forest, past the Belknap Springs and Blue River's Carmen Reservoir.

I'd already been warned by Mycological Natural Products owner Owen Rice that our exceptionally long and wet winter this year would delay the spring mushroom hunting. This bulk buyer of raw mushrooms (located off W. 11th in Eugene) keeps a daily pulse on how the season is developing via the mushroom sellers who arrive each evening to sell the day's "catch."

"It stayed cold and wet and dark for so long this year," he says, leading him to believe there aren't many morels fruiting locally this year. "It's still too cold," Rice says.

Rice was right. I didn't find porcini or morels that day. After parking off Hwy 126 at an elevation still well below the snow pack, I wandered around for a while on several sunny logging roads. I came across handfuls of wilted yellow-foot chanterelles, their wet heads drooping into the

moss, tired of life already. I picked them anyway, along with several perky hedgehog mushrooms.

I love a good hedgehog mushroom. While chanterelles become little drama queens in their death, melting or wilt-

## BASIC ADVICE ON MUSHROOM HUNTING

Words of wisdom from Owen Rice of Mycological Natural Products

1. Check if the land you are picking on is public or private.
2. Look into getting a personal use permit from the park's ranger station (for example, the Willamette National Forest station on Hwy 126 issues permits).
3. Pack water, snacks and sunscreen.
4. Do not lock your keys in your car after parking in a remote area (I have definitely never done this on a blistering August day two years ago outside Mapleton).
5. Properly identify the mushrooms you are picking.
6. Tell someone exactly where you are picking and bring a GPS with you. Many phones do not get reception up in the Cascades.

ing over in dramatic death throes, hedgehogs have a good hardness to their structure.

I'm climbing uphill past a pine tree when a bird, perhaps a grouse, explodes to my left. She's definitely some kind of game bird; her fat frame clears a low path over the forest floor before landing, clumsily, on a pine tree. I peer over into her nest. She's dug out a little pit for herself at the base of the pine tree, but doesn't have eggs yet.

Birds abound, but porcini and morel season, as Rice predicts, will likely pick up in our area around May 20 and run through June to July-ish.

I return to the car and try another logging road, this time over by Hwy 20, where it intersects with Deer Creek road. Rice says that a good porcini hunter will return to the same patch year after year.

"They'll look for bumps in the ground and pull it out when it's in button stage, before insects have found it," he says. "You are going to camp in that area, return every two or three days, looking for those bumps in the ground. Now it's your secret patch."

Mushrooming in the Northwest can be big business; Rice's business employs 17 mushroom enthusiasts. He often flies fresh bulk orders of mushrooms, picked the day before, to high-end restaurants around the U.S.

Back on the mountain off Hwy 20, I've got at least 6 ounces of wilted yellow-foot chanterelles to show for my five hours of staggering through the hillsides. Last fall, I managed to pick nine pounds of yellow chanterelles near Walton in a single day, which is my record. Come mid-May, I'll be out near Sisters for the start of porcini season. I can't wait. ■