

Life under leaves

Visit some woodland and discover what lives among the trees.

Time | 1hr 5

Cost | £

Location | Outdoors

Group size | Teams

You will learn

Value the outdoors

Enjoy being outside, feel comfortable in nature, and feel connected to the natural environment.

Be responsible

Believe in doing the right thing, being trustworthy, and doing your best



You will need

- Pens or pencils
- A4 paper
- Weather appropriate clothing
- Binoculars

Before you begin

- Decide where you'll go. The UK has plenty of woodland to choose from, so choose some nearby to visit.
- Check whether you need permission to visit the woodland you've chosen – some is private, protected, or managed. You could get in touch with the governing body for the area to ask if you can visit or have a tour.
- If you can, try to get hold of a map of the footpaths. You may also want to take a torch, depending on the time you're visiting.
- Remind yourself of the [Countryside Code](#), [Scottish Outdoor Access Code](#), or [Countryside Code NI](#).

Tree teams

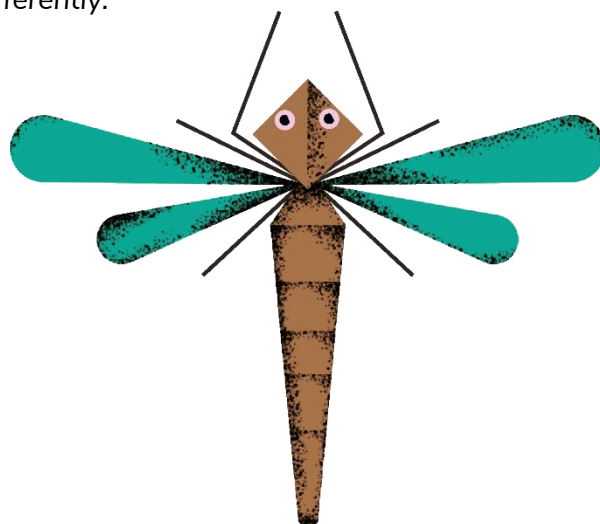
1. The person leading the activity should make sure everyone knows how to stay safe and protect the woodland.
Use *The code of the woodland explorer* below to make sure everyone understands. You could also recap the *Countryside Code* (or *Scottish Outdoor Access Code* or *Countryside Code NI*).
2. Divide into teams of about six people. Each team should have an adult leader or helper.
3. The person leading the activity should set boundaries, so everyone knows how far they can explore. They should also explain if there are any areas people need to be extra careful (for example, roads, rivers, or ponds) or avoid entirely (for example, protected, private or dangerous areas).

Finding in the forest

1. Everyone should set out to explore the area. They should keep an eye out for interesting wildlife and do their best to answer the questions in *See more than trees*.
2. Each group should record what they find so they can show others and learn more about it later. It's up to them how they record it – they could draw, write, take photos, or record audio or video.

Time to tree-cap

1. Before they leave the woodland, everyone should make sure they've not taken anything they shouldn't have or left anything behind.
2. Everyone should gather together somewhere they won't disturb wildlife.
Depending on how you're travelling, you may be able to do the following step during your journey back.
3. Everyone should share their favourite finds and anything that surprised them.
Woodlands are one of the most diverse habitats in the UK. Even a small area can have a lot of variation, so it's likely that people will have found different things. They may even have answered some of the questions differently.



What ‘wood’ you do next

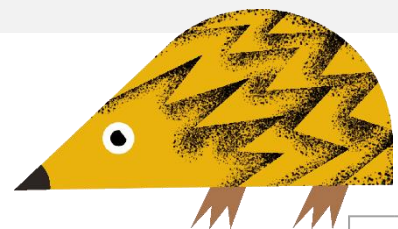
1. Everyone should decide how they’ll share their findings. For example, they could write a letter to the local authority that manages the woodland – they could use the information everyone gathered to track the life on the forest and check where human activity’s causing damage.
2. Everyone should share their findings, including things like maps to show where wildlife was spotted and copies of their notes, photos, drawings, or recordings.

If you noticed how human activity could change (or be better managed) to cause less damage, include this too.



