



Hunting News

Grafton Land Trust

Preserving Grafton's open spaces since 1958

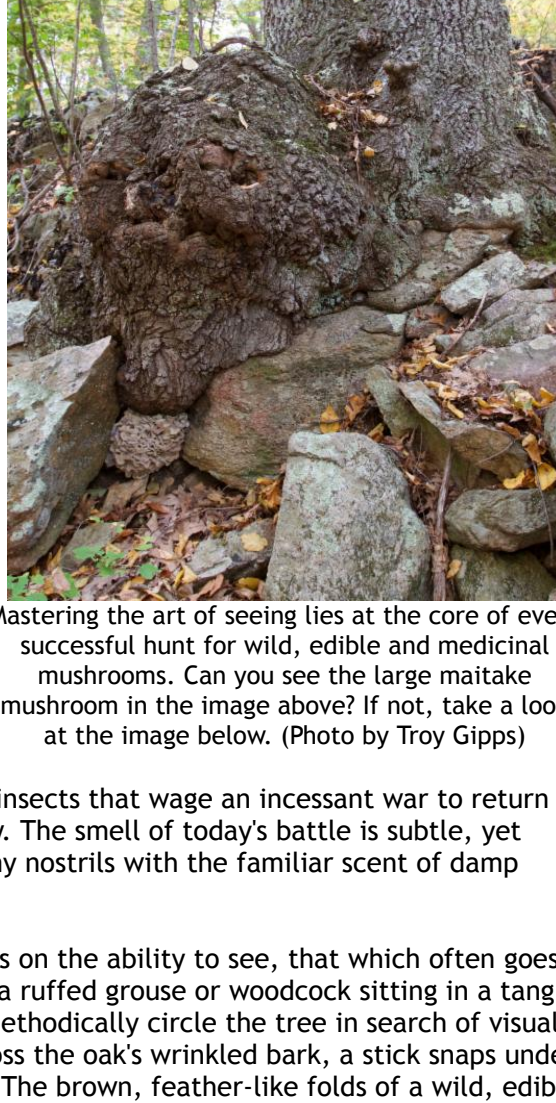
March 2016

Dear Hunter,

Maitake Hunting: Mastering the Art of Seeing

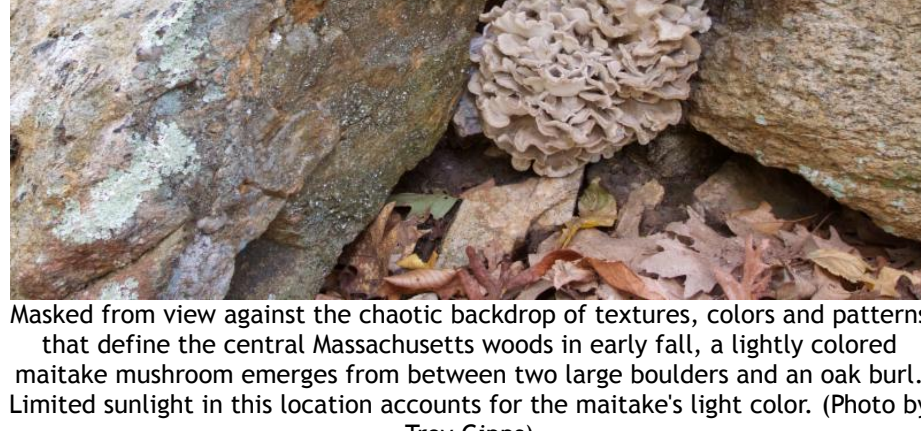
My focus dances between the patterns of oak bark and leaf litter and the patchwork of warm sunlight and cool shadow that creeps across the forest floor in the waning hours of an autumn afternoon. It is elder oaks I seek, but not for oaks sake. I search instead for a secretive quarry; bound beneath the twisted roots that lock this forest in time and space, escaping only with the coming of September rains.

A stubborn red oak, in the twilight of its years, stands on the crest of a small hill, beside which the trickle of an intermittent stream whispers to the forest, gently warning of the coming winter. I approach, and stand quietly before the wise, old tree, scanning the texture and color of the visually chaotic ground that surrounds its trunk. I step over a dead limb that has clearly surrendered to invading armies of fungi and insects that wage an incessant war to return it to the soil from which it grew. The smell of today's battle is subtle, yet persistent. It rises, bathing my nostrils with the familiar scent of damp woodland decay.



