



## Almost Mushroom Heaven

West Virginia, with its extensive and diverse forests and bountiful rainfall, is an ideal region for the production of wild mushrooms. . . lots of them. In fact nearly 1,700 different species of mushrooms and other larger fungi have thus far been recorded for the state. This abundance includes some world-class prize edibles such as the Golden Chanterelle

(*Cantharellus cibarius*), the King Bolete (*Boletus edulis*), and of course the eminently esculent Morels (*Morchella* spp.), of which there are about a half dozen varieties. Morels, which also go by numerous local names such as mollymoochers, haystacks, merkels, dry-land fish, and sponges, can only be found for an all too brief period in the spring (mid-April to mid-May), but dozens of other kinds of wild mushrooms, edible and otherwise, adorn our woods and fields throughout the summer and fall.



"The brown-net bolete, *Tylopilus variobrunneus*, a new bolete first described from Barbour Co., WV"  
(Photo by Bill Roody)

Many who develop an interest in the fascinating world of fungi, first do so with the idea of harvesting exotic gourmet mushrooms from the wild. This is an enjoyable outdoor activity, but it is not something to be taken casually as some mushrooms are poisonous. Unfortunately, there is no "rule of thumb" that can be used to separate the wholesome and delicious from others that are potentially dangerous if consumed. One common highly toxic mushroom that grows in summer and early fall is the Destroying Angel (*Amanita virosa*). This all white, innocent-looking mushroom has caused fatalities to some who have eaten it. Gathering wild mushrooms for the table is a rewarding pastime but you must know for certain which ones are edible and which are harmful. Those who want to forage for edible mushrooms should learn the safe edibles one by one, either from an experienced mushroom hunter or by studying mushroom field guides.

There is much more about mushrooms to be enjoyed besides eating them. Some contain pigments that can be extracted to use as a natural fabric dye. Others can be processed to make paper or a suede-like material similar to leather that can be fashioned into hats and other articles. Mushrooms have been used for centuries in Chinese folk medicine and modern research has shown that several of these ancient remedies may have merit. This is understandable when you consider that many of the world's major antibiotics such as penicillin come from fungi. Pharmaceutical firms are currently researching the properties of many common mushrooms as a possible source of medicines.

Aside from practical aspects, mushrooms are among the most beautiful and interesting objects of nature, something that has not been overlooked by painters, poets and photographers. Their rich colors and sometimes bizarre forms attract our attention and challenge our curiosity. Mushrooms and other fungi have an intriguing ecology, and are absolutely essential elements of a healthy ecosystem. West Virginia is truly a treasure trove of fungal delights.

## Getting It All Down

Division of Natural Resources biologists, with help from some volunteer field mycologists, are currently in the process of acquiring “voucher specimens” of mushrooms and other fungi from all parts of the state. “Vouchers” are dried specimens of each species which provide a long-term scientific record that can be used as a reference for future study. Each voucher specimen is recorded in a database then preserved in a herbarium as a permanent reference collection. This ongoing project has yielded several new state records, including the discovery of species that have not previously been scientifically described. The WVDNR fungi collections are being housed in the herbarium at Davis & Elkins College in Elkins, WV under the curatorship of Michelle Mabry. Eventually the accumulated field data will be collated to create an atlas of West Virginia fungi, which will document all of the species known to occur within the state and their geographic distribution.

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**[Click here](#)** for more information on the recently published ***Mushrooms of West Virginia and the Central Appalachians*** by William Roody.

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