

The Mushroom That Came in From the Cold

Helvella corium and the first ever mycological society for Russia

Britt A. Bunyard

There are quite a few species of *Helvella*, ascomycete fungi that are fairly closely related to the morels. Several species of *Helvella* are pretty familiar to most mycophiles; I've seen the attractive mostly-black *H. lacunosa* all across North America. Its lighter colored cousin, *H. crispa*, is another large *Helvella* well known by many. There are many diminutive *Helvellas* that are infrequently seen and poorly known. Of all the *Helvellas*, *H. corium* might be the most rarely seen.

The first time I ever saw *Helvella*

corium I was foraging with members of the Oregon Mycological Society, it was springtime, and we were (mostly) looking for morels. While scouring a low, sandy, floodplain area of northwestern Oregon (I'm sworn to secrecy of the EXACT location, of course!), I happened upon a small black cup on a short stalk. None of the veterans there knew what it was and I confidently offered up *Plectania nanfeldtii*, considering the small black cup-on-a-stalk and time of year. That was that.

Until I got home (actually, I was staying with fellow mushroomer and legend within the NAMA community, Maggie Rogers) and, for the first time, really took a look at this cute little specimen. Fortunately, Maggie, ever the careful field mycologist, had held on to the little asco and left it in a dish above the kitchen sink. Where I noticed it while washing my hands and realized it was a *Helvella*! (I'm pretty sure I gasped audibly.) The slightly furrowed stem gave it away. It was a *Helvella* all right, but none that I'd ever seen. Around 1 AM we finally had it keyed out and I slept well knowing I'd learned a new species.

Lightning struck a second time, about six months later and about as far from Oregon as you can get and still be on North American soil: Newfoundland. The Great Northern Peninsula, to be precise. On an outing with the Foray Newfoundland and Labrador club we explored a barren gravelscape that resembled a moraine left behind by glacial melt. The till was punctuated, in places, by dwarfed vegetation, but little else. Newfoundlanders are determined, hardscrabble folk (much like the habitat we were exploring) and if there are mushrooms present, they WILL find them. The local naturalists directed us to a place where they, curiously, had seen a large patch of small strange-looking mushrooms only days before. Sure enough, the mushrooms were still there. Little brown-black stubs growing right out of the gravel. They were tiny ... and they were *Helvella corium*!

This is what I love most about the wonderful, confounding, and at times frustrating world of mushrooming. You go your entire lifetime without seeing a certain species, then you see it twice in the same year and in impossibly different regions, thousands of miles distant.

But the story is not yet finished. Yet another brush with this enigmatic little ascomycete came only a few months later, and again involved Maggie Rogers. She'd sent word that the great Russian mushroom watercolor painter



Figures 1a and b. *Helvella corium* found in the gravel along a woodland roadside near St. Petersburg, Russia. Photos courtesy of Stanislav Krivosheev.





Figure 2. *Helvella corium* from same population as in Fig. 1. Note the furrowed stem. Photo courtesy of Stanislav Krivosheev.