The code of the woodland explorer

- **Stick together in your teams with your adult when exploring.** Even if you manage to stick to the footpaths, the forest can begin to look the same if you’re not familiar with it, so it’s important to stay together to stay safe (and so you don’t miss it if anyone sports anything really cool).
- **Tread carefully, slowly and quietly.** Not only will you be less likely to trip on roots or rocks, the forest floor is teeming with life – by moving slowly and quietly you’ll be able to spot more and squish less. You’ll also have a better chance of spotting shy animals such as deer or badgers; they’ll usually run for cover if they hear you coming.
- **Put back anything you pick up** (unless it’s litter). Wildlife use rocks, leaves, and rotting wood to build their homes – you don’t want to be responsible for mayhem among minibeasts.
- **If you find litter that you can pick up safely (with gloves if possible), put it in a bin, and wash your hands.** Don’t touch anything sharp or heavy – let the person leading the activity know about it so they can tell whoever’s in charge of the area.
- **If you want to remember something, take a photo or draw it.** It’ll be useful when you want to remember the details of what you spotted – you could even label your drawings, for example, to remind you of colours.
- **Don’t approach animals such as deer, badgers, or birds.** Bigger animals don’t always run away. Sometimes they can be aggressive and bite. Lots of animals are also protected by disturbance from the law. Admire them from a distance, with binoculars if you have them.
- **Don’t damage trees or plants** by bending or breaking branches. Animals like birds and squirrels use the branches to get around safely – you wouldn’t like it if someone destroyed the roads or footpaths you use every day.



See more than trees

What sort of woodland is it?

- For example, it could be a timber plantation (with uniform rows of trees that are roughly the same age), an ancient mixed woodland (with old and gnarly trees of all sorts of species packed together in a random pattern), or a recently planted young woodland (with smaller, thinner young trees, which may be protected by covers around their trunks to stop deer or cattle from eating the bark).
- If you're not sure what kind of woodland it is, try to capture what you see with notes or pictures so you can find out later.

What plants can you find?

Remember don't touch them – you might damage them and some are toxic to humans.

- Other than the trees, what plants are on the ground? If there aren't many, what's the ground like – is it quite dusty and muddy?
- Are there any clearings filled with wild flowers and grasses?
- Can you spot low shrubs and bushes around the paths and at the foot of trees?
- What about mushrooms or fungi?

What's the largest tree you can find?

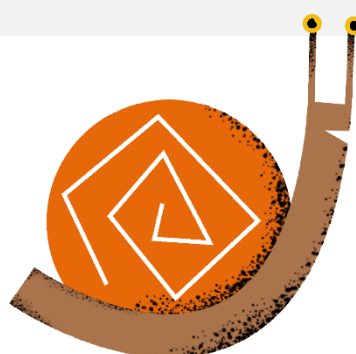
- Think about the width of the tree as well as the height. Some of the oldest trees aren't especially tall, but they're wide. See if you can find the tallest and the widest trees.
- The circumference of the tree is the measurement around the outside. Roughly, every two and a half centimetres represents about one year's growth. This means that you can estimate the age of a living tree by dividing the circumference by two and a half. For example, a tree with a circumference of 50cm would be around twenty years old.

What water is there?

- Are there rivers, streams, or ponds in the woods? Is the water flowing or still?
- What life can you find around the water? Are there any fish? What about birds nearby?

What large animals can you spot?

- Depending on where you are (and when you're visiting), look out for deer, badgers, foxes, larger birds, rabbits, and squirrels.
- Animals like badgers, hedgehogs, and foxes are fairly wary and mostly come out at night, but rabbits and squirrels can be seen even in city parks.



What small animals can you find?

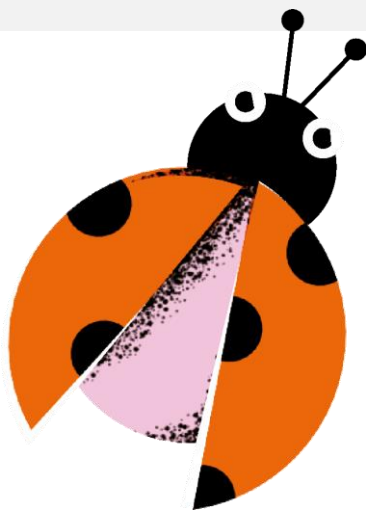
- Here, 'animals' means anything living that isn't a plant, so it includes insects, other bugs, and birds too.
- Can you spot smaller wildlife living under rocks, in trees, or by water? Be careful not to disturb them.

