

Podcast
USDA Forest Service in Alaska – August 22, 2011
Topic: Fungus Festival, Girdwood & Cordova, Alaska
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Welcome to Forest Focus, presented by the US Forest Service, Alaska Region, I'm Bob Belongie...

Southeastern Alaska is renowned for its beauty and bio-diversity, drawing thousands of visitors to the area every year.

Among the multitude of species flourishing in the Chugach National Forest are some that may, at first, literally go unnoticed underfoot, but nonetheless serve an important function in the ecosystem and are quite tasty besides:

"Here in Prince William Sound, we're the northernmost temperate rain forest, a spruce-hemlock forest, we have some cottonwoods here and there, and really, we get a lot of rain here, and with that rain comes a lot of fungus. We get quite a few mushrooms and the fungus festival highlights that abundant resource within our forest"

That's Erin Cooper, Wildlife Biologist for the Prince William Sound Zone in the Cordova Ranger District.

Forest Service Ecologist Kate Mohatt tells us that both edible and non-edible fungus, such as you might see covering a rotting log on the forest floor, have important roles in the habitat:

"They actually fill several niches, and it depends on the species you're talking about. The ones you just described would probably be in the decomposer category, or the ones that you see growing out of trees. Sometimes they can be parasitic on trees as well, but the majority of the fine edibles and the mushrooms that you see popping up in the fall are actually mycorrhizal species, and that means that they form a symbiosis with virtually every tree in the forest. They're attached to the trees at the roots and they provide the tree with nitrogen and phosphates, and the tree provides the fungus with carbohydrates. And around the fall time the tree starts to slow down in their carbon production, so the mushrooms, they start popping up."

There are two festivals popping up that will celebrate wild mushrooms, the Girdwood Fungus Festival, scheduled for August 27th and 28th, and the Cordova Fungus Festival, over Labor Day Weekend, giving aficionados of all things mycological plenty to see and do.

Erin Cooper says in addition to tips on telling the difference between gourmet mushrooms and their toxic relatives, both events will educate the public on the ecological importance of these organisms in the forest environment:

"First off, there's this overview of what is a mushroom, and how do you identify mushrooms and what are the functions of mushrooms in the ecosystem."

Ken Hodges is a Fisheries Biologist for the Cordova Ranger District; he's been part of the local festival since its humble start with a few dozen people back in 2007:

...Developed from just a small gathering of folks, people that were interested, here in the community, to a much bigger event, we have speakers coming in from university of Washington and the San Francisco area, it's gotten to be quite a major attraction (laugh) for Cordovans in the fall."

Cordova Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Martin Moe is an enthusiastic supporter of the festival:

"We have several festivals and events that we put on during the year, for sort of several reasons, the first of all is, just to provide venues for entertainment for locals, as well as visitors and to attract visitors to our slowly growing visitor segment of our economy."

The Girdwood Fungus Festival will kick off with a formal event at the Hotel Alyeska, (AL-EE-ESS-KUH) where wild gourmet mushrooms will be paired with fine wines. In addition, there will be guided mushroom walks in the National Forest with mycologists – fungus experts – as well as workshops on using non-edible mushrooms to make natural dyes for yarn or cloth.

Kate Mohatt says community participation in the festivals has surpassed all expectations:

"The first year, we had envisioned seeing a little local gathering maybe a few, twenty, thirty people that might find it interesting, and we got close to five hundred people through the door. And last year was the third annual, we got around a thousand. I think part of that is, that we just have something for everyone. You know, you could care less about mushrooms and still find something interesting and fun about the festival. There's a fun run for example, and there's going to be cooking demos this year, there's a five course dinner that's actually a fundraiser."

So, how does one make a dessert that incorporates mushrooms? Like searching for gourmet fungus in the National Forest, it's all about having the right skills...

For more information about the Girdwood and Cordova Fungus Festivals, follow the links on the U-S Forest Service Region 10 News and Events Page.

You can also visit www-dot-fungusfair-dot-com or www-dot-cordova-chamber-dot-com to find out more about the festivals.

Forest Focus-Alaska is produced by Belongie Entertainment Enterprises for the Office of Public Affairs, U-S Forest Service, Alaska Region.

In Juneau, I'm Bob Belongie.