



MYCOBATHING IN WOODPECKER GULCH

Ever heard what sounded like a giant eagle or mythical beast flapping its wings and snarling at you. Neither had I, until a warm, sunny August day when I set off foraging at my favorite mushroom collecting locale, Woodpecker Gulch.

2021 has been a strange weather year, though strange seems the norm these days. June was historically warm, with the mercury topping 100 degrees at my home in Carbondale, Colorado. Then came July heavy with rain, enough to close the interstate for weeks and reroute the Colorado River with heavy debris. A friend of mine asked me earlier in the year if I thought morels might come out in the Grizzly Creek burn scar above I-70. I told him, "If it rains enough to flood the highway, then yes."

Boletus, also known as porcini, popped soon after the rains began and I did my fair share of harvesting. I also scored a nice basket of chanterelles on my way to Crested Butte for a family memorial, but staying alone in a house with minimal cookware, I gave most of my booty away. Usually one to hoard such treasure, it felt liberating handing it out to friends and family. Having gorged on porcini the weeks prior, I set forth again in search of chanterelles, this time for keeps. I have always said foraging for mushrooms is a good excuse for a walk in the woods. Whether I find delectibles or not, the journey is as important as the end product. However, due to recent climatic anomalies, I expected product.



Russulas



Coral

I left home with the rising sun and soon climbed the road into the high country. Halfway up, I came upon a few porcini on the still moist, south facing slopes. This was a good sign as the north facing slopes of Woodpecker Gulch would surely be lush. Rounding a corner, I heard bleating and soon saw a herd of sheep dotting the hillside. Shortly thereafter an ATV came rumbling down the road. The driver stopped, and we chatted about what turned out to be his herd. He had driven up to drop off some salt licks and look after one of his guard dogs who was misbehaving. The dogs stay with the herd, and he comes up daily to feed and check on them. I asked how many of the herd end up dying by predation, expecting the answer to be a few. He said about 8 percent fall prey, and that's before the wolves come. For a herd of over 1,000 head, that's a lot of dead sheep. Noticing my basket, he told me his daughter had just been to Lake Irwin and found a bunch of mushrooms. I told him it was a good year, and in fact there were some fine porcini just down the road which I would be happy to grab for him. He said no thanks. Surprised, I told him how well they go with a tenderloin, but he insisted he wasn't interested. I asked about the dog on the back of his ATV, wondering if it was the unruly one. He said no, this was his good dog, his Kangal. He told me she was a special breed that could take out a coyote and tree a bear without backing down. She looked docile enough so I gave her a pet. Saying goodbye, he told me the sheep had been all over the frontside. I told him I was headed over the ridge. He said that side would be undisturbed. He also mentioned his other dog out in the field is about as tall as my shoulder, but he is nice and I should just talk to him should I run into him. As I was leaving, he said he was impressed I had walked all the way up. I told him I also ski here in the winter. He said that's what this country is for.



Amanita



Elderly Amanita

After a quick sip of water atop the ridge, I headed over and soon found the elk trail which is my entry point into the musty underworld of Woodpecker Gulch. Aside from a few hunters in the fall, it is a destination few people have cause to venture. Upon entry, it was immediately clear the rains had sprouted a cornucopia of fungal activity. Stepping off the elk trail, I found myself swimming in a sea of shrooms, treading water amongst amanitas, coral, porcini, fairy fingers, hawk's wings, puffballs and other unidentifiable toadstools in reds, browns, yellows, whites and purples.

The sun was high, yet thin cloud cover and the smoky haze from Western fires lent ideal light to the forest floor. I soon found myself snapping pictures, drawn more toward the next flush of colorful mushrooms than orienteering toward my favored chanterelle patch. I became enthralled by the life cycle of the *Amanita Muscaria*. Stout, white-headed babies, Alice in Wonderland speckled orbs of precocious adolescents, disk-like spreading midlife forms and finally the drooping and shrivelled elderly, babushkas gossiping on a park bench.



