

Fungus Fair

By Betty Charnon, Ecologist, Chugach National Forest

What started out as plans for a simple nature walk “mushroomed” into a weekend long event of fun-filled activities. From September 5-7, Girdwood, Alaska, was host to the Fungus Fair! The event was organized by the Chugach National Forest, Glacier Ranger District, and Jonnie Lazarus from Girdwood Parks and Recreation. Key district organizers were mycologist Kate Mohatt and ecologist Betty Charnon, but the entire district staff assisted in many ways, including artwork for totes and T-shirts, trail improvements for the fun run, providing logs for the mushroom workshop, staffing the registration desk, and set-up/clean-up.



Mushroom photo by Sadie Youngstrom.

The weekend began with the Fungus Fair “Formal” at the Hotel Alyeska. This fundraising event featured a five-course gourmet fungal feast with wine pairings followed by a live auction of items donated by local artists and businesses. The rest of the weekend centered on activities aimed at expanding local knowledge of fungi in the Girdwood area through a series of talks by local experts, guided mushroom forays, mushroom cultivation workshops, and an incredible display of local mushrooms in the new Girdwood Community Center. There was something for everyone at Fungus Fair with other activities such as the Fun-Guy/Fun-Gal Fun Run, a Mushroom Movie night featuring “Attack of the

Mushroom People,” and a wildly popular kids arts and crafts workshop. All proceeds from this event went towards future Fungus Fairs and Girdwood Community projects. This year’s beneficiary is the Girdwood Skate Park, which is in desperate need of renovation. Final fund-raising figures showed we raised nearly \$10,000.

Although the Forest Service and Girdwood Parks and Recreation were the main partners, other organizations and individuals shared their particular areas of expertise to make this a true community event. Here is a quick rundown of community involvement. The local non-profit group Girdwood Inc. was the fiscal sponsor so we could raise money without having to rely on the Forest Service budget and also incorporate a worthy fund-raiser for a community project. The Hotel Alyeska chef Michael Flynn created an incredible menu for the “Formal” and owner John Byrne III gave a generous donation toward the dinner. Fungal experts from Kenai, Anchorage, and Cordova conducted the forays and gave popular talks on the many uses and roles of fungi. Four Valleys Community School, Inc., helped out in many ways from co-sponsoring the fun run to allowing the use of their credit card machine at the auction. Local runners and the junior high cross country team helped organize the fun run. Artists Katie and Sarah Cronk organized the kid’s activities. They also made the fabulous fairy faces and other large artwork that can be used in future events. Local barista Carol Sanner (Glacier Valley Roasters) kept us supplied with her great coffee throughout the weekend. Girdwood Books and News owner Chuck Hinson got a special order of mushroom books to sell at Fungus Fair. Dozens of community members staffed the T-shirts and



Sarah Cronk and Katie Cronk’s mushroom art. Photo by Jonnie Lazarus.

registration desk. The librarian read mushroom stories to kids during lap-sit time. The junior high student council supplied the popcorn snacks during the movie. Dozens of artists and local businesses donated items for the auction. Finally, there were hundreds of people who participated in the various events throughout the weekend.

Due to the success of Fungus Fair this year, plans are already underway for next year. Through Fungus Fair, we can educate the public on mushroom identification, proper collecting techniques, uses, and other interesting facts about fungi. The Cordova District also recognized this need and successfully conducted their second annual Fungus Festival. We are fortunate to be able to follow their example and will continue to work together to make both events a smashing success. By hosting these events, the Forest Service is recognized not only as a valuable source of ecological information for fungi enthusiasts but also as an important part of the community.