



THE ALPENA NEWS

June 14, 2021 | Today's Paper | Submit News | Subscribe Today | Login

Sister Marie, mycologist

Up North Portraits

LIFE

JUN 1, 2021

ERIC P. ROORDA

f SHARE t TWEET



Ads by Google

Stop seeing this ad

Why this ad? ▶



A drawing of Sister Marie by Eric P. Roorda.

The Alcona Conservation District teams up twice a year with its Iosco County counterpart to host a mushroom hunt every spring and fall at the Ingalls Forest near Tawas.

Last spring's event ... well, you know what happened. But last fall's hunt went ahead, attracting 70 masked amateur mycologists, who plucked 55 species in 90 minutes.

It was great fun, and I learned a ton, so I determined to return for the spring hunt on Saturday, May 22.

Some background: Mycology is the study of fungus. The first writings on the subject were the work of the Greek author Euripedes (480-406 B.C.), better known for his tragedies, *Medea* and *Electra*. Carl Linnaeus, who assigned Latin names to all the known plants and animals in the 1700s, placed fungi into the Plant Kingdom, with genus labels like *Boletus* (the deadliest). The father of the field is Christiaan Hendrik Persoon, a South African naturalist who published the seminal work in mycology, *Synopsis Methodica Fungorum* (Methodological Synopsis of Fungi) in 1801. Persoon is credited with coining the maxim, "*Be sure of your 'shroom, before you consume.*"

In recent decades, advanced research has shown that, in evolutionary terms, mushrooms are actually more closely related to species in the Animal Kingdom. But let's not go there. Vegetarians already have a limited menu.

After a dry spell that discouraged the emergence of morels where I live, it rained overnight, and I found the first (as in, one) of the season outside the house, just before leaving for the mushroom hunt. Surely, a good omen, I thought...

But the clammy, cloudy day resulted in a small turnout, just five folks, not counting the

pros, of whom there were four.

The star of the mushroom hunts is Sister Marie Kopin, the sole surviving nun of the Order of the Sisters of the Precious Blood convent in Mount Pleasant, and a mushroom specialist from the Michigan Mushroom Hunter's Club. She learned mycology from her father, who passed on his father's and his grandmother's expertise to her when she was little, wandering the woods of Genesee County in the Thumb.

Think of a nun. What picture does your mind produce? A lady wearing a black dress and black veil? The only black Sister Marie wore were tall rubber boots, like hard-bitten commercial fishermen wear. The rest of her outfit was dungarees, white cardigan, and beige hat. The nun you imagined was probably standing straight, her hands clasped. Not Sister Marie, whose posture was more like a hard-bitten commercial fisherman than a demure Mother Superior.

If Maria from "*The Sound of Music*" had never met the dashing Herr Von Trapp, and stayed in the convent, she might have turned out like Sister Marie, wandering alpine meadows identifying breeds of Edelweiss, instead of tromping northern Michigan woods differentiating between fungi.

Sister Marie introduced her sidekick as "*Heather the Hunt Leader.*" That's a serious designation. You can't just read "*The Audubon Guide to Mushrooms*" and declare yourself qualified to take others on a mushroom hunt. You must be certified by the State of Michigan, by taking a course, then scoring at least 80% on an exam. The same certification, along with a \$200 fee, is required to sell wild mushrooms.

Sister Marie told us many fascinating tidbits about mushrooms. She mentioned "*Mycopia Mushrooms*" near Ludington, which grows mushrooms in an old factory.

She said a mycologist friend wove her hat with fibers dyed from mushrooms. It was a cloche, popular with flappers — Clara Bow wore one. It made Marie resemble a mushroom. (If people start to resemble their dogs, and mycologists mushrooms, that explains my fossil-like complexion.)

Sister Marie reminded me of a wise woman I met in Belize, who took me on a walk in the jungle, pointing out many useful plants, drawing on knowledge passed down from her ancient Mayan ancestors, who gathered the same herbs, vines and fungi.

There is no Catholic patron saint of mushrooms. I can imagine Sister Marie being canonized one day and taking the title, after being credited with mushroom-related miracles!

Sister Marie did not mention the topic of "*magic mushrooms*," which also emerge this time of year. On that note, it is time for the State of Michigan to follow the progressive lead of the City of Ann Arbor, and legalize psychotropic psilocybin. Research by Dr. Roland Griffiths, head of the Department of Neurosciences at The Johns Hopkins University, has documented their salubrious psychological effects. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LKm_mnbN9JY

Sadly, the woods held few edible treasures on this occasion. But time spent in the woods is never time wasted, with or without morels.

Happily, the day ended with a delicious repast, built around the single perfect morel specimen that greeted my eyes in the morning.

Then, off to bed to dream of finding more tomorrow...

Eric Paul Roorda, Ph.D., is an author, artist, and college professor. More importantly, he is a cartoonist and occasional columnist for The Alpena News. His political cartoons appear on Mondays, and "*The Whitetail Family*," a coloring book in serial form, appears on Saturdays on the Outdoors page. You can order the coloring book for \$15 at eproorda@gmail.com.