

Silver lining

BY TOM DICKSON

Last year's fire season was one of the worst in Montana history. Twenty-one major fires and hundreds of smaller blazes burned a total of 1 million acres across the state. More than 4,000 local, state, and federal firefighters were deployed, and two were killed by falling trees in separate incidents. The smoke caused severe respiratory problems, especially among seniors and people with asthma, in dozens of communities. Some days, when we could hardly breathe in Helena, we tried to imagine the even grimmer air quality endured by fire crews and residents of Missoula, Eureka, and Seeley Lake.

Firefighting cost the state of Montana \$75 million in 2017, and a recent University of Montana study estimates that tourism losses due to "severe smoke and fire" topped \$240 million as visitors changed, shortened, and cancelled trips.

Yet despite the undeniable human loss and hardship, we know that some ecological good can come from the fires. Fires clear thick underbrush that, if not periodically thinned, accumulates and fuels even more severe fires. By removing forest canopy, fires open areas to sunlight, fostering new growth of grasses, forbs, and shrubs eaten by elk, moose, and other wildlife. Fires knock back conifers overtaking native mountain grasslands, and are necessary for lodgepole pine cones to open and release their seeds.

Forest fires also are one of the mysterious forces of nature that coax morel mushrooms up out of the ground the following year.

For months, Montana mushroom fans



filling half a pillow case with thumb-sized morels. On the drive home I told him he'd been spoiled—"like the kid who catches a 20-inch trout the first time out"—and recounted the many times my wife and I had searched for morels over the years and found only a few, or none.

This summer could be another banner year. I might join fellow members of the Western Montana Mycological Association, based in Missoula, on its annual Memorial Day weekend outing. When we head out, we'll no doubt follow the advice of Larry Evans, Montana's mushrooming guru and founder of the organization.

A few years ago while mushroom hunting together, Evans told me not to bother with intensely burned areas—"where the soil gets sterilized." Look instead for mosaics of burned and unburned ground, which indicate cooler fire temperatures as well as ground moisture that enhances morel production. I also learned to look for dead conifers that still retain some burnt-orange needles—another indicator of a slowly moving fire and damp soil.

Though morels are prized in our households, I'd be happy if Montana remained fire free the entire year. After the smoke of 2017, residents and visitors deserve a full summer of sweet, clean air. But if a forest does burn, count on me to be among the hundreds of mushroom lovers wandering the charred aftermath next summer, pocketknife in one hand, pillow case in the other. 🐻

For tips on when, where, and how to locate morels, Google "Secrets of a Morelling Master" and read our article from March-April 2015.

have been quietly speculating that the 2018 morelling season may be the best in years. The combination of heavy snowpack this past winter and hundreds of thousands of acres of charred forest could produce ideal morel conditions. Especially promising: Many burned areas are on public lands accessible by roads.

The last time morel lovers saw so much burned forest was after the devastating 2007 Jocko Lakes Fire, which torched more than 36,000 acres and came within a mile of the town of Seeley Lake.

I drove to that fire site one morning the following summer with a friend who had never picked morels. After parking near a seep that oozed from the blackened soil, we got out of the car. I took just five steps, looked around at the ground, and said, "There are morels everywhere."

"I don't see them," my friend replied.

"Crouch down and look closer."

He did, then gasped. We spent the next hour within 100 yards of the vehicle, each

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