

# The maddening search for morels

BY CHRISTINA AMMON

It's a sign of the season each spring when, at the end of my dirt road, mushroom buyers park their pickup trucks, set up their scales, and wait for the pickers to arrive. They are in the market for the coveted morel mushroom, which is prized by chefs for its deep, butter-holding cavities and meaty, umami flavor. They can't be easily cultivated, so are mainly gathered, and since I see the hunters hauling bags to the scales, I assume the surrounding hills must be abundant.

Last year, I decided to hunt for some myself. I know that my travels have always been enhanced by a quest. During a layover in Frankfurt, I sought out the house of Goethe. In Marrakech, I scoured the medina for nutmeg during a time when there was a shortage, and last year in Mexico, I wandered the old town looking for the perfect pair of flip-flops. A good quest winnows this chaotic world

down to a simple search image and infuses your otherwise random wanderings with purpose. Perhaps morel hunting would enhance my daily hikes in the same way.

I waited for the right weather sequence to arrive—a few wet days followed by sunshine—and then set off in the mornings, full of a first-cup-of-coffee optimism. My eyes were keen and searching, and the dog seemed to love my new slow hiking style—we moved across the land at sniffing-speed, and he nosed every bush and tree stump. I liked it too—the way it heightened my attention to detail and stilled me in the sharp light of early morning. We'd wander until my pant cuffs were soaked with forest dew and my stomach growled for breakfast. I didn't find a single morel.

"Morels are everywhere but impossible to find," a saying goes. My friend Malu said she wondered if they really even existed. It

was clear from the buyers on my road that they did, but the pickers are famously protective of their spots. I don't know the secret. Perhaps you just have to put in the time, or just get plain lucky.

I'd like to say I don't mind—that the thrill of the hunt is enough. And for a while, this was true. But as poison oak rashes began to irritate my arms and ankles and as I found myself disoriented more than once, frustration set in. I could no



The quest for the morel can lend purpose to one's walk.  
Illustration: Christina Ammon.

longer enjoy a walk in the woods because I was now too obsessed with looking at the ground in fear of missing a morel.

At one point my friend Caroline sent me a text: *I found nearly two pounds of morels!* She went out with some old-timers, and they had a perfect day of mushroom hunting. She generously brought some over to my house to share. Each bite was proof that they exist.

The day grew hot, the land drier. The likelihood of finding morels diminished by the minute. "You know you can just buy them off Amazon," a neighbor told me when we crossed paths on the road. But, of course, this would ruin the mystique of this Oregon pursuit. I'd have to resume my search the following year, which was fine by me. I was ready to raise up my head and start enjoying hikes again.

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# Pacific lampreys: Intrepid, misunderstood travelers need some help getting past upstream obstacles

BY NATHAN GEHRES

The Pacific Lamprey is an often sadly misunderstood fish. Here in the Northwest, lampreys are often referred to as "eels," which they are not. Some people have the mistaken impression that the lamprey is a harmful invasive parasite or pest, but this could not be further from the truth. While the Atlantic Sea Lamprey became an invasive species in the Great Lakes, that is not the case with our native lamprey. In fact, Pacific Lamprey are an important ecological and cultural component in coastal rivers from Japan to Baja California. Rich in nutrients, Pacific Lamprey is also a sought-after food for all sorts of wildlife, as well as for many indigenous peoples.

These ancient creatures lack the jaws, scales, and paired fins of the typical fish. They even lack a substantial internal skeleton. Most famous for their round, sucker-like mouth filled with teeth, adult Pacific Lampreys may cause trepidation in those that peer into their maws, but they pose no threat to humans.

Like salmon, Pacific Lamprey are anadromous, meaning they start life in fresh water, migrate to the ocean as adults, and return to freshwater streams to spawn. Larval lamprey, known as ammocoetes, have no eyes or teeth, burrow into streambeds after hatching, and are filter feeders, cleaning the water. These "larvae" remain in freshwater for up to seven years, growing to the size of a pencil. Then they develop eyes, teeth, and a sucker mouth before riding rising river flows out into the ocean in late fall or early spring. They stay in the ocean one to three years and grow up to two feet in length.

