

Explore Leaf Litter

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There are treasures to be discovered right at our feet. Many times when hiking through a wooded area we tend to look up. We look up at the trees, at the birds, at the canopy above our heads. But there is more to explore, more to be seen, and it's under our feet. A simple activity that you and your family can enjoy on your next hike is exploring leaf litter. It only takes a few materials, all of which are easily found around the house, and the activity and hike can be as short or as long as you'd like.

Leaf Litter Activity: More to explore under our feet

What is leaf litter? Leaf litter is found on the ground in the woods. It is made up of the leaves, needles, and twigs that are on the ground, basically any dead plant material. All of this material will eventually decompose and become soil.

What you'll need: A bag, a small paper lunch sack or reusable cloth or canvas bag would work great. The second item needed is a solid white or light colored piece of cloth about handkerchief size. Even an old pillow case or piece of sheet would work. Optional tools include a magnifying glass, jar or bug box/house, paper, and old unwrapped crayon.

What to do: While out hiking in an area with lots of tress, collect a few handfuls of leaf litter and place it in your bag. Next, find a good spot to sit down. Preferably somewhere close to the area where you picked up the leaf litter. Spread out your handkerchief or piece of cloth. Then gently dump out the contents of your bag onto the cloth. Move the leaves around and explore what's there.

Right away you might notice that there are insects and spiders moving about in the leaf litter. Or sometimes you might have to shift around and spread out the contents a bit more but typically you'll find these little critters moving about. Use a small jar or clear container to scoop one up. Once secured in a container use a magnifying glass to take a look at what was hiding amongst the leaves.

Then investigate the types of leaves, needles, and small pieces of twigs or bark. Sort the items by similar shape, size, or color, making piles of each. Now that you've sorted your collection, try creating a pattern with these items. Or try to match items in the leaf litter to the plants that are around you. Can you find similar leaves or bark growing on the trees? Another activity that you can do is have everyone on the hike pick their favorite item they collected and share why. Maybe it's the color, shape, or something interesting about that item that made it stand out. You can then also make a rubbing of this item. To do this lay a piece of paper over your chosen item. Using the flat side of the unwrapped crayon to color over the paper, you will create an image of your favorite leaf litter material. When you get home, you can even display your leaf rubbings as fun fall decorations.

Continue to explore the leaf litter or move to a new location and try the activity again. At the new location did you find the same types of leaves and insects? Are there difference in the color, smell, or texture of the leaf litter in the new location compared to the first location?

Remember all parts of nature should remain in nature. Clean up by gently brushing off the handkerchief and making sure all contents from the bag are dumped out. Then release all of the critters you might have captured.

While returning from your hike, talk about what surprised you about the leaf litter and ask questions about your discoveries. Questions can start with 'I wonder why.' 'I wonder if,' 'I wonder how.' Remember, it's okay to not know all the answers. Use those question to extend this activity at home where you can look up more information in field guides. Remember, there is always more to explore!