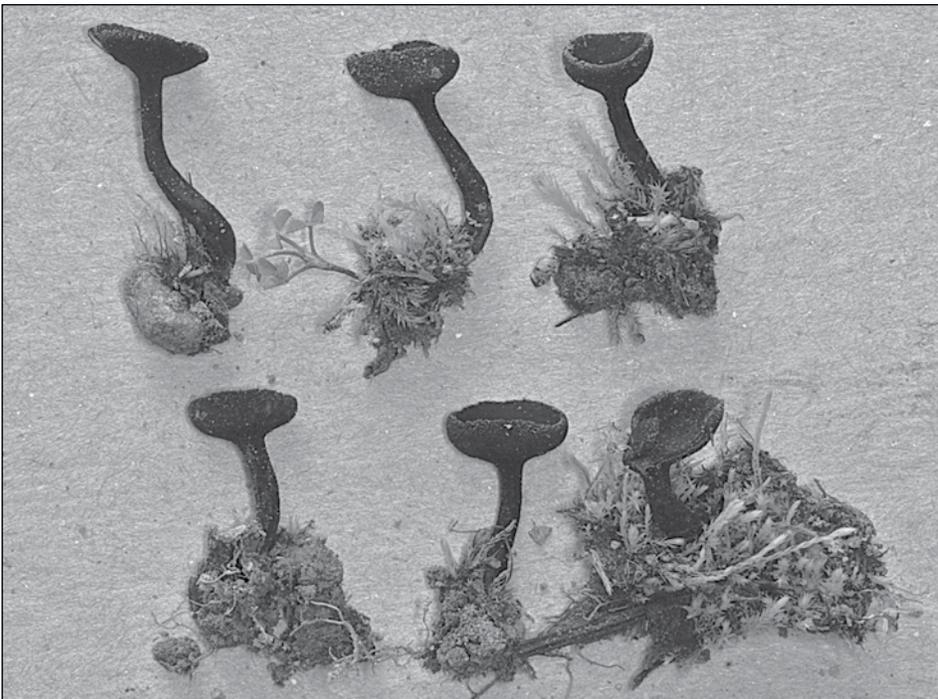


Figure 3. *Helvella corium* found in the gravel and sand along a roadside, from Vancouver Island, British Columbia. Photo courtesy of Adolf Ceska.

Alexander Viazmensky, known to many of us as “Sasha,” had been involved with the organization of a brand new mycological society in Russia. Indeed, this is the first such organized group in Russia, involved with mushrooming (see side panel), which I found peculiar, as the Russians are legendary for their appreciation and passion for wild mushrooms (see “The Day That Feeds The Year,” FUNGI vol. 2, no. 2). Maggie had boasted about this new upstart club, their very active discussion board, and outstanding collection of mushroom photos. I *had* to take a look. And there it was again (Figs. 1 and 2): *Helvella corium*!

***Helvella corium* (O. Weberbauer) Masee** is restricted to the northern latitudes of the planet, is widely distributed, but not routinely seen. (Maybe it simply does not occur when and where most mycophiles are looking to collect mushrooms.) Nancy Smith Weber is THE authority on the genus *Helvella* in North America (see Weber, N.S. 1972. The genus *Helvella* in Michigan. *The Michigan Botanist* 11: 147-201) and she’s examined only about a half dozen collections, mostly from eastern Oregon and a place in Michigan (which has since been paved over). The diminutive *Helvella* also has been seen on Vancouver Island (Fig. 3). And Stanislav Krivosheev, of the Saint Petersburg Mycological Society, had this to say: “This mushroom kind is really rare. I know only one population; it is near to St. Petersburg, in Leningrad region. I have observed these mushrooms for a couple of years; they appear in the same place, in May, on a roadside of woodland road”

This species and its close cousins are quite unlike many of the more commonly seen *Helvellas* which feature a convoluted, saddle-shaped apothecium (hence their common name for the entire group, the “elfin saddles”). *Helvella corium* sports a single black cup (apothecium) atop a stem this is described by Weber (1972) as “...terete to compressed, even or frequently with low irregular rounded ribs which do not continue onto the apothecium...” (see Fig. 4). *Helvella macropus* looks quite similar especially when immature (and darker in color), but when mature is a much lighter color, has a very long stalk, and is no doubt a close relative

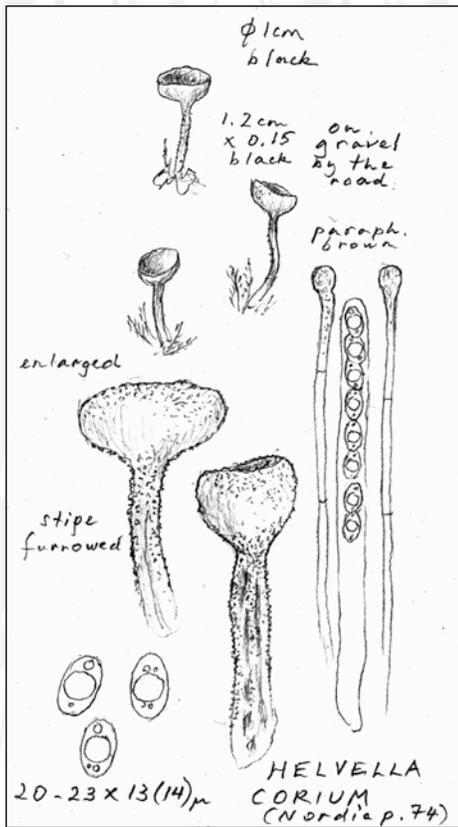


Figure 4. *Helvella corium* from Vancouver Island, British Columbia, illustrated by O. Ceska.

with a similarly scurfy cup. *Plectania nannfeldtii* is a similar looking (albeit not so closely related) species with a black-colored stalked cup, but this species has a much longer stem than *H. corium*, up to 5 centimeters (2.0 in); microscopically, it has larger spores (typically 23–28 by 11–14 μm).

