



A Tree-tastic Scavenger Hunt

Follow the life of a tree from seed to rotting log and uncover a special secret.




Tally Ho!

In nature, nothing is wasted. A fallen seed takes root and sprouts. Or becomes a meal for hungry wildlife. Fallen leaves offer shelter for tiny critters through the cold of winter, and then break down, or decompose, adding nutrients to the soil. A fallen tree becomes a place to sit, a home, and a food source. When it decomposes, it leaves behind rich soil in which a new tree can grow.

This is the great secret of trees: From the time they are a seed to long after they die, trees continue to give to the living things around them!

What's that you say? You are *curious* to learn more? Nature Cat and his pals are, too! In fact, the latest addition to Nature Cat's curiosity list asks, *How do trees help wildlife as they grow from a seed until they become a crumbling, rotting log?* Join the Nature Cat crew on a tree-tastic scavenger hunt to find examples of trees at different stages of their lives and for signs of the animals that depend on the trees.

Let's Go!

-  **Where:** A local wooded park or preserve, or even your backyard.
-  **When:** Summer, along with spring and early fall are ideal, but you can go any time of year
-  **What to bring:** An adult, your scavenger hunt list, a pencil to check off items as you find them, a camera or cell phone for photos (optional), binoculars (optional), magnifier (optional), and sturdy shoes. Remember, too, too, also to dress for the weather!



Directions:

Below you will find your scavenger hunt list. Find trees at different points in their life cycle, and earn bonus points for finding signs of the ways animals use trees. If you bring along a camera, take photos as you go and share them with Nature Cat on Facebook and Instagram with the hashtag #treesrule. Use your binoculars and magnifier to get a closer look at birds, frogs, salamanders, insects, and the many other animals that depend on trees for food and shelter.

Tip for success: It's okay if you don't find everything on your first try! Keep your scavenger hunt list handy for anytime you visit a wooded area.

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Find a tree seed.

You can find seeds inside the scales of a pinecone, by opening up a maple samara, or 'helicopter,' or splitting open an apple. Acorns are seeds, too, as well as hazelnuts and walnuts. Find more examples and an identification guide [here](#). Most tree seeds get eaten, but a lucky few will take root and grow.

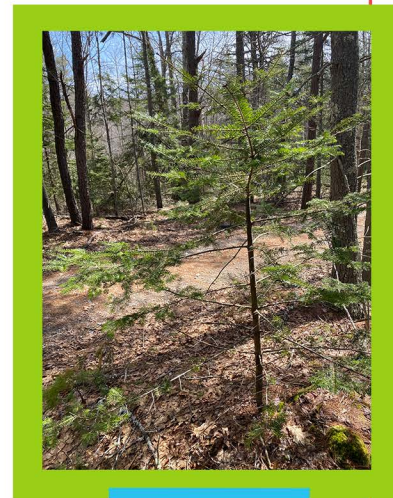


Find a tree seedling.

These are tiny versions of trees that may only be a few inches tall.



Seedling



Sapling



Find a sapling.

Saplings are young trees that are bigger than seedlings, but smaller than adult trees. Seedlings and saplings make a great snack for hungry animals. Stay tough, little trees!

Bonus time! Can you find a sapling that has been nibbled on?



Find a mature tree.

A mature, or adult, tree is a tree that produces flowers or fruits, such as acorns, pinecones, or pears. Look on a tree, as well as around the base of a tree, for evidence of flowers or fruits. Sniff, sniff. Is that the sweet-smelling flowers of the dogwood tree? (That's Hal's favorite tree.)

Bonus time! Can you find an animal using the tree? If you don't see any animals, can you find a sign of an animal, such as a bird's nests, a squirrel's drey, or a cocoon?



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Find a snag.

Snag?! Is that even a word? (Yes, Hal, yes it is.) A snag is a tree that is dying or has died but is still standing.

Bonus time! Snags play a big role where they stand as nurseries, hiding places, food, and hunting perches. Find a snag with holes from woodpeckers or insects. What other signs of animals do you see? Perhaps a cache, or store, of acorns in that hole or an old nest?



Find a fallen tree.

Wind, heavy rain or snow, or old age may cause a tree to topple over. Sometimes when this happens, you can see the tree's root system. Are the roots longer than you are tall?

Bonus time! Find a tree stump. What do you see growing on the tree stump? You might see moss, ferns or mushrooms.



Find a decomposing log.

This is all that is left of a mighty tree that once stood. You may see some bark, as well as the decaying wood inside the log. Tiny critters—too small to see—help break down the wood into smaller and smaller pieces. Eventually these tiny pieces become nutrient-rich soil where a new tree may one day grow, starting the cycle all over again!

Bonus time! Decomposing logs are often home to mosses, lichen, fungi, salamanders, snakes, frogs, toads, insects, and more. How many of these can you spot?



Collaborators

This Tree-tastic Scavenger Hunt activity was developed in collaboration with:



CHICAGO REGION TREES INITIATIVE
Our Trees.
Our Communities.
Our Future.



Lake County Forest Preserves



McHenry County CONSERVATION DISTRICT



FOREST PRESERVES of Cook County



Illinois Extension UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

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