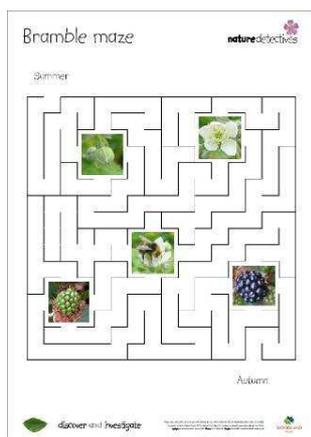




The Woodland Trust's 'Nature Detectives' website was set up 2 years ago and has gone from strength to strength. March 2007 saw it voted as 'junior website of the month' and it's had 750,000 visits since it started. Originally set up for schools and youth groups, it now boasts 21,000 accounts, over half of which are families – despite direct marketing to the home audience being very small-scale.

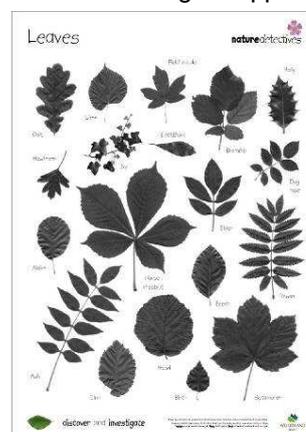
The good news here is that the ethos of the project is to encourage children to get outside and get to grips with what's going on in their own local environment. Aside from the puzzles and craft activities, you can also create and develop your own private nature diary online, download colourful posters, stickers and seasonal charts to help you identify birds, plants and trees, and print your own log book to take to the woods. Part of the site gets season specific depending on the time of year and there is a good range of materials developed by teachers for teachers to fit in with outdoor education and the curriculum. Staff do stress however that they are in the business of providing a bank of resources from which teachers can pick and mix according to their subject and interest. Refreshingly, they prefer not to 'teach teachers how and what to teach'.



According to Shaun Nixon, Project Officer for Nature Detectives, the most popular aspect of the site is the pdf downloads - *half a million items have been downloaded over the last 2 years!* Shaun puts this down to the fact that the information is clear, simple and straightforward. He does get occasional calls from people saying 'why isn't this tree on the leaf sheet' but as he points out, these sheets are meant to start kids off, so they only show leaves, flowers and seeds which most kids stand a good chance of coming across. That way, everyone gets a chance to tick the 'identified' box. The really enthusiastic kids will take their interest further anyway. This is biodiversity for all at its simplest.

Appealing most to 7-11 yr olds, the website has however proven that children can record and monitor just as accurately, if not more so, than adults. The 'seasons' information which is logged is added to the overall data collected as part of the Nature's Calendar programme and those experts who doubted that information collected by children would add value have been firmly proven wrong.

With funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund just coming to an end, the Woodland Trust has decided to maintain this valuable resource from its own funds. This means that Nature Detectives can no longer support regular free handouts to registered users, so in response to an outcry, from schools in particular, a new Club will be launched in May 2007. Membership fees will be just £12/annum for which members will receive seasonal information packs, together with a new poster that can be populated with 52 'challenge' stickers sent via weekly emails. Each email also gives suggestions for associated activities and will even be timed for when children arrive home from school on a Friday.



Asked why he thinks the website has been so successful Shaun Nixon says, *'It's free, you can access it anywhere and it's self-led. Independence and finding things out for yourself are really important for children and here, all the information is in one place. I used to be sent to the library to find things out, and it was quite a scary place when you're only 8. The internet has become what books used to be – information overload – but this site is the perfect place to start your journey of discovery'*

Although clicking a mouse isn't quite the same as watching one in your woodpile, clearly well designed websites do work. Through Nature Detectives, lots of kids are being shoed outside by the computer to do their exploring, rather than by their parents.

[www.naturedetectives.org.uk](http://www.naturedetectives.org.uk)