What evidence of human activity is there?

- Are there structural things like paths, fences, or buildings?
- What about evidence of tree cutting or land management such as stumps and laid hedges or fires?
- Are there signs of industry like chimneys, plantations, allotments, or roads through the middle of the forest?

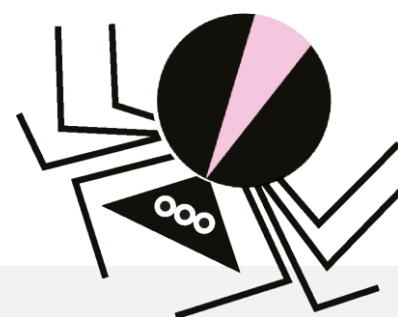
What effect do you think human activity has had on the wildlife in the area?

- How does litter affect wildlife? Animals can get stuck on or in it and be hurt or killed.
- What effect does it have when humans create roads and paths? It can trample down plant life and cars may hit animals trying to cross.
- What else can you spot? Keep an eye out for trees that have been cut down (and not replaced) – this removes shade and places for animals like squirrels and birds to nest. Trees also keep the soil healthy by absorbing water and providing shade that keeps it from drying and cracking, so cutting down trees also harms the soil.



Reflection

Time	Activity
10 mins	This activity was about valuing the outdoors. Were people used to visiting woodland, or was it a new environment? What different wildlife did they spot? How did the woodland feel different to other outdoor areas? People could think about how the temperature or sunlight felt different, or the different smells they noticed.
	This activity was also about being responsible. How did people do the right thing during the visit? Perhaps they helped to pick up litter or left a small animal alone even though it was really tempting to pick it up to see it better. Humans have a huge impact on woodland. How could people do their best to take care of forests? Planting new trees is one of the least expensive ways to reduce carbon emissions – an added bonus is that dedicating space to trees means more space for other life to grow and thrive.



Change the level of challenge

If you know what species people are likely to find, why not challenge groups to find a list of animals and plants? You could also encourage people to identify what they find in a more detailed way, for example, looking into differences between species.

Make it accessible

- Make sure the woodland you visit is accessible for everyone. Forests with well-maintained footpaths or purpose-built roads may be more accessible than wild land.
- You may need to think about transport links too.

All Scout activities should be **inclusive and accessible**.

Take it further

If anyone found any particularly interesting plants or animals, they could get stuck in to some research for other requirements of their [Scout Naturalist Activity Badge](#).

If people spotted ways that human activity impacted wildlife, they may want to take action. For example, people could contact local authorities or action groups and tell them about their concerns.

Youth shaped guidance

Anyone with more knowledge could share their skills with the rest of their group. It's up to everyone how they record what they find, and what exactly they do with the information afterwards.

Safety

All activities must be safely managed. Use the [safety checklist](#) to help you plan and risk assess your activity. Do a [risk assessment](#) and take appropriate steps to reduce risk. Always get approval for the activity and have suitable [supervision](#) and an [InTouch](#) process.

- **Outdoor activities**

You must have permission to use the location. Always check the weather forecast and inform parents and carers of any change in venue.

- **Animals and insects**

Be aware of the risks before interacting with animals. Be aware of anyone with allergies, and make alternative arrangements for them.

- **Gardening and nature**

Everyone must wash their hands after the activity has finished. Wear gloves if needed. Explain how to safely use equipment and set clear boundaries so everyone knows what's allowed.

- **Adventure**

This activity has specific rules and systems to make sure it's managed safely. Visit the [adventure page](#) for more information.

- **Near water**

Manage groups carefully when near water. The [guidance on activities near water](#) will help you to keep your group safe.

- **Phones and cameras**

Make sure parents and carers are aware and have given consent for photography.