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Alexander “Sasha” Viazmensky of the Saint Petersburg Mycological Society for notifying the world about the brand new mycological society of Russia; thanks also to his colleague in the Society, Stanislav Krivosheev, for sharing photos of *Helvella corium*. Thanks also to Adolf and Oluna Ceska of the South Vancouver Island Mycological Society in British Columbia, Canada, for a photo and illustration of *Helvella corium*. The author appreciates Nancy Smith Weber’s review and commentary on this manuscript. And thanks to Maggie Rogers of the Oregon Mycological Society for wisely not letting this little asco get away. ♣

The Saint Petersburg Mycological Society

by Alexander Viazmensky

In Russia, collecting mushrooms is something very private, almost intimate. People prefer to hunt mushrooms alone or with very close friends. Real mushroom hunters never go to the woods in large groups. Perhaps that was the reason why, for many years, we did not have any organized mushroom societies in Russia.

However, in 2003 two internet savvy mushroom lovers Michael Andreev and Michael Fomenko created a web site and internet forum “Mushrooms of Leningrad Region.” It became possible for our mushroom lovers to exchange their information and impressions, and to show off their finds. Gradually our forum expanded. We began having not just mushroom lovers among our members, but professional mycologists as well. Now we have about a thousand registered members.

Our mushroom lovers needed more mycological knowledge. Mycologists needed rare specimens that mushroom hunters had been finding, as well as good photographs of mushrooms. To spread our knowledge and our love of mushrooms we all needed to organize shows and other events. By 2011 all this led us to the idea of creating a mycological society that would unite mushroom lovers and professional mycologists. On January 16, 2011, the enthusiasts of our forum came to a meeting at Komarov Botanical Institute (KBI) and founded The Saint Petersburg Mycological Society (SPMS), the first mycological society in Russia. We approved the statute of our Society and elected two co-presidents: one is Dr. Alexander Kovalenko, the deputy director for science and the head of the mycological department of KBI; the other, Leonid Smirnov, a mushroom expert, as well as the writer and moderator of our forum. The KBI became our “base” where we organize our meetings and shows.

The first event of our Society was a mushroom photo show that ran from April until June 2011. Besides photos, it featured polypore mushrooms and early season mushrooms from the woods. The

next event was a weeklong mushroom show in October. Mushrooms that could not survive for so long were replaced by fresh ones. That show also featured mushroom photographs and watercolor paintings. In spite of Russian traditions, we also organized several forays. We now have around forty members in our Society. Our membership remains small, mostly because we have our forum, and for most people the forum is enough. Most of our mushroom lovers want their mushroom life to remain private. However many of nonmembers participate in our Society events. Our Society, as well as the forum, has members not only from St. Petersburg but also from other parts of Russia and from other countries. We are open for new connections, for new ideas and for new friends around the world. ♣

САНКТ-ПЕТЕРБУРГСКОЕ МИКОЛОГИЧЕСКОЕ ОБЩЕСТВО

Александр Вязьменский

Собирание грибов в России - дело личное, почти интимное. За грибами ходят в одиночку или с очень близкими друзьями. Большими коллективами настоящие грибники в лес не ездят. Возможно, именно поэтому до недавнего времени в России не было никакого сообщества грибников. Однако в 2003 году двое любителей грибов и интернета Михаил Андреев и Михаил Фоменко создали веб-сайт и интернет-форум “Грибы Ленинградской области.” Наши грибники получили возможность обмениваться информацией и впечатлениями и хвастаться своими находками. Постепенно форум расширился. Среди его участников, помимо просто любителей грибов, появились профессиональные микологи. Сейчас на форуме около тысячи зарегистрированных участников. К началу 2011 года возникла идея создания микологического общества, объединяющего грибников и профессиональных микологов. Грибники нуждались в микологических знаниях, а микологи - в редких грбных

находках, попадавших к любителям, а также в фотографиях грибов. Для пропаганды наших знаний о грибах и нашей любви к ним нужны были выставки и другие мероприятия.

Всё это требовало объединения. 16 января 2011 года энтузиаста нашего форума собрались в Ботаническом Институте им. Комарова (БИН) и учредили Санкт-Петербургское Микологическое Общество, первое микологическое общество в России. Мы утвердили устав Общества. Были избраны два сопредседателя Общества: профессор Александр Коваленко - заместитель директора БИН по научной работе, известный миколог, и Леонид Смирнов - знаток грибов, писатель и модератор форума.

Первым мероприятием нашего Общества стала фотовыставка грибов. Она продолжалась с апреля по июнь 2011 года. Помимо фотографий на ней были представлены художественно выполненные муляжи грибов, а также трутовики и ранние грибы. Затем состоялась выставка грибов в октябре. Она длилась неделю. Грибы, терявшие свой вид, заменялись на свежие. На этой выставке, помимо грибов, также были представлены их фотографии и акварели.

