

Fieldwork in the forest: a health and safety checklist

Health and safety advice for fieldwork in woodland environments



Introduction

British woodlands and forests offer Geographers a diversity of field study sites for investigations and enquiries. Like any outdoor environment there are risks that need to be identified, assessed and managed before taking young people on a field trip. A pre-visit to a woodland or forest is an excellent way to see the site, assess the risks and in some cases meet the woodland owner or estate manager. This health and safety checklist can help you prepare your woodland or forest fieldwork.

Permission

If the woodland or forest is not on your own school grounds you will need to seek permission from the person or organisation that owns the woodland or forest.

For public woodlands:

the woodland owner may be the local council, a conservation group, a national charity or another educational institution.

For private woodlands:

it is essential to contact the estate manager, farmer, business or organisation that manages the woodland.

You will need to explain to the woodland owner:

- the aims of your field work visit
- the number of people attending
- that your group is covered by school insurance (offer to provide a copy)
- that you are responsible for the welfare of everyone in your group (including having a First Aider present)
- that you will produce a risk assessment for the field trip (offer to provide a copy)

You will need to check with the woodland owner:

- parking location for minibus/coach
- preferred access route into woodland
- areas of woodland that you are allowed to access, and areas that may be hazardous or out of bounds (e.g. dangerous trees, conservation areas, and areas of forestry operations)
- the location of emergency vehicle access points, and the address and postcode of your woodland location, for your emergency procedures
- exchange contact details with the woodland owner

Site risk assessment

Check for:

- Access: easy access for groups via a footpath, stile, gate
- Ground hazards: rabbit holes, roots, mud, rocks, dog poo and wild animal faeces.
- Vegetation: stinging nettles, brambles, plants that cause irritation e.g. Giant Hogweed.
- Trees: unstable trees, signs of fungus and rot on tree trunks that could weaken trees structurally, dead branches hanging over paths, species with thorns such as blackthorn
- Water bodies: check for flooding across paths after rain, boggy and muddy areas around water bodies.
- Animals: burrows, nests (especially wasps and bees), wild boar (can be aggressive if they have young), dogs off leads (if a public woodland), dead/wounded animals.
- Boundaries: are there fencing or hedges or roads/paths around the woodland? If there are no clear boundaries you need to agree boundaries with your group, or a system to stay safe with an adult supervising.
- Pests and diseases: Weils disease exists in stagnant bodies of water. Lyme disease is carried by ticks. Ticks are often found in areas of long grass and bracken where deer live. Wearing long sleeves and trousers tucked into socks covered in insect repellent prevents ticks. Horseflies, bees and wasps can all sting – check your group for anyone who has allergies to stings. Check public health websites and NHS for more information.
- Weather: do not go into woodlands during high winds or gale force winds (unless trees are very young and no taller than a person). Very cold weather below freezing increases the risk of hypothermia, and very hot weather over 30°C increases the risk of hyperthermia.
- Fieldwork equipment: ranging poles, quadrats and other items may have sharp edges, and/or be heavy and awkward to carry leading to injuries.

Emergency procedure

- Ensure that emergency procedures are written into your risk assessment.
- Make emergency procedure cards that can be given to all adults accompanying the fieldwork trip.
- Procedures should describe the roles and qualifications of each adult such as First Aider, DBS, support to First Aider, and how to safely return the rest of the group to school.
- Procedures should also contain information on the woodland's emergency access points, the woodland address, post code and 'what3words' for your exact location (see www.what3words.com)
- Ensure telephone numbers of woodland owner and school and other contacts are on your emergency procedures.

To bring: Protective clothing

- Sturdy boots or wellies
- Waterproof coats and trousers
- Long sleeve tops and trousers

Cold weather:

- Warm layers of clothing (thermal underwear if very cold)
- Gloves, hat, scarf
- Spare clothes to change into if very wet

Hot weather:

- Cool clothing that covers all of the skin
- Long sleeved tops with collar
- Long trousers
- Socks
- No sandals or open toed shoes
- Sun hat and sun glasses
- Gloves for protection in vegetation from stinging nettles

To bring: Equipment

- First Aid kit
- Mobile phone or walkie talkie
- A whistle to call group together or call for help
- Extra warm clothing if cold
- Medical forms of all participants
- Parent/guardian permission forms

If in a remote location:

- Backpack with camping mat, sleeping bag, survival bag, survival blanket, clean warm water for first aid, thermos of hot drink, energy food, rope, tarpaulin or shelter.
- Map
- Leave details of route, location and itinerary with someone at school who is not on the trip.



Images

1. Risk: Broken bridge a hazard for access
2. Risk: Old tree with dead overhanging branches
3. Equipment including first aid kit