

Living in the Leaf Litter

All Ages

While it is fun to walk, crunch and kick through a pile of leaves, it is fascinating to dive in and discover just what lives under that pile! All sorts of plants, animals, and fungi live in the leaf litter (the leaves, seeds, dead plants, twigs, and bits of bark that gather on the ground). Many of the leaf litter inhabitants work hard to converting all that litter into food for plants. Some of the tiny invertebrates, animals that do not have a backbone, feed on the leaf litter and break it into little bits. Then microscopic critters, bacteria, and fungi decompose or break down the little bits into molecules of nutrients and minerals which plants can absorb. The leaf litter community works to keep our plants healthy, and the plants work to keep our planet healthy. We can help by leaving the leaf litter on the ground.



Living in leaf litter, you may find slugs, snails, worms, spiders, harvestmen, sow bugs, mites, springtails, pseudoscorpions, and other fascinating creatures. Many animals visit the leaf litter looking for nesting material, a place to hide or to hibernate. Birds, small mammals, amphibians and carnivorous insects forage for food (tasty insects) in the leaf litter. Some insects overwinter in the leaves, some as eggs, or larvae others as pupae and even some adults like the Mourning Cloak butterfly stay there too.



A funnel web, home to a spider.

To begin your investigation, find a nice thick layer or pile of leaves. Gently pull back the leaves to reveal a world of critters and activity. A magnifying glass can help with your observations. Be mindful. This is home for many creatures so please be gentle and leave the litter the way you found it.

Keep a list or use our check list on page 2 to keep track of all the different animals you find. Make some careful observations such as how many legs does the creature have? Are the legs jointed (like a beetle's)? Does the critter have skin or an exoskeleton (hard shell like 'skin')? Scientists use questions and observations like these to sort animals into different groups.

Raking up leaves and disposing of them can have some unintentional consequences for your garden. A number of invertebrates, including some butterflies, use the leaf litter as a nursery, laying their eggs there. Removing the leaves removes the eggs. In the spring there are fewer insects. This means fewer pollinators in your garden and fewer birds that eat insects.

Remember to keep an eye out for Poison ivy.

Always check for ticks.



Who Lives in the Leaf Litter

Cross off each one as you find it

<p>Earthworm</p>  <p>a decomposer, it needs moisture to breathe through its skin.</p>	<p>Pill Bug</p>  <p>a decomposer, it rolls into a spherical 'pill', cousin to the woodlouse</p>	<p>Pseudoscorpion</p>  <p>fierce looking teeny-tiny predator, related to spiders, harmless to humans</p>	<p>Snail</p>  <p>uses its raspy tongue to scrape leaves for food and rocks for minerals</p>
<p>Rove Beetle</p>  <p>a very fast moving predator, eats small invertebrates, sticks its tail up if disturbed.</p>	<p>Woodlouse or Sow Bug</p>  <p>runs fast, this decomposer is a crustacean and has gills under its suit of armor.</p>	<p>Woodlouse Hunter</p>  <p>fierce looking spider with long fangs that can pierce the armor of woodlice and other tough prey</p>	<p>Ground Beetle</p>  <p>a fast runner, often hides in the soil, uses sharp jaws to eat anything (omnivore)</p>
<p>Slug</p>  <p>an excellent plant matter recycler, some will eat anything even scat and crushed snails</p>	<p>Springtail</p>  <p>very tiny decomposer with long antenna, leaps using a forked spring under its abdomen</p>	<p>Harvestman (Daddy Long Legs)</p>  <p>harmless relative of spiders, taps and tastes for food and water with its second pair of legs</p>	<p>Jumping Spider</p>  <p>has two large front facing eyes, uses short legs to leap on its prey, has a poisonous (to its prey) bite.</p>
<p>Centipede</p>  <p>very fast runner, ferocious predator with poisonous jaws.</p>	<p>Millipede</p>  <p>slow moving recycler, releases poisonous gases or liquids to repel predators, coils up when disturbed</p>	<p>Snail eggs</p>  <p>Snails lay eggs in depressions under debris, they take 4 to 6 weeks to hatch but can overwinter</p>	<p>Salamander</p>  <p>a carnivore, it eats slugs, worms, snails, and insects, tail falls off easily, it will grow a new one</p>