

If you go down to the woods today... you might discover some intriguing footprints left by a whole host of animals! Even if you don't have a wooded area on your doorstep, you can ignite children's imagination using familiar woodland creatures and the many stories told about them.

Who's hiding in the woods?

Woodland animals might be hard to spot, but the sticks and leaves they hide among grow on trees! These natural materials can offer a playful way to introduce the woodland stones:



- Make a trail in the sand tray leading to piles of leaves, twigs, and fir cones, with the stones hidden underneath.
- Bury the stones in compost for the children to uncover.
- As well as real leaves and sticks, add some toy trees or bushes for the animals to hide under.
- Create a winter play scene tray using the stones and flour.



When they've found the stones, you can build on children's knowledge of the natural world with questions such as:

- Which animal is on this stone? Have you seen one before in real life?
- Where does this animal live – up in the trees, on the forest floor or in a woodland pond?
- Where might you find a footprint like this – on a muddy path or by the water?
- Look at the footprints of the two birds of prey – can the children see the shape of their sharp claws? What might they catch with these claws?

Rubbings are a fun way to record the animal footprints they're found, as well as developing fine motor skills while children learn how much pressure to apply with the crayon.

Woodland tales

Woodland animals are firm favourites for storytelling:

- You might like to introduce *The Gruffalo's Child* and talk about the tracks left by the different animals.
- Use the stones to create a track in the sand or playdough for one of the animals, then ask, 'Whose are these footprints, and where do they go?' What might the squirrel be up to? Where has the frog hopped off to? Encourage the children to build a story together.
- Create a small-world play woodland scene for open-ended play and storytelling. As well as the stones, add natural materials, play figures and plenty of places for the animals to hide in!



Woodland games

The stones are ideal for matching and sorting games:



- Keeping the animal side of the stone hidden, make a footprint in clay and see if the children can guess which animal it is. You could make it easier by asking, 'Do you think it's a rabbit or a mouse?' Then it's the children's turn to make a footprint for others to guess.
- Play matching games using the stones alongside printed pictures or toy animals.
- Sort the animals by their features – does it have two legs or four? Is it a bird? Does it live in the water? Does it eat plants, other animals, or both?

Go down to the woods

Even a small, wooded area in a local park will contain plenty of wildlife, as well as opportunities for sensory play and practising gross/large motor skills:

- Can the children spot any real animal prints? Maybe they'll be lucky enough to see a distinctive deer print.
- Is there anything else that shows that an animal has been here – a bird's nest, frog's spawn, droppings, a burrow, or birdsong? Take the opportunity to talk about how we shouldn't touch these things or disturb where the animals' live.
- Search the woodland floor for twigs, leaves, fir cones and other materials and use them to create wonderful woodland art. Can the children create their own owl or fox on the forest floor? They might like to make a giant set of woodland footprints using sticks or stones.



Get talking – useful words

Forest, woods, branches, sticks, twigs, leaves, fir cones, leap, hop, scuttle, glide, swoop, nest, burrow, den, habitat, homes

Songs about woodland animals

Sleeping bunnies

Five Little Speckled Frogs

Three Blind Mice

Books about woodland animals

Owl Babies by Martin Waddell

The Gruffalo by Julia Donaldson

One Snowy Night by Nick Butterworth

The Leaf Thief by Alice Flemming