Lampreys have been found at depths of 2,600 feet and feed parasitically on a

wide array of fishes and even whales, but we really don't know much about their life at sea. After adults return to freshwater (February-June), they migrate upstream but live in the river for about a year before spawning. During this time, adults go on a crash diet, stop eating, and lose about 25 percent of their size.

Lampreys can swim efficiently, but they are not fast, and they can't jump. Instead, they climb up cascades, waterfalls, and other obstacles using only their mouths. Nevertheless, they historically migrated as far inland as Idaho. Spawning adults do not necessarily return to the stream where they hatched. Both sexes help with nest construction (March-June), using their mouths to move small rocks and forming a shallow bowl in the streambed.

Like salmon, lamprey die after spawning. The remains of spawned-out lampreys add nutrients to streams, supporting their young and everything else living there.

The populations of Pacific Lamprey are declining. Many factors have led to this sad situation, but perhaps the biggest obstacle to lamprey population growth is just that: obstacles—barriers that they cannot get past. In the natural world lampreys often climb past cascades and waterfalls that block even salmonids, following smooth wetted surfaces. Unfortunately, since lampreys climb using their sucker-like mouths, they have difficulties moving past simple 90-degree lips or corners, u-shaped channels, or dry walls, all of which are commonly found on dams, weirs, and even fish ladders.

## Passage improvement project

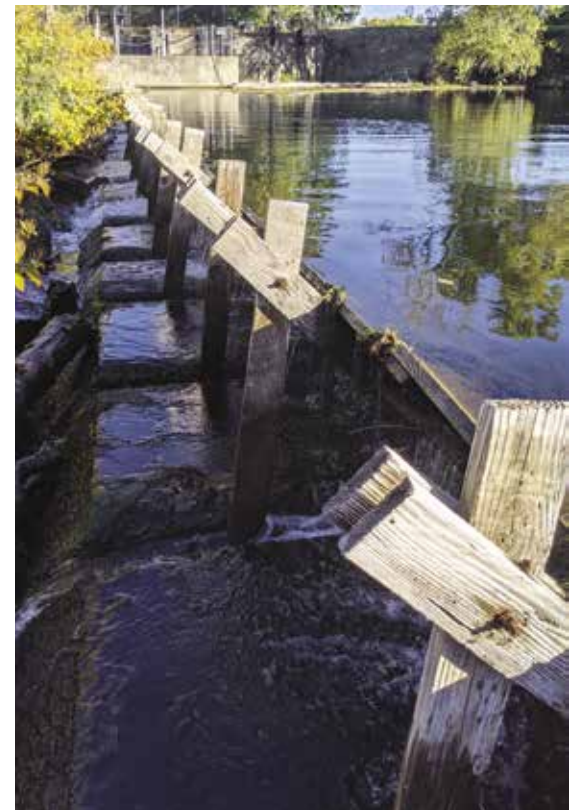
The Applegate Partnership and Watershed Council (APWC) has initiated

a lamprey passage improvement project with Stewart Reid, PhD, a local lamprey biologist. The focus is to mitigate passage issues at six dam sites in the Applegate Valley. Fixes that allow lamprey to pass barriers are often surprisingly simple and inexpensive and do not impede function of the structure.

Pacific Lamprey are amazing animals that provide multiple benefits to rivers in which they live. They clean the water when young, then cycle oceanic nutrients back through those same streams when they die after spawning and provide a rich food source for many animals during all life stages.

Salmon are venerated for marathon migrations, but lamprey, which can migrate even farther using their unique climbing ability, are often held in low esteem. These maligned and misunderstood animals deserve better, and it is my hope that we are beginning to recognize that in the Applegate.

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Irrigation diversions with sharp angles, like this one on Murphy Dam on the Applegate River, are difficult for lampreys to climb and are candidates for lamprey passage improvements.  
Photo: APWC staff.

A Pacific lamprey climbs a concrete water diversion. Photo: Stewart Reid.



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