

Mushroom Hunting Safety

Wild mushroom foraging may not seem like a dangerous hobby, but there are real risks involved here, as there are in most outdoor activities. Few people would argue that the freedom of not wearing a car seat belt outweighs the safety of wearing one, but people do make their own choices. The point is that there is general recognition that certain preventive behaviors can minimize risk, although not eliminate it. Mushroomers tend to walk off trail and through the woods, so there is always a risk of tripping and falling or otherwise injuring yourself far from your car or the nearest first aid kit. However, by far the greatest danger is getting lost and spending much more time in the woods than you had planned. The quality of that extra time in the woods will vary from life threatening to miserable to merely inconvenient, depending on how prepared you are. A friend of mine is an officer in Snohomish county Search and Rescue and he thinks that in 2016 there were three lost foragers in Snohomish and Pierce counties, all of which involved extended stays in the forest, in one case overnight, but all three were found. None of the three were adequately prepared. We don't have numbers on this but there may have been other foragers who were lost but who were adequately skilled and prepared such that they never had to call search and rescue. (BTW Search and Rescue teams do not charge for being called - at least in WA state)

Foragers tend to bring gear necessary to harvest mushrooms, so that gear will not be covered here. However, they tend not to carry much safety gear. Safety planning however starts before assembling gear.

Pre Trip Planning

1. Make a plan for where you will go, how long you will stay out and when you plan to return. Give this plan to some one who is not going with you. Tell them you will check in with them upon return and if you do not check in with them within say 6 hours of your planned return time, they should call the authorities (sheriff or search and rescue).
2. Line up at least one other person to go with you.
3. Get the latest weather forecast for your intended destination. Change plans if weather looks challenging.
4. Know how to use your gear. A map will not help if you don't know how to read it, as a GPS won't help if you don't know how to use that.

Assemble Safety Gear (List of Essentials, modified for mushrooming)

1. Navigation (map, compass, GPS, extra batteries)
2. Weather Protection (sun and rain, top and bottom)
3. Insulation (extra clothing)
4. Illumination (headlamp/flashlight)
5. First Aid Supplies (bring the kit you want rescuers to have when they work on you.)
6. Fire (waterproof matches, lighter, candles, etc)
7. Repair kit and tools (this could be as small as a Swiss Army knife or multi function tool)
8. Nutrition (extra food)
9. Hydration (extra water)
10. Emergency shelter (a tube tent is the size of a deck of cards)
11. Signaling devices (whistle, air horn)
12. Watch (keep track of your time)

Optional but Helpful Safety Gear

1. Walkie Talkies (AKA Family Radios)
2. Mobile telephones (for rescue, send text message - much better chance of being received than a call)
3. Emergency Personal Locator Beacons (EPRB)
4. Altimeter

Right about now you may be thinking that this seems like a lot of gear to carry, especially if you only plan an outing of a couple of hours. However, one of the biggest risks is plunging into the woods w/o safety gear because “I’m only going to be in there a few minutes” or some similar but equally unwise rationale. I speak from experience here; unfortunately twice. As for space, all of the above gear fits easily in a day pack. To avoid packing and repacking a day pack weekly, you can pack it for safe foraging at the start of the season and leave it packed all season. A day pack at a second hand store could be purchased for \$10 or under, and dedicated to mushrooming and/or hiking. When I see mushroomers assembling for an outing in the woods and they have no pack (or other way to carry all this gear) then I know they are not adequately prepared. It makes me wonder if they plan to drive home w/o a seat belt.

Personal Observation and Judgement

There is no substitute for being a keen observer and using good judgment. Even if you are following a guide into the woods, you are personally responsible for knowing where you are and getting yourself back to your starting point. Never cede this responsibility to anyone else. If you can't do this, get some training (REI, Mountaineers, etc.) so you learn how, or don't go into the woods. What do you observe? You look at your compass, noting your bearing entering the woods, so you will know what bearing will enable you to exit the woods. If you have a GPS (or phone app) you mark a waypoint when you leave the trail or car, so the device can guide you back. Perhaps most importantly, observe what your path looks like on entering the woods, note landmarks, turn around occasionally to note what the return path looks like. Stay always oriented. If you don't know where you are, quit mushrooming right now and start working on navigation. See prior Spore Prints article - “Becoming Unlost in the Woods”, Spore Prints #514, June 2015.

So you can look at all this as a list of best practices in wilderness travel safety. Most likely, you won't adopt all the prior recommendations. I understand that and I take some shortcuts myself. Each situation is different and has to be evaluated on it's own merit. For example, if I'm planning on hunting alone and fog is forecast, I will either modify or cancel my plans, or if I proceed, I'll adopt every other safety recommendation listed here. Bottom line; the more of these recommendations you can adopt and practice; the safer you will be.

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