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THE POSTMAN

Processing wild mushrooms

BY RICHARD ALAN MILLER

Have you ever wondered what a mushroom buyer does with the wild mushrooms they buy?

All fresh mushrooms should be sorted, graded and packaged in the field, and then transported directly to shipping points or drying stations for further processing. By "field packaging," 24 to 36 hours will be saved from the normal field to market delay that is common in the industry.

Wild mushrooms are harvested by pickers, who carefully harvest the mushroom from the ground, brush off the soil and debris and put them in "mushroom baskets." They are then presented to mushroom buyers who grade (#1 through #5) and weigh each mushroom, and then determine payment to the picker.

Fresh mushrooms are typically packaged in baskets of 10-15 pounds by the buyer, and then transported to a remote processing plant for final grading and packaging. Often a mushroom that is purchased from the picker at one grade in the field is damaged to the point that it is one or more grades lower when reaching the processing plant. This is due to handling during the transport process.

Typically the processing plant will re-grade and repackage with paper to protect the fruit from further damage during transportation. Styrofoam boxes are used, typically holding up to ten pounds. This packaging includes gel-ice packs to slow the growth (aging) of the fresh mushroom.

A wild mushroom that is purchased as a #1 in the field can become a #3 or #4 by the time it reaches the end user since the fruit continues

to "ripen" (the gills open and edges curl), or it is damaged. With this in mind, better incomes result by slicing the mushroom into 1-inch widths, and preparing them to dry in a home-built dryer.

Dryers are easy to build. A good design can be found in the drying chapter of the book "The Potential of Herbs As A Cash Crop."

When the drying process is finished, the mushrooms are packaged in large polyurethane bags containing one to two pounds, placed in 50-pound boxes and stored in a dry environment. Once dried, the wild mushrooms have a shelf life of two to three years, with no loss of nutritional value or customer appeal. Each season has its own specific mushrooms for harvest.

The true "natural resource" found in our community is really the native intelligence of simply recognizing what distinguishes us from other rural communities. Our environment is quite special, as the Kalmiopsis Wilderness Region hosts eight different biospheres, with a diversity of plants rivaling that found in the Amazon. We live in a garden of diversity. See <http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=NWPS&sec=wildView&WID=287>

Richard Alan Miller • 541-476-5588

Do you have a question for the "Postman" regarding crops for profit on the homestead? If so, send them to rick@nwbotanicals.org. Richard will answer all of them. We will print some of the questions and answers in the next APPLGATER.

BIRDMAN

Who's who?

BY TED A. GLOVER

Bird watching is more than just a hobby—it is a fun and exciting game! No matter how experienced you are in identifying birds it is always a challenge to find something new. You will be amazed at how many birds you can already identify even if you don't consider yourself a regular "bird watcher." Just look around your yard or along the streets and roads as you're driving and you'll discover that you already know many of the birds that frequent the Applegate Valley.

The American Crow is abundant and widespread throughout our area and the Mourning Dove can be seen darting up from the ground, flashing its tapered tail feathers edged in white. The ever present jays, both Steller's and Scrub varieties are easy to spot and identify. So too, are mallards, the male with its beautiful metallic green head, distinctive yellow bill and loud "quacking" call. And who hasn't witnessed the majestic Great Blue Heron, standing solitary in open fields, with its black head plume and dark legs?

When looking to identify a bird, be sure

you take a good look at the entire bird, noting the bill and facial markings as well as its colors. The finches, grosbeaks, and sparrows have distinctive conical bills that allow them to crack seeds. Before turning to your field guide, be sure to note the size and compare it to the size of birds which with you are familiar. For example, is it about the size of a House Finch, or larger like a jay? Behavior is also a help in identifying a bird. Does it spend time on the ground? Does it perch on a tree limb or overhead wire? Of course, the songs and calls birds make can be of great assistance. Some bird experts claim that they make 90% of their identifications by ear.

Keep your eyes and ears open and you'll find scores of interesting and attractive birds to watch. We've seen and identified over 125 species in the Applegate and are still counting!

Ted A. Glover • 541-846-0681

From left: Western Scrub-Jay, (*Aphelocoma californica*) and Steller's Jay (*Cyanocitta stelleri*) by Lee Karney, USFWS; and Mourning Dove (*Zenaidura macroura*) by Dr. Thomas G. Barnes, USFWS.

