



National
Guidance

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Woodland Activities

This document provides guidance about a range of activities which are commonly practised in woodland, although some may take place in other natural or urban environments (such as parks or school grounds). These activities include:

- animal tracking;
- birdwatching;
- plant and tree identification;
- conservation, tree planting and rewilding;
- foraging;
- fire lighting and management;
- food preparation and cooking on open fires;
- collecting and making drinking water;
- building improvised shelters;
- tree climbing;
- using tools such as axes, knives and saws;
- woodland crafts;
- pioneering (building structures from wood and rope);
- navigation;
- nightlines;
- sensory experiences;
- wide games (games which take place in large outdoor areas such as woods or fields).

Some of these activities are used in programmes with a variety of names, such as Bushcraft, Outdoor Living, Wilderness Living, Survival Skills, Forest School and Earth Education.

Specialist adventure activities which can take place in woodland, such as high tree climbing, abseiling, high ropes courses, off-road/mountain biking and orienteering are beyond the scope of this document. See OEAP National Guidance document [7a "Adventure Activities"](#).

Woodland Activities are often used to achieve outcomes such as:

- developing relationships with nature;
- environmental awareness and understanding;
- self-reliance;
- resilience;

- learning practical skills;
- teamwork;
- national curriculum learning including science, geography, design and technology.

Compared with other outdoor learning activities, woodland activities can often be more accessible. There are areas of woodland or other suitable settings reasonably close to many establishments. Many of the activities do not require expensive specialist equipment or highly trained leaders, and can be undertaken for short periods of time, and thus lend themselves to activities led by teachers or youth workers near their school or other setting, or during a residential visit. Woodland areas are often sheltered and so activities can take place all year round and in poor weather.

General Considerations

Although many woodland activities are relatively straightforward, it is important that the risks involved in them are assessed and managed, that leaders are competent, and that groups are properly managed and supervised. Some of the activities can be enhanced by, or require, indirect or remote supervision. See the following OEAP National Guidance documents:

- [4.3c "Risk Management – an Overview"](#)
- [3.2d "Approval of Leaders"](#)
- [4.2a "Group Management and Supervision"](#)

There should be adequate first aid provision on or near the activity site. Particular attention should be given to cleaning wounds, and medical attention should be sought for deep wounds or if dirt remains in the wound, or if there is a possibility that someone has not had a tetanus vaccination. You should know what to do if someone is bitten or stung (for example, by a snake, insect or plant). See documents [4.4b "First Aid"](#) and [7e "Bites and Stings"](#).

You should consider whether any protective clothing or equipment is needed for certain activities. For example:

- warm clothes or waterproofs;
- boots or wellingtons;
- suitable gloves, e.g., for handling firewood;
- a helmet when handling large poles, planks, etc. during pioneering activities.

Where activities take place near water, such as a river or lake, see document [7i "Group Safety at Water Margins"](#).

For field studies in woodland areas, see document [7h "Field Studies"](#).

If camping or bivouacking, such as when staying overnight in improvised shelters, see document [7L "Camping"](#).

Any activity taking place in a remote setting (for example, more than 30 minutes' walk from an access point), or in moorland or mountainous terrain, should be regarded as an adventure activity for the purpose of leader and activity approval. See document [7a "Adventure Activities"](#).

Site-Specific Risk Assessment

Before using any site for woodland activities, you should visit it in order to check its suitability and to identify any potential hazards, which might include:

- litter such as broken glass or discarded needles;
- human or dog faeces;
- poisonous fungi (e.g., death cap, yellow-stainer) or plants (e.g., cuckoo pint, foxgloves, deadly nightshade);
- thorns, or plants which are painful or dangerous to touch (e.g., stinging nettle, hogweed, monkshood);
- dangerous overhanging branches (due to dead wood or 'sudden branch drop syndrome' which can affect particularly oak, beech, elm, eucalyptus and sycamore);
- trip hazards, or sharp branches which could poke someone in the eye, especially if the activity involves running or takes place at night;
- dead trees which might fall;
- the effect of wind.