Mastering the art of seeing lies at the core of every successful hunt for wild, edible and medicinal mushrooms. Can you see the large maitake mushroom in the image above? If not, take a look at the image below. (Photo by Troy Gipps)

The success of my hunt hinges on the ability to see, that which often goes unseen. It is akin to spotting a ruffed grouse or woodcock sitting in a tangle of brush before the flush. I methodically circle the tree in search of visual cues. My left hand slides across the oak's wrinkled bark, a stick snaps under foot, and it bursts into view! The brown, feather-like folds of a wild, edible maitake mushroom (Grifola frondosa) fan out nearly two feet from its hidden ivory stem. Maitake (pronounced my-TAH-keh) resemble the ruffled backside of a chicken, hence the popular name, "Hen of the Woods." I brush away leaves, lean down to inhale the maitake's distinctive smell, then unfold my knife and carefully free my prize from the forest floor. I have found maitake in past years, but the 2015 season far exceeded my expectations.



Masked from view against the chaotic backdrop of textures, colors and patterns that define the central Massachusetts woods in early fall, a lightly colored maitake mushroom emerges from between two large boulders and an oak burl. Limited sunlight in this location accounts for the maitake's light color. (Photo by Troy Gipps)

Maitake is prized not only for its delicious flavor and sheer size (most specimens range from 3 to 15 pounds, but they can weigh much more), but also for its medicinal value. Like other polypores, which are mushrooms that have no gills on their undersides and release spores through small pores, maitake contains polysaccharides that stimulate the immune system. Research has shown great promise in its ability to help the body fight various types of cancer, especially that of breast, liver and lung. In a [clinical study](#) in 2002, an extract derived from a specific maitake polysaccharide, known as beta-D-glucans, was proven to regress cancerous tumors and mitigate the effects of chemotherapy on immune-competent cells. A [June 2011 study](#) published in the *Journal of Medicinal Food* found that maitake D-fraction, which is a patented extract of maitake glucans, helped lead to the death of breast cancer cells. Additional evidence points to its ability to also fight leukemia, stomach and bone cancers. In addition to fighting cancer, maitake shows potential for helping with other conditions, such as diabetes, HIV/AIDS, high cholesterol, and high blood pressure. Not bad for a fungus!



A young Graftonite proudly holds a maitake he discovered while on a mushroom foray with his father and brother. If properly supervised, hunting for wild, edible and medicinal mushrooms is a great way to get kids engaged in the pursuit of their dinner in a woodlot near you. (Photo by Troy Gipps)

The mushroom's color is quite variable, ranging from countless shades of grey, tan, and brown, to, in some cases, ivory; direct sunlight tends to darken its upper surfaces. The undersides of its clusters of flattened caps are typically much lighter in color, as are the larger internal branches of the mushroom that lead to the stem.

The central Massachusetts maitake season runs from the end of August through as late as early November, with the bulk of the prime specimens being found from mid-September through the end of October. It is best to harvest maitake before the first frost, as it tends to burn and toughen the edges of the mushroom's caps.

Safety

Maitake vaguely resembles the much larger Berkeley's Polypore (*Bondarzewia berkeleyi*) and the Black-staining Polypore (*Meripilus giganteus*), both of which are non-poisonous. There are no other poisonous look-a-likes in our area, which makes the game of maitake hide-and-seek quite safe for novice mushroom hunters.

It should be noted that hunting mushrooms in general could be dangerous if you are not armed with an appropriate level of knowledge. A good place to start is to purchase a region-specific mushroom guide. I have been using [Edible and Medicinal Mushrooms of New England and Eastern Canada](#), by David L. Spahr for many years and have found it to be an excellent guide. David also moderates a [Northeast Mushrooms Yahoo Group](#). Joining mushroom forays led by professional mycologists is also a great way to build the knowledge base you will need to safely enjoy the sport. One of the largest gatherings of its kind in our area is the [Annual Fungus Fair](#), which has been held in September at the Millers River Environmental Center in Athol, Massachusetts over the past few years. Massachusetts is also home to oldest amateur mycology club in the United States, the [Boston Mycological Club](#), which was organized in 1895.



