

## Story morals and forest morels: The year after fire brings its rewards

by Leah Eskelin



*A morel mushroom grows in disturbed gravel on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge (Photo credit: USFWS).*

2019 will be synonymous with wildland fire for most of the residents of the Kenai Peninsula, and as the details of date and time fade away, the Swan Lake Fire will remain a part of our shared history. It will weave into stories told to the younger generations as they grow up. You know the ones. Those “oldtimer” stories that seem larger than life when homesteaders in the late 1940s used burn poles from the 1947 Burn as fence posts, that recall log homes built with ax and adze in the 50s before a road connected the western

Kenai Peninsula to Anchorage.

While hard to admit that an age of 60 or 70 is considered “old”, depending on perspective, even our younger community elders who arrived in the 1970s are weavers of these shared stories. You’ve likely listened in awe to tales of moose herds in the 1980s eating well off the shrubs and willows growing strong after the 1969 Burn. Arriving here in the last 20 years, building my own Kenai experiences, marrying into a family with deep local roots with equally deep memory

banks, I find that “oldtimer stories” and the newer ones I tell our children carry a shared theme: after challenge comes reward.

Our collective life on the edges of expansive protected public lands also means that we live intricately connected to the natural world. We talk about when the salmon will return to our rivers. We anticipate the antler size on young moose eating from our window boxes. We hear waterfowl fly overhead and anticipate ice out on some nearby pond. Many of us also drive through the Swan Lake Fire burned area and think...mushrooms! Just as 2019 is synonymous with wildland fire, these next years will be filled with a reward often tied to a burned landscape: morel mushrooms.

I remember the year after King Country Creek Fire, 2006, boaters returned to Lower Skilak boat launch with trash bags full of morels. So many mushrooms! It was then that I started wondering just what magic happened after a fire to make conditions prime for these somewhat odd-looking blond or black fungi. Looking into that question further, it seems that even mycologists are somewhat stumped when asked exactly why these “burn morels” are triggered to grow in newly burned areas. What we know is that clusters of these tasty fungi are expected to show up this spring in the 160,000 acre Swan Lake Fire scar. Excited morel hunters will be on the way to the burn, too.

Whether you have hunted morels after fires for decades or are tempted just to check it out this year, there are some points to consider to make your adventure a success. First, know your mushrooms. Both true and false morels grow on the Kenai Peninsula. True morels have a cap and stalk that are one hollow piece. False morels have a solid stem or a stem with a cottony-material inside and the cap is loosely connected, not one unit as in true morels. Check out the U.S. Forest Service’s *Mushrooms of the National Forests in Alaska* pamphlet to get both detailed descriptions and photos of what to look for locally. Want more help prepping for a morel hunt of your own? Attend the virtual “Morels After the Fire” talk we are hosting with USFS mushroom expert Kate Mohatt at the KPBAAlerts Facebook page. This event is scheduled for 7pm on Tuesday, May 12, 2020. Call 907-260-2820 for details.

The second thing to do before heading into the fire scar for morels or any other recreation is to make a

plan. Where are you going? Is the trail you want to use reopened yet after repair? How long will you be out on your morel hunt? Landmarks will have changed after the fire cleared away trees and brush from otherwise familiar territory. What map or GPS will you use to find your way back to the car? Grab a pair of sunglasses, too. Those charred branches stick up but blend in to the ground, posing a poking hazard. Remember, too, that walking through ash means coming out of the experience feeling like Santa after a long night of chimney visits. Have a plan to handle dirty clothes before you take a seat in your car.

Spring morels show up just as moose calves typically do. Do you have a plan to stay safe in bear country? Once you have a plan, share it with a trusted friend back at home and follow up when you are home safe and sound (maybe also share some of your bounty with that awesome friend of yours). Those tasty morels you collect on the Refuge are yours to enjoy but not to sell. Only commercial permittees on the Chugach National Forest can sell their morel harvest taken from forest lands. The vast majority of Swan Lake Fire burned on the refuge, meaning most if not all the morels found in the burn scar are for personal use only. Check out the fire perimeter at <https://arccg.is/0XaaT1> to see where the forest and refuge boundaries meet.

Finally, remember that a burned area is filled with change. Last week’s *Refuge Notebook* article detailed the various hazards to be expected in this year after the Swan Lake Fire. Trees with shallow roots are tipping over with the lightest of wind. Unstable ground appears solid until you step into the remains of an ash pit. Fallen trees that now serve as seed traps and later decompose into new soil can block your way, making a once easy foray a more strenuous hike.

Although the way through the burned area may take more planning, time and care, remember that thread of truth weaving through all those oldtimer’s tales: after challenge comes reward. Just think about the stories you can tell for years to come of the heaps of morels you found in 2020. Happy Hunting!

*Leah Eskelin is Lead Park Ranger at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Find more information about the refuge at <http://kenai.fws.gov> and info about upcoming virtual refuge events at <http://www.facebook.com/kenainationalwildliferefuge>.*