

Picking Mushrooms in Areas Burned by Wildfires



INTRODUCTION

When a wildfire moves through a forested area, a significant amount of tree cover and other vegetation can be burned away, leaving the soil exposed. Under these conditions, wild mushrooms (including fire morels) may be among the first organisms to reappear in fire-damaged areas.

Although individuals and commercial picking operations are allowed to harvest mushrooms on Crown land, everyone who does so must comply with applicable legislation related to the use of Crown land and respect the rights of private property owners, First Nations and other interested parties in affected areas.



Grey fire morels often appear in greater-than-normal quantities in areas where wildfires have occurred.

MUSHROOM BIOLOGY

Mushrooms are an essential component of forest ecosystems. They decompose organic matter, provide food for animals, and can even help plants grow. Morels play a critical role in the natural recovery of soils and understory species post-wildfire.

Mushrooms are the fruit of a fungus that lives unseen in the soil, the duff (the layer of plant material and leaf litter

that often covers a forest floor) or on living or dead trees. This unseen, thread-like network is called a mycelium. In the case of many mushrooms, the mycelium is interconnected with the roots of a living tree.

If conditions are right, the mycelium produces spore-bearing bodies (mushrooms) each year. The spores germinate in the soil when conditions are favourable and will establish new mycelia in the forest.

There are several species of fire morels in British Columbia, including *Morchella tomentosa* (gray fire morel), *Morchella sextelata* (pink fire morel) and *Morchella septimelata* (green fire morel) — as well as morel relatives with which they might be confused: *Gyromitra esculenta* (false morel) and *Verpa bohemica* (false early morel).

PICKING WILD MUSHROOMS

Mushroom pickers should tread carefully in areas where mushrooms are growing and leave over-mature mushrooms behind. They cannot pick mushrooms in sensitive ecosystems or forest reserves. When harvesting mushrooms, it's important to not harm the mycelium that produces the mushrooms. If it's not damaged and conditions are favourable, the fire morel fungus may produce a new crop of mushrooms after the first crop is harvested.

Mushroom picking is allowed on provincial Crown land without a permit, but it's illegal to pick mushrooms in a provincial or national park. On private land, pickers must get permission from the property owner to access the land and harvest mushrooms from it.

Permission to pick mushrooms is required:

- » on First Nations reserve lands
- » on leased public land
- » on private land

Mushroom picking is NOT ALLOWED:

- » in national or provincial parks
- » on Department of National Defense lands (federal)

- » in protected areas, (ecological or special reserves)
- » in recreation areas (provincial recreation sites and trails)
- » in areas specifically closed to protect sensitive resource values or for the purposes of public safety



Pink fire morel by Margot Kimmel

Anyone planning to pick mushrooms in burned areas is strongly advised to learn where the boundaries of provincial parks, federal parks and First Nations reserves are, to avoid picking mushrooms in restricted areas or inadvertently wandering into areas where permission is required to pick them. Pickers should familiarize themselves with the locations of First Nations traditional territories and reserves.

» Visit iMapBC:

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content?id=C52F8C3BFE8C4110A63171337F363F43>

Crown land may be closed to mushroom picking or other activities at any time to address safety issues or other concerns. Anyone planning to pick mushrooms is strongly advised to check with the local FrontCounter BC office to see if access to the specific area they wish to enter has been closed. You can call FrontCounter BC toll-free at **1 877 855-3222**. A list of FrontCounter BC offices is available online at www.portal.nrs.gov.bc.ca/web/client/locations.

HARVESTING TIPS AND PRECAUTIONS

Poisonous mushrooms grow in B.C. and can cause sickness or death if eaten. Anyone who picks mushrooms should be able to correctly identify both edible and poisonous varieties. Do your research carefully or go picking with an educated professional.

Mushrooms should not be eaten raw. Morels contain a volatile toxin that dissipates through drying or cooking but will cause gastrointestinal problems if the morels are eaten raw. Some morel look-alikes can also cause gastric distress in some people (e.g. the *Gyromitra* species).

HARVESTING TIPS:

- » When harvesting morel mushrooms, cut the stem above the ground. Do not pull or tear the mushroom out of the ground. This leaves the dirt in the forest instead of transferring the dirt to your collecting container.
- » Do not disturb the soil surface, since doing so can harm the mycelium (the underground, threadlike network that produces the mushrooms).
- » Only pick mushrooms that you will actually use. Broken and overmature morels may continue to spread their reproductive spores if they're left untouched.
- » Confirm the mushroom's identity with an experienced harvester, buyer, or biologist.

RESOURCES:

» Ecology and Management of Morels Harvested from Forests of Western North America (USDA):

https://www.fs.usda.gov/pnw/pubs/pnw_gtr710.pdf

» B.C. Centre for Disease Control:

<http://www.bccdc.ca/resourcegallery/Documents/Educational%20Materials/EH/FPS/Fruit%20and%20Veg/Wild%20Mushrooms%20May%20Be%20Poisonous%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf>

PUBLIC SAFETY IN AREAS BURNED BY WILDFIRES

Anyone traveling in wildfire-affected areas should be alert for potential safety risks, including water runoff, floods, landslides, rockfalls, danger trees and damaged infrastructure.

Trees that have been damaged by fire could topple at any time, especially in windy conditions. Where a tree has burned right down to the roots, the resulting ash pit may be difficult to spot and could cause an injury. Warning signs and other types of public notices may be damaged or missing in fire-affected areas.

Timber salvage and landscape rehabilitation activities may be underway in burned areas. Do not enter areas where heavy equipment is operating without operator permission. Aerial seeding is often used to rehabilitate burned areas. Please avoid these sites since they are extremely sensitive and need time to recover.

RESOURCES:

» Current wildfires:

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content?id=F4EA16310CC541899EFC156A60D74FC9>

» Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of B.C. (APEGBC): <https://www.egbc.ca/>

» Environment Canada weather:

https://www.weather.gc.ca/forecast/canada/index_e.html?id=BC

» Current flood information, ClimateReadyBC

information and contacts: <https://climatereddybc.gov.bc.ca/>

» Ministry of Forests (district offices and contacts):

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content?id=D49E6A6A67C944AC80A9F5B5686543F1>

ROAD USE AND VEHICLE ACCESS

When traveling on forest service roads in B.C., always stay alert and exercise caution. Watch for road hazards and industrial traffic. Always drive with your headlights on.



Obey all signs but be aware that not all hazards are identified by signs. Public roads within burned areas may be temporarily deactivated to reduce potential environmental concerns, address safety concerns, prevent erosion, or protect streams and wildlife habitat. This work can make roads impassable even for four-wheel-drive vehicles. Driving on a deactivated road is extremely dangerous. We discourage all vehicle traffic on these roads to allow landscape rehabilitation to continue uninterrupted.

Roads in burned areas that have not been deactivated may have logging operations underway. Always watch for logging trucks, which have the right of way on forest service roads.

A gate on a road may indicate that the road is on private land. Public roads may also be gated if they are unsafe (e.g. due to fallen trees, a damaged bridge, etc.) or access may be restricted to help protect wildlife. Usually, a sign will be posted to explain why a public road is closed. Gates used to control livestock must be left as you found them.

Some roads may be closed to support wildfire recovery management strategies, including range recovery and salvage retention strategies. For more information, visit <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content?id=D0FAAC6BD7014A049289C47454D6D324>

Operators of off-road vehicles (ORVs) should familiarize themselves with the regulatory requirements in British Columbia's Off-Road Vehicle Management Framework. More information is available online at <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content?id=C589D47B786849F0A8E6B44F0777A0BC>

For more information about resource road safety or to view current forest service road closures in your area, visit <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content?id=D0FAAC6BD7014A049289C47454D6D324>

CAMPING

Camping in previously burned forest areas is not advisable, due to potential safety hazards and ecological impacts. Campers must respect private property. Always ask the landowner for permission if you wish to camp on private land. Recreation Sites and Trails BC campsites are to be used for recreational camping only, not to conduct a commercial business. Wildfires can affect provincial parks and access to some parks may be restricted due to wildfire activity.

When camping on Crown land:

- » "If you pack it in, pack it out!"
- » Food and garbage can attract animals. Store all food and garbage well away from your camp and be sure to take your waste with you when you leave.
- » Never cut down a live tree without authorization. If campfires are allowed in the area where you are, only use dead or fallen wood for firewood. Stay clear of trees marked with "wildlife tree" signs.
- » Always leave your campsite clean, safe and sanitary.

RESOURCES:

- » Recreation Sites and Trails BC: www.sitesandtrailsbc.ca
- » BC Parks: www.bcparks.ca

FIRE PREVENTION

On average, about 40% of the wildfires that occur each year are caused by people. A carelessly discarded match or an escaped campfire can easily cause a wildfire. Sparks generated by vehicles or other equipment can also start a wildfire.

For information about wildfire hazards, fire prevention, fire use prohibitions, campfire bans or current wildfire conditions, call the 1 888 3FOREST fire information line or visit the BC Wildfire Service website at <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content?id=F4EA16310CC541899EFC156A60D74FC9>

- » Report any suspicious activities or environmental damage to local authorities or the RCMP.
- » To report a wildfire, call 1 800 663-5555 tollfree or *5555 from a cellphone.
- » Report natural resource violations by calling 1 877 952-7277 toll-free or #7277 on most cellular networks. You can also submit a report online at <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content?id=E0A851C9104A418F8A01FCA0E8E830B3>

You can find more information about picking mushrooms in wildfire-affected areas by calling FrontCounter BC toll-free at 1 877 855-3222 or by visiting <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content?id=5A3DAABEFA1743C095A43AD20614CEF2>