Purchasing a region-specific mushroom guide is an important first step in developing the knowledge required to safely harvest wild, edible and medicinal mushrooms.

The first rule of thumb once you have properly identified any wild edible mushroom that you have not previously consumed is to try a small amount to ensure you do not have an unfavorable reaction. Wait a day or two, and if all goes well, you can start enjoying the unique flavors wild mushrooms bring to a variety of recipes.

Preparation and Cooking

Successful hunters will undoubtedly find themselves with far more maitake than can be used prior to spoilage, so preserving your take will be your immediate concern. Fortunately, maitake is one of the most versatile wild edibles. It can be sautéed, deep-fried, microwaved, boiled, baked and dried. The species also freezes well raw, although sautéing, then freezing, will take up much less space in your freezer.



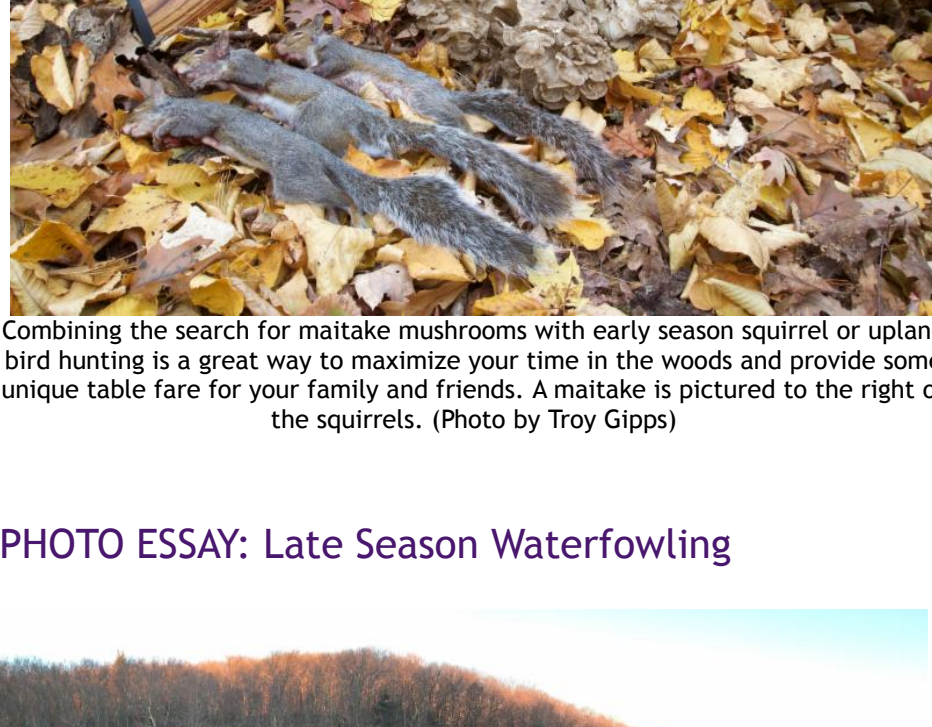
A basket full of maitake. Note the light color of the undersides of its clusters of flattened caps. (Photo by Troy Gipps)

To prepare a maitake for cooking or storage start at the bottom and pull the mushroom's individual caps and branches into several large pieces. Insects may emerge during this process, as the maitake's growth pattern creates a lot of spaces for them to hide. If you encounter dirt or other debris, cut or brush it away. You can also rinse the mushroom with cold water and gently pat it dry. Then peel away the individual caps. The long fibrous grain of the mushroom aids in breaking the pieces down into the desired size and it will leave you with long strands of maitake. To speed cooking or drying, it is best to keep the pieces less than one-quarter of an inch thick. Maitake is edible all the way down to the base of the stem.

Maitake can sometimes be found in specialty and gourmet grocery stores, but at a cost that typically reaches \$20 per pound for fresh maitake and \$6 per ounce for dried, it is far more enjoyable and cost effective to keep your eyes open while walking through the autumn woods.

