



What do New Forest ponies eat?

Teachers' notes

Do you know what New Forest Ponies can eat? You might be surprised which prickly greens they prefer.

This activity is a good starting point to discuss **animal adaptations** and behaviour or to discuss **responsible tourism** when visiting the New Forest.



How to play the game

Use the printable cards (below) to mark out a **good**, **bad** and **not sure** area. (make sure you print 1 sided!)

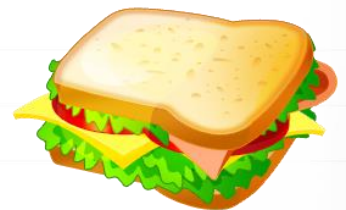
If playing the game in school, you could use images of the New Forest (available in image gallery) to help pupils better understand the environment the ponies live in. You can read more about the life of New Forest ponies by downloading a guide (available in the factsheets section of our website).

Reveal each card one by one. Starting with some "obvious" ones and making it harder or more unfamiliar as you move on. If you have a pony puppet, the puppet could try eating each food item and then either hop around happily or "double-over" with tummy ache. Ask pupils to **justify** their choices using their knowledge e.g. "Fungi are natural", "Sandwiches have green salad". Emphasize how new information learned might make them want to change their opinion.

Alternative approaches:

- Replace the cards with physical objects you have collected (not Fungi though).
- Work on table in pairs or small groups using sets of cards. Encourage good listening and discussion.
- Use the answers you are unsure about to generate research questions about ponies and the New Forest.

Vocabulary: browse, graze, adaptation, gorse, poisonous, nutritious



Background information and links on next page.

Printable answer sheet below.

About New Forest Ponies and Commoners' animals.

The New Forest pony is one of the best-known images of the National Park; it is an icon of