Boletus, also called porcini



Amanita nubilosa



Amanita babushkai



LIFECYCLE OF THE AMANITA MUSCARIA





Hawk's Wing

Meandering rather than navigating, I overshot my intended destination. Rather than reorient, I continued across the forest floor and noticed a porcini poking out from underneath a thin, fallen tree. Walking to photograph it, I nearly trampled a cluster of chanterelles next to the tree. Drawn from my mesmerized state and reminded of the task at hand, I harvested the larger specimens and began shifting my focus from observer to gatherer. A second larger patch soon presented and I began filling my basket.

FUNGAL SEASCAPES





Lactarius Deliciosus



Puffballs

Uncertain of my exact location, but certain I had found my third patch of the day, I set down my basket and knelt to pick the first of the bunch when I heard the aforementioned sound of what my mind could only register as some sort of thunderclap of wings. Looking up I expected to see an eagle or some other bird of prey swooping down, but surprisingly saw nothing. Hearing another whoosh, whoosh above, I looked up expecting a large owl. Instead, I shockingly saw a full grown bear clinging to the tree trunk about 15 feet overhead.

The week before, I had been foraging for porcini with my cousins when after hearing a snort, we looked up to a juvenile, male moose. At the time, we thought it sounded urgent and demanding, but interpreting the moose's snort in retrospect, it seemed to be saying, "Hey guys, I was here first enjoying my solitude and foraging for some succulents down by the creek, so if you don't mind taking a few steps back and respecting my privacy, that would be great." This was in opposition to what my current furry friend was saying, which could be clearly interpreted in bear as, "Get the fuck outta here, now!"



Amanita gills

In the nano-seconds it took my brain to compute scared, snorting bear, probable cubs in vicinity and the fact she could hop off the tree and land on my shoulders if she so desired, I rose urgently enough from my seated position to tweak my mid-thoracic back as I swirled to grab my basket and skedaddle. She shimmied farther up the tree and continued snorting as I backed away in an adrenaline rush, snapping a few shaky iphone photos in retreat.

Remembering her words and with zero regrets, I left the third chanterelle patch untouched by human paws. Criss-crossing the forest floor, both petrified and exhilarated, I realized I was quite hungry. I sat to eat my sandwich, but was so amped I ate walking in circles. Only able to eat half the sandwich, I put my pack back on and headed uphill in the general direction of what I hoped would be the original chanterelle patch. Gotta get back in the saddle, they say.

I had seemingly gotten my bearings and was quite sure I was about to crest the rise to the original patch when I heard the now familiar set of snorts, grateful at least this time the sound was moving through the forest rather than directly overhead. Nevertheless, I froze momentarily. Deciding I may as well walk as stand still, I crested the rise to what was indeed my original patch. Just above, running uphill and climbing a tree, was the bear. She quickly shimmied back down and headed uphill out of sight, followed by a pair of cubs.



Chanterelles



Mother bear in tree

MISSHAPEN PORCINI



The Japanese have a concept called Forest Bathing. Shinrin-Yoku is also translated as taking in the forest atmosphere. According to Qing Li in an article for Time Magazine, forest bathing is not exercise. It is simply being in nature, connecting with it through the senses, walking aimlessly and slowly, following your nose. It doesn't matter if you don't get anywhere. You are not going anywhere. You are savoring, listening to the birds sing and the leaves rustle, watching sunlight bounce off the forest floor. Forest bathing is crossing the bridge between us and the natural world.



Unidentified brown mushroom

Amanita



Amanita

When I first heard the concept of forest bathing, I realized that is what I do while foraging. More succinctly, that is foraging- a slow meander through the forest, no set agenda, no particular destination, unfurling wonder around each bend. My friend Tony once remarked that it's great to get out with people, but it's always better alone. It was his way of saying to cross that bridge, it is best done in solitude.

Years ago, hiking with a basketful of chanterelles down the same slope now populated by sheep, I met a man scouting the area for fall hunting. Wide eyed, he looked at my basket and asked where I got them. I told him they are all around, but I found these in Woodpecker Gulch. He said I know this area well, where is Woodpecker Gulch? I replied it's on the map, you can find it. Woodpecker Gulch, it's out there waiting for you!



Dave Teitler enjoys the outdoors and gets his mushroom eyes on if the summer rains come. When not romping around the woods, he can be found tending his vegetable garden, hanging with family and friends or working at his Chinese medicine clinic in Carbondale, CO.



Amanitas