

By Mary Beth Sallee

In West Virginia, they're known as molly moochers.

In eastern Kentucky, the common name is hickory chickens. In other parts of the Commonwealth, they're referred to as merkels or miracles based on folklore of how they saved a mountain family from starvation.

And in south central Kentucky, they're best known as dry land fish.

Whatever you call them, one thing's for sure: the morel mushroom is a tasty, down-home delicacy for many in Barren and Metcalfe Counties.

Just ask Ashley Livingston.

Ashley has been hunting morel mushrooms for over 33 years.

"We lived in Summer Shade (Metcalfe County) when I hunted my very first time, and I knew then I loved it," Ashley said. "It was a family thing. My mom's grandparents were avid mushroom hunters in Indiana, and it was passed down. My dad took an interest in it and began taking me with him when I was about 7. I can hear him now (say), "Watch where you're stepping. Don't step on them.""

According to the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife, morel mushrooms are the most well-known wild fungus around. Having a conical-shaped cap that is covered with ridges, they typically arrive when the spring season arrives and the nightly temperatures stay in the 50 degrees range.

Morel mushrooms grow in the soil, not on wood. However, they typically can be found associated with the roots of sycamore, elm, ash, poplar, and hickory. Wherever one morel is found, there are usually many others.

"When the weather begins to warm, early spring I get an itching to go," Ashley said. "When the red buds are in bloom is my clue to hit the woods. I find them around apple,

On the hunt for dry land fish



These morel mushrooms are just a few that Ashley Livingston has collected.
PHOTO/Submitted

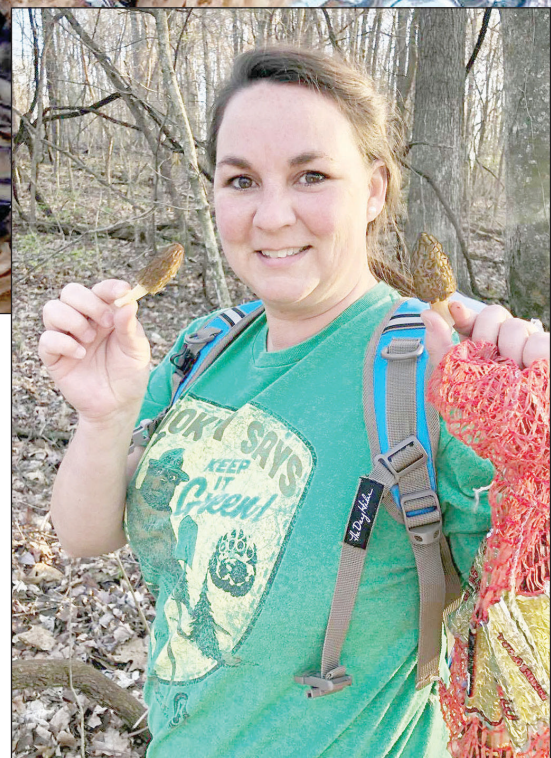
elm, ash, and oak trees. Those are my go-to trees. I find most of mine in a very moist soil not standing with water, but it is a low area."

"I do check the soil temperature in a shaded area at home before I head to the woods," Ashley continued. "Usually, an average of 55-60 degree soil temp is when I find them. You want to go when the night temps stay in the 40s. Usually hunting in the afternoons is when I find mine. I have went in early morning, but I

choose afternoons."

As far as the number of mushrooms she collects, Ashley said she typically gathers all that she can find.

"I would love to come out of the woods with 100+ each time," Ashley said. "I usually average 20-30 each hunt. Some days I do come out



Ashley Livingston enjoys gathering morel mushrooms, otherwise known as dry land fish.
PHOTO/Submitted