Hunting for morel mushrooms isn't easy for beginners. But one lucky novice made a morel discovery in his own backyard.

Morels Underfoot

Story and Photos
By Joe McFarland

Every spring across Illinois, thousands of perfectly decent citizens slip off into forests to do something they'd rather not discuss. It will be early April, just about the time trees begin to develop a few small leaves, when unfamiliar cars and trucks begin appearing along country roads. Strangers will step out, gripping knives, then disappear into the woods. Most will be carrying bags or baskets.

When they return, these ordinary people—many from honest, well-respected communities—will drive away and refuse to tell anyone where they've been. On the following day they might return, and on each day afterward for a couple of weeks, until the leaves on trees are almost fully opened, and then the people will vanish for another year.

Lou Conte said he had never heard of such a thing.

"Until last year, I don't know that I'd be able to recognize a morel mushroom," this respected Illinois resident explained from his Jackson County home. Scarcely an hour earlier, Conte was in the woods behind his house picking dozens of morels, experiencing for the first time what so many Illinois residents swear they know nothing about.

"It was always such a mystery," Conte recalled while slicing open the hollow mushrooms on his picnic table. "Several people I know said they were going to show me how to find morels, but they never did."

There's a good reason. Morel mushrooms, a common name for the fruiting bodies of fungi belonging to the genus *Morchella*, are far too precious to share with even close friends. They can be delicious. They're considered delicacies. Gourmet restaurants throw lavish feasts featuring morels. But the fact these peculiar-looking mushrooms often grow in the same places year after year makes the location of those treasured hotspots priceless information.

So Conte turned to other sources for morel guidance.

Thanks to the Department of Natural Resources and *Outdoor*Illinois magazine, Conte gained all of the background information he needed to make educated forays into the woods in search of the sponge-capped spring fungi. Conte learned about morel habitat, collection techniques and safe identification. He quickly built enough confidence to predict exactly where morels might grow on his property—months before the season.

Trees, he learned, are an important association for morels—but only certain trees are frequent hosts.

"Yellow poplars and ash trees," Conte recited. "And dead elm trees. Also dead cottonwoods and dead or dying apple trees."

Conte is a frequent visitor to the woods and once considered a career as a zoologist. But since tree identification

After learning what trees might host morels, amateur mushroom hunter Lou Conte scouted his backyard forest in February and made a bold prediction—during April, he would find morels under yellow poplars. He found them exactly where he predicted.

can be tricky before leaves fully appear, a copy of Forest Trees of Illinois (available through DNR's gift shop at 217-782-1687) can be handy.

Conte learned that yellow morel mushrooms (*Morchella esculenta*) often appear on the ground around specific trees during morel season. But why wait until morel season before finding the right habitat? Conte scanned his backyard forest in February, and decided precisely where he would look for mushrooms in April.

All true morel mushrooms are completely hollow. Slice open these sponge-capped fungi to verify their identity. No other potential look-alikes found during the spring match the hollow construction of a morel.

"I found a number of yellow poplar and ash trees on my property," Conte said. "When it was time to look for morels, that's where I found morels.

When I wandered away from those trees, I stopped finding morels."

The hunt itself is rarely easy. The pitted, honeycomb design of morels are perfect camouflage among leaf litter—in fact, one entrepreneurial Illinois morel hunter created his own line of camouflage material based on the design.

"No wonder I've never seen them before," Conte said while slowly wandering the hillside. "They're impossible to see. I've been hiking out here every spring for years and I've never noticed morels."

One trick, Conte learned from experts, is to understand precisely when morels pop out of the ground during spring. If morels are hard to spot (and they can be maddeningly difficult to see), it's helpful to know when the time is right before heading to the woods.

"I tell people to imagine the shape of a morel," suggested Illinois Natural History Survey mycologist Andrew Miller, who hunts for morels in central Illinois in mid to late April. "When your eyes see that matching image on the ground, you've found morels."

As for selecting habitat, Miller said the conspicuous appearance of dead

With nicknames such as "smokies" or "blacks," the dark morels known as *Morchella elata* share the essential traits of all true morels: a sponge-like cap and completely hollow interior.

American elm trees—one of the well-known hosts of *Morchella esculenta*—make finding habitat easy. Dead American elms (*Ulmus americana*) typically shed their bark to reveal a bare trunk within a year or two after dying. Those bare trunks can be easy targets for hunters, even from considerable distances.

"Any morel hunter worth his salt can spot a dead elm at 60 miles an hour," Miller added.

Rain and temperature are important, too. Tom Nauman, who operates the "mushrooming" business Morel Mania with his wife Vicky in Putnam County, suggests looking for morels after spring weather truly sets in.

"Pay attention to the weatherman," Nauman suggests. "When the overnight low stays above 60 degrees, that's when I start looking."

The Naumans host the Illinois State Morel Mushroom Hunting Championship each year, a friendly competition where hundreds of morel hunters scour the woods for the biggest, the smallest and the most morels—hoping for the ultimate prize of Grand Champion. Whereas most morel experts hide information, Nauman shares everything he knows.

"I'm the exception," Nauman said. "I take about 500 people to one of my best mushroom spots every year."

This year's festival is set for the first weekend in May at the Marshall-Putnam Fairgrounds in Henry (a couple of hours southwest of Chicago). Registration information can be found at morelmania.com.

For Conte, a beginner with a new, morel secret in his backyard, learning how to find morels not only solved the mystery surrounding these fabled fungi, it represented a new way to expand his participation in nature.

"That's what it's all about," Conte said, gesturing toward the trees. "I love being out in the woods anyway, and this is just another way to enjoy nature."

"I could get used to doing this every year."

Look for morels in Illinois when forest trees are just starting to leaf out, and look closely—the reward of a bowl of yellow morels (inset) is worth the effort.