Помимо выставок, вопреки российским традициям, состоялись несколько коллективных выездов в лес.

Сейчас в нашем Микологическом Обществе около сорока членов. Столь малое число членов объясняется тем, что у нас есть форум, и для большинства любителей грибов этого достаточно. Большинство хотят, чтобы их грибная жизнь оставалась делом личным. Однако многие, не являющиеся членами Общества, тем не менее участвуют в его делах. Среди членов нашего Общества, как и среди участников форума, есть представители не только Петербурга, но и других регионов России, а также зарубежных стран. Мы открыты для новых контактов, новых идей, дел и новых друзей во всех частях мира. ♣

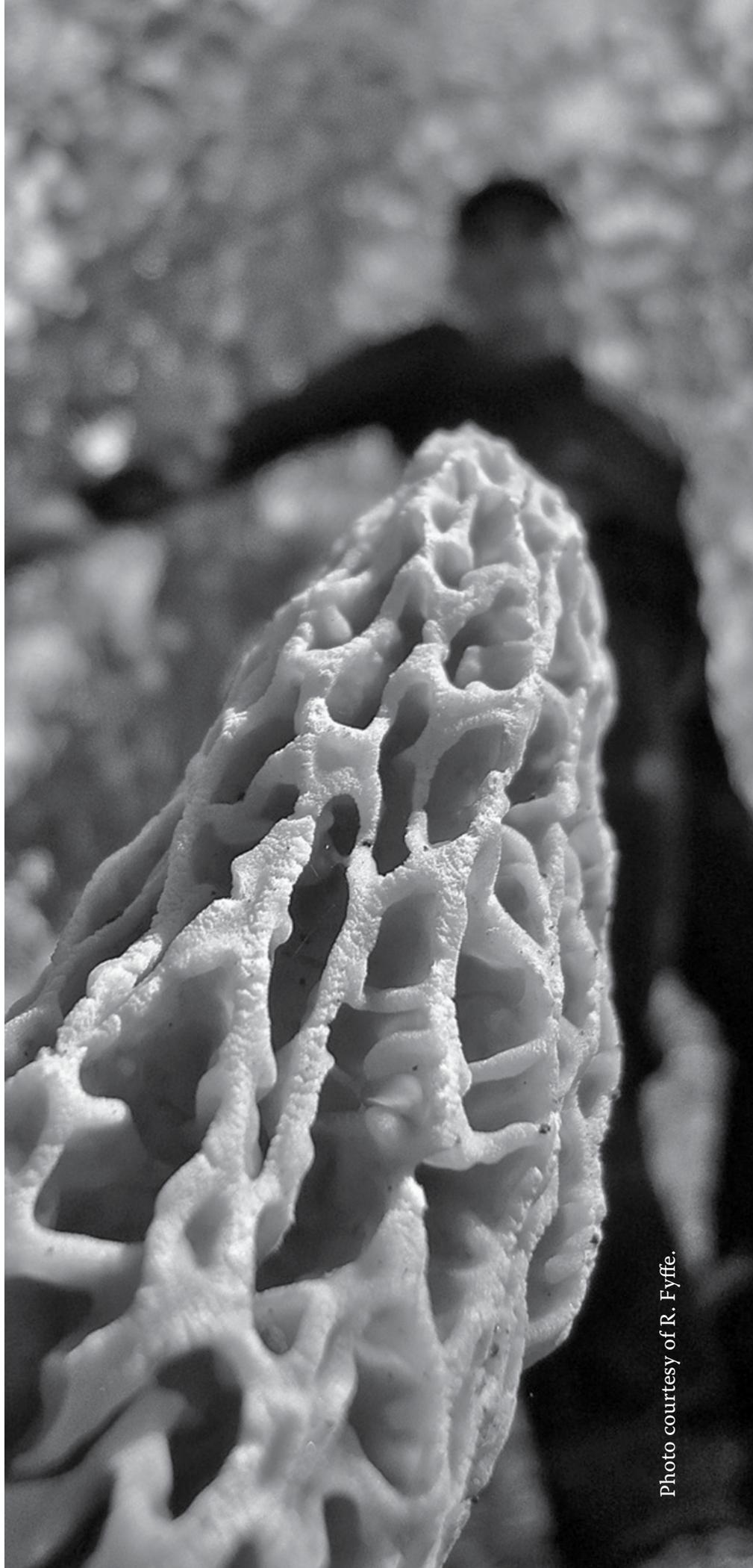


Photo courtesy of R. Fyffe.