

The Forest Folks

When people think of forests, the first things that come to the mind are large trees, bears, eagles, gorillas, and tigers. But there's plenty more. Forest plants, organisms, such as bacteria and fungi, are also jungle dwellers! In fact, each part of the forest supports life...

Plants: Forest plants include trees, shrubs, vines, herbs, grasses, and a variety of other plants to be found among the trees.

Plants are real all-rounders! Their most crucial benefit is that plants (leaves) produce oxygen, which is essential for every living organism. Moreover, plants provide shelter and food to the animals living in the forest, and benefit human beings as well.

Mammals: The huge variety of mammal species living in forests range from the tiny, mouse-like shrews to acrobatic primates! Many forest mammals are brilliant climbers, and use trees for food, shelter, and as travel routes.

Reptiles: Snakes and lizards are the most common forest reptiles. There are approximately 2000 species of snakes on earth! Lizards have species ranging from tiny geckos to the huge iguanas.

Both have very interesting defense mechanisms. Snakes use their venom and camouflage. And lizards shed their tails when attacked! Even after separating from the lizard, the tail continues to move! This distracts the predator and the now tailless lizard escapes!

Birds: There are two main groups of birds: the permanent residents and the migrants. The permanent residents use the forest for food and shelter. Birds feed on insects, and on seeds and fruits found in forests. The migrating birds distribute seeds as they travel great distances every day.

Amphibians: Amphibians include frogs, toads, and salamanders. Amphibians begin their lives in the ponds (where they hatch from the eggs) and can spend their entire adult lives on dry ground. Sometimes these ponds are tiny pools of water between the leaves of a plant, or they are large expanses of wetlands within the forest (riparian zones).

Fungi: Do you like mushrooms? Do you know that mushrooms are the "fruits" of an underground network of fungus? Yes, fungus!

Trees and the fungi (that mainly grow around tree roots) are interdependent for certain nutrients. If a tree is cut down, the fungi around its roots die. If a new tree is then planted in the same spot, it cannot grow well because the soil would lack the important fungus!

Fish: Fish in a forest? Well, not exactly in the forest but, in the rivers and streams that run through them. Rivers, ponds, and bogs are all integral parts of natural forests, and there are often complex relationships between the animals in the water and the animals in the trees. Fish and the variety of insects in the water attract reptiles and birds.

Insects: Insects are the most abundant group of pollinators and are thus vital to both plants and other animals. They also decompose the piles of dead organic matter, which the fungi cannot decompose alone. Insect larvae work their way into fallen trees and help the forest floor store moisture.

Epiphytes: Do you know that there are certain plants that grow in the branches of large trees? They can make up over 50 per cent of the plant species in a tropical rainforest! They come in all shapes—hanging, sprawling vines, bushy clumps of water-catching leaves, even cactus-like plants. In some temperate coastal forests, trees are carpeted with layers of epiphytic moss and lichens!