The presence of some of these hazards should not prevent you from using an area, but your group management and supervision will need to take their presence into account.

The risk of falling branches or trees varies greatly depending upon the strength and direction of the wind and the nature of the woodland. Some establishments set a blanket limit for the use of all woodland: Beaufort force 6 (a constant wind of at least 25 miles per hour) is commonly used, but a safe limit in a particular woodland and with a particular wind direction may be higher or lower than this, depending on the time of year. A decision can be helped by knowledge of how the landowner manages the woodland to reduce the risks to visitors. If it is windy, you should stay alert and, if it feels unsafe in the trees, leave.

After a windy period, you should re-check the area for damage and new hazards.

If a thunderstorm is possible, you should consider the risk posed by lightning – see OEAP National Guidance document [7j "Weather and Group Safety"](#).

Food and Water

Wild Foods

If foraging for wild food, it is essential that you are absolutely certain about your ability to identify the species you select and to distinguish them from any similar species. Although there are many edible plants and fungi, there are others that may look similar but are poisonous, even deadly poisonous. Any food to be eaten must be positively identified. You must also know whether any particular food is safe to eat raw or whether it must be cooked.

Most people are familiar with some wild foods, such as blackberries, and will have eaten them before. If you introduce unfamiliar foods, you should allow people to try only a small amount, in case of a possible allergic reaction to a food they have not eaten before.

Hygiene and Food Handling

It is essential to maintain good hygiene. There should be adequate facilities for washing hands with soap and water before handling food. Anti-bacterial gels are a useful alternative but are not as effective as washing with soap and water.

Safe food handling is important:

- perishable food should be stored in a cold place unless to be used in a short time;
- raw meat or fish should be stored and prepared away from other foods, and any utensils used in its preparation must be washed immediately with hot water;
- food must be cooked thoroughly.

Water

Unless you are certain that any water collected is safe to drink (for example, if it comes from a known tested source), it should be purified before drinking. The most reliable way of purifying water is to bring it to a rolling boil for at least one minute.

Toilet Arrangements

If there are no toilets close by, you should consider what arrangements are needed, for hygienic, environmental and privacy reasons. In some areas digging a pit or latrine well away from water sources might be acceptable. Toilet paper should be burned and buried or carried out.

Fire

Open fires can be a great source of pleasure and provide a focal point for a group. Lighting and managing a fire effectively and safely is an important life skill.

The dangers associated with fires must be managed carefully. They should only be used in designated areas or in such a place that they cannot cause a wildfire or environmental damage such as scorch marks. They should not be used at all when the risk of a wildfire is high.

Fires can produce deadly carbon monoxide if used in an enclosed space (such as in a cooking shelter). Good ventilation is essential.

There are serious hazards associated with stoves, kettles and ovens. If participants are to use these, they should be trained and directly supervised by a competent leader until they are sufficiently competent to operate them safely themselves. Leaders should ensure that they are aware of up-to-date good practice and the manufacturer's instructions.

If using camping stoves or fuels, see OEAP National Guidance document [7L "Camping"](#).

Using Tools

If participants are to use tools such as knives, saws or axes, they should be trained to do so safely. This means that leaders must themselves be competent in the use of the tools and aware of the risks involved in their use.

Consideration should be given to the use of tools which could be offensive weapons, and how their availability is controlled, taking into account the nature of the group and the location. It is a criminal offence to carry a sharp or bladed instrument in a public place or on school premises, except for a folding pocket knife with a blade of less than 3 inches (7.6 cm), unless there is a good reason to do so.

Further Information

Further information about various woodland activities can be obtained from many sources. These are a few examples:

- bushcraftuk.com
- www.eartheducation.org.uk
- forestschoollassociation.org
- www.nationaltrust.org.uk/lists/50-things-activities-in-the-woods
- www.scoutingresources.org.uk/pioneering
- www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/visiting-woods/things-to-do/children-and-families

