

# QUEST FOR THE BLUE *ENTOLOMA* OF NEW ZEALAND

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For some reason I have always had an affinity to blue mushrooms; actually almost anything blue that appears in nature. It seems to be a rare commodity therefore I am always searching for it.

Ever since the first time I saw a photograph of the blue chanterelle, *Polyozellus multiplex*, in Arora's *Mushrooms Demystified*, I wanted nothing more than to find one of my own. It only took me 27 years to find my first one! Now with that one under my belt and among my collection of fungal photographs, I was in need of a new muse, which just happened to be none other than the blue *Entoloma* of New Zealand, *Entoloma hochstetteri*.

I spend quite a lot of time in New Zealand. I go at least once a year and sometimes twice for business reasons since some of the best trout fishing on earth is there and that is partially what my business entails. I am usually there during some part of their fishing season, which runs from October (their spring) through April (their autumn).

In order to be there when it is not too crowded with tourists during peak season, I try and go during more shoulder season times like November or March. Alas, this is not the "rainy" season and hence there are no mushrooms to speak of. The time for mushrooms in New Zealand is from the first autumn rains which can come as early as late April to early May and runs well into June. But by that time it is starting to get cold and things wind down.

This year was going to work out great because I was going down to attend a big tourism conference in late May so my trip would coincide with the rainy season, hence a good supply of wild mushrooms to photograph - the prime target of which was to be my blue

*Entoloma*. I was determined to find this mushroom or I wasn't coming home!

My first stop in New Zealand was on the South Island in Queenstown. I spent a few days in the area, checking out some local tourism hot spots and took a scenic flight over to the west coast, flying over and amongst the glaciers and landing at Fox Glacier, one of the few glaciers to end at a rainforest just 984 feet above sea level. It's one thing to spot mushrooms from inside a speeding car, but from a single engine airplane, I didn't have a chance. So, I was going to have to wait yet another day before I could get into the forest to have a look. The suspense was killing me but I had a few clues on areas to check out and knew I was heading in the right direction the next morning.

Finally, the time had come to leave my business concerns behind and do something fun for myself, so I loaded up the car, said my goodbyes and was off to the coast for the rest of the week. The first stop was Haast Pass as you leave behind the Makarora Valley and head up and over to the west coast. I am always humbled by the winding curvy roads in New Zealand. I don't believe there is a single straight road in the entire country, just switchback after switchback, which makes for an interesting albeit tiresome drive. Don't forget the part about driving on the wrong side of the road from the wrong side of the car, which adds so much to your overall experience!

There was nowhere I wanted to walk around at the visitor center so I kept on heading north up the road until I found a place to park where I could walk on a few trails through the rain forest and have a look around. I grabbed my camera gear and started to walk in. At first I was afraid this was not going to be the right habitat, as it looked far too swampy. I continued on the track, which was

Photo by Mary Smiley

a wire- covered boardwalk to prevent you from slipping and killing yourself. I walked for quite some time looking everywhere imaginable to no avail. I was getting worried this was not a good place after all but at least it was interesting and pretty in its own way. I stopped along the track to take a photo of the scenery. I just stood there for a while and took in the view and started to move on. I only took a few steps and then looked to the right to see if another photo was in order when I spotted my quarry. I was so excited I actually gasped and squealed aloud and my heart started to pound. (Is this really normal?) I stood there in disbelief admiring my blue treasure as if I'd just found the Hope Diamond. After all, it was MY Hope Diamond. I could have stood there all day but I quickly started shooting photos like a wild woman. About now was when I started to really wish I'd packed my full size tripod and brought it on the trip. With

so many business clothes to lug around and then hiking boots, pants, rain coats, etc., I simply didn't have the room to lug the big tripod and here was my Hope Diamond a good four feet off the ground on the side of a moss-covered tree where there was no way on earth to utilize a mini tripod. Whatever was I going to do to get the perfect photo? It was dark in the rainforest and damp and almost impossible to shoot handheld without camera shake. Oh horrors, I had no other option. So, I shot and shot and even went all the way back to the car for my film camera loaded with slide film, just in case. While I was back at the car, I pulled out my laptop and uploaded the shots from the digital camera so I could make sure I actually had something before I left this place and may never see another blue mushroom again as long as I live. From what I could see, I had some decent images so I was content to go back and shoot some slides and then move along.

I left my beautiful little mushroom right where I found it and never even touched it so it could live on to see another day. I never saw another one all the way to the end of the track and back to the car, so that was the only one out there (at least visible to me). Meanwhile, I managed to lose the cable that goes from the camera to the laptop so I was out of luck to view any more images until I was back in civilization and could buy a new one, which was going to be a few days.

I continued north all the way to Franz Josef Glacier, which is about where I'd been the day before by plane, only by plane it took less than an hour and by road a good seven hours. This was to be my stop for the night, visiting a B&B I wanted to work with in the future. The next morning I was up and out the door early on my way to Greymouth to visit some friends and go mushroom hunting for more *Entoloma hochstetteri* at a

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Excellent references available.



Photo by Mary Smiley

spot known to my friends as a fairly fail safe place to find them in season. They were right! We found lots although it took us a while to key our eyes in to the forest floor, which again was dark and damp but the little blue jewels were there all right. I can't stress enough how small these mushrooms actually are, so to photograph them means laying completely on your belly or side only three inches off the ground. My mini tripod was a nightmare and didn't behave well at all, so once again I was going to have to rely on my skills at hand holding the camera or resting the camera on a solid surface so I could do a timed exposure. Nightmare after nightmare in tight, almost impossible snarly locations but I kept snapping away in hopes that something would magically appear on my camera and film that would be usable. Crawling

through mud, wet leaves, sticker bushes, on my belly like a Navy Seal on a combat mission but all the while thinking, "This is so much fun, I don't ever want it to end!" Not only were there blue *Entoloma* everywhere, but there was a huge assortment of the most colorful waxy capped mushrooms I've ever seen, from red to pink, green, yellow, a veritable smorgasbord of colorful mushrooms all for me to photograph. I was a pig in poop just then, squealing with delight and I looked about as dirty. No worries as they say in the Land of the Long White Cloud, this is all good fun. This was to be the last of the blue mushrooms I would see on my trip but I saw enough that one day to last me at least a year until my next trip to beautiful New Zealand, the most awesome place on earth. ♣

## A LITTLE BIT ABOUT THE BLUE *ENTOLOMA*

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New Zealanders refer to it as The Sky-Blue Mushroom or Toadstool, the Maori name for it is *werewere kōkako* but the scientific name we use for this unmistakable smurf blue mushroom is *Entoloma hochstetteri*, named after the German naturalist Ferdinand von Hochstetter. Edibility of this beautiful mushroom is unknown and it may be poisonous as many of the genus *Entoloma* are. Nonetheless, it is one of the most remarkable fungi to be encountered in the forests of New Zealand, its native habitat. Found on both the North and South Islands of New

Zealand, it is associated with *Podocarpus* and *Nothofagus* woodlands. Given its iconic stature, *Entoloma hochstetteri* is featured on the reverse side of the \$50 New Zealand banknote (see bottom right hand corner of the banknote, pictured). The blue color of the fruiting body is due to three azulene pigments and the mushroom is blue in its entirety including the gills and stipe, which is often twisted. A mushroom that is truly something to behold amongst the brilliant green moss and leaf litter on the forest floor! ♣

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