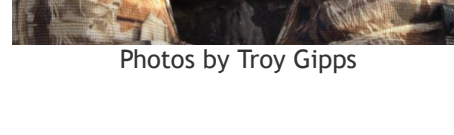
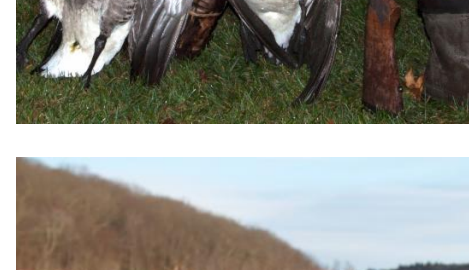
See you in the field.

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Combining the search for maitake mushrooms with early season squirrel or upland bird hunting is a great way to maximize your time in the woods and provide some unique table fare for your family and friends. A maitake is pictured to the right of the squirrels. (Photo by Troy Gipps)

PHOTO ESSAY: Late Season Waterfowling



Photos by Troy Gipps

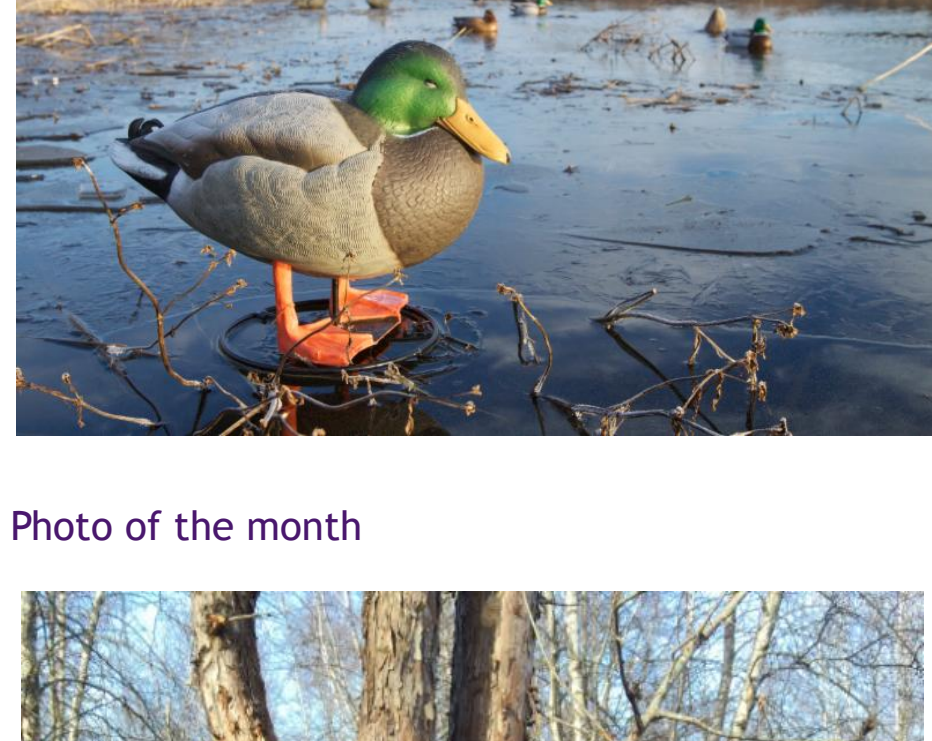
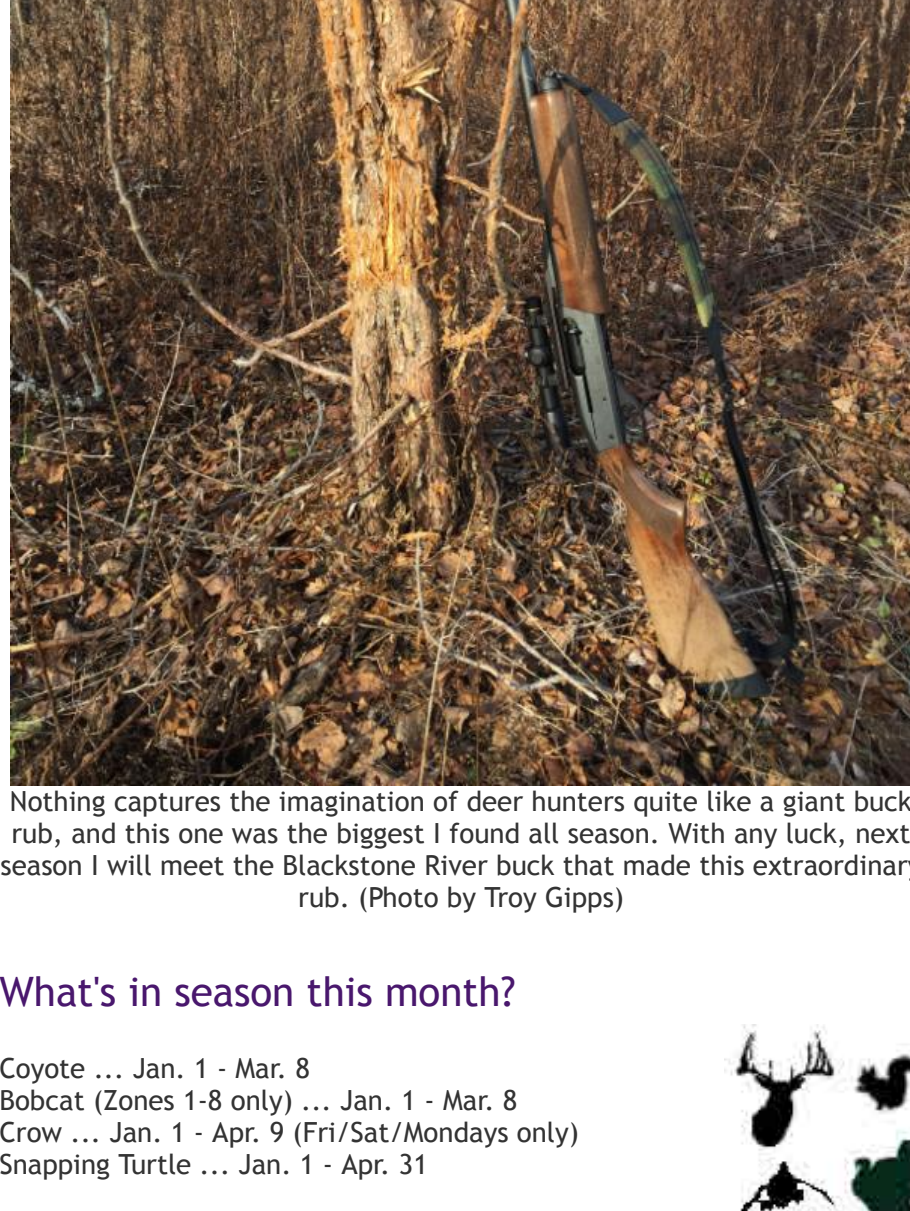


