

Tom Volk's Fungus of the Month for April 1997

This month's fungus is *Morchella*, the morel !

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Being in Wisconsin, what else could I pick for the fungus of the month for April? In our part of the state, we normally don't get morels until early May, but after a long winter, we sure begin to think about them in April, or even earlier.

If you've visited my web site before you probably know I already have a page on [The Life Cycle of the Morel](#). This page will augment the information on that page. I recommend you read both. There are many inline images so if you have a slow modem be patient!



I did my Ph.D. dissertation on the life cycle of the genus *Morchella*. This is the result of my first morel hunt in 1983.-- but it's been all downhill ever since, although last year's "crop" was pretty close. Yes, I know you've all seen this picture before and it's time for a new one. I have a very nice picture of my sister and me with our harvest last year, but I haven't been able to scan it in yet. So you'll have to take my word for it. Isn't that what every morel hunter says??



Many people ask about false morels, which are also common this time of the year. False morels are *Gyromitra* species (some would include *Verpa* species as false morels also). Sometimes also



called "beefsteak morels," *Gyromitra* species are easily distinguished from *Morchella* species because the cap in *Gyromitra* is not fused to the stalk, except at the very top. Compare to the black morel, below. In addition, the stipes of *Morchella* species are

hollow. If you examine the spores of *Gyromitra* species you will find 2 oil droplets, which are not found in *Morchella*. It is important to be able to distinguish the genera, because some *Gyromitra* species have been shown to contain varying amounts of the toxin



monomethylhydrazine, which is one chemical bond away from being rocket fuel. For that reason I do not recommend eating *Gyromitra* species. There are many people who do eat false morels after first parboiling the mushrooms and throwing away the water, sometimes repeating this, and then sauteeing the mushrooms. There are reports of people even getting sick from inhaling the vapors during



the parboiling process.

Some people are tempted to (and do) eat *Gyromitra* species because of their meaty texture and large size, as shown in this photo of Jay Justice, of Arkansas, photographing two very large specimens of *Gyromitra caroliniana*. You are of course welcome to eat anything you like, but in my opinion eating false morels is like playing Russian roulette. (no offense intended to any Russians reading this.) There is just too much variability in the amounts of toxin in different populations to take any chances. I've tasted small amounts, and I don't think it's very good anyway. In my opinion, and according to this picture, *Gyromitra* is just a toadstool.



I was very fortunate to attend the 1996 Missouri Mycological Society's MOREL MADNESS foray at Meramec State Park, west of St. Louis, at the invitation of Ken Gilberg and Jim Winn. It was a lot of fun, and I recommend this foray very highly. The picture is of the morel king (who found 95+ morels) the morel queen (who found 70+ morels), the morel prince (who found the largest morel), and last year's morel king, holding the 3.75 lb.

Gyromitra caroliniana he found. Most of

the morels were found on south slopes, mostly under recently dead elm trees, but also under living ash and oak trees. The Morel Madness foray is generally held every year. If you get the chance to go, I highly recommend this foray-- everyone there is very nice, and lots of morels can be found--people actually will share their spots with you!. For further information on the Morel Madness foray contact Jim Winn at pjimwinn@aol.com

If you have anything to add, or if you have corrections or comments, please write to me at volk.thom@uwlax.edu

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