

CHAPTER 4

MUSHROOMS

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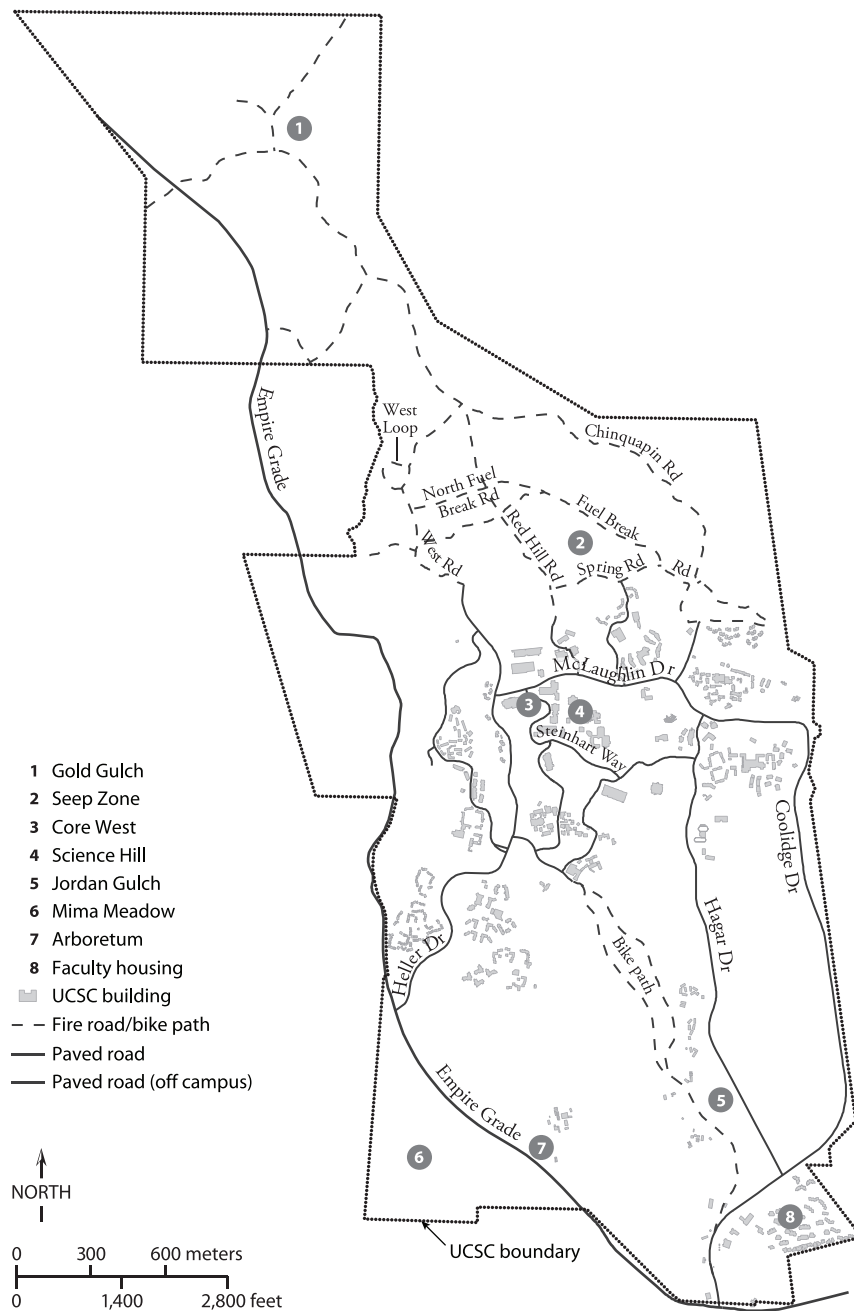


Figure 4-1: Mushrooms locator map

THE FIRST WINTER RAINS ARE THE HARBINGER of the “mushroom season” in Santa Cruz, the height of which extends from mid October through March. Mushrooms are a prominent feature of our wintertime biota, and a mid-December stroll on campus is often rewarded with a spectacle of mushrooms that provides a palate of colors and a diversity of forms rivaled only by spring wildflowers. More importantly from an ecological standpoint, mushrooms are the small visible portions of huge but hidden fungal organisms that affect almost every aspect of the living world.

Mushrooms are *fungi*, organisms that differ from both plants and animals in almost every aspect of their biology. The study of fungal biology and ecology — *mycology* — is an exciting and relatively young field with much room for discovery. The study of mushrooms in Santa Cruz has a particularly rich history. UCSC graduate David Arora, author of the definitive though somewhat dated guide *Mushrooms Demystified* (1986), got his start observing and identifying mushrooms on campus. Clubs such as the Fungus Federation of Santa Cruz, the annual Fungus Fair hosted by the City of Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History, and a rich cultural heritage of *mycophagy* (eating mushrooms) brought here primarily by Italian immigrants, have all contributed to our knowledge of local mushrooms.

This chapter begins with the basics of fungal biology, and highlights some of the more dramatic aspects of mushroom ecology and natural history. An understanding of these topics greatly enriches the mushroom hunting experience. I then introduce the more common mushroom species on campus, including their identifying characteristics, where and when to look for them, and notable aspects of their biology. Finally, I cover some basics of hunting for edible and non-edible mushrooms on campus (or anywhere else you go, for that matter). Bear in mind that this chapter is designed to complement, not replace, a good field guide and expert opinion.