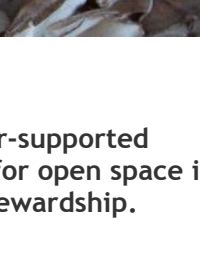
Photo of the month



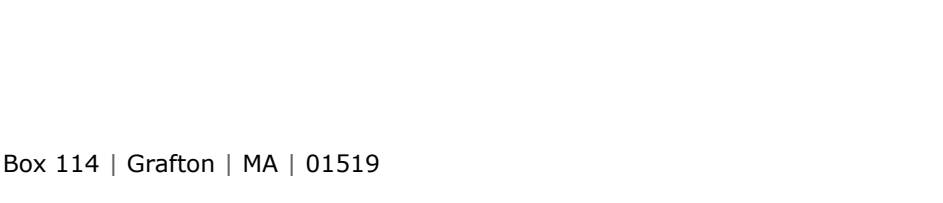
Nothing captures the imagination of deer hunters quite like a giant buck rub, and this one was the biggest I found all season. With any luck, next season I will meet the Blackstone River buck that made this extraordinary rub. (Photo by Troy Gipps)

What's in season this month?

Coyote ... Jan. 1 - Mar. 8
Bobcat (Zones 1-8 only) ... Jan. 1 - Mar. 8
Crow ... Jan. 1 - Apr. 9 (Fri/Sat/Mondays only)
Snapping Turtle ... Jan. 1 - Apr. 31



Open Season (year-round, except during shotgun season for deer; no daily or seasonal bag limit): English sparrow, flying squirrel, red squirrel, chipmunk, porcupine, skunk, starling, weasel, and woodchuck.



The Grafton Land Trust is a private, non-profit, member-supported organization that preserves, maintains, and advocates for open space in Grafton, and promotes environmental education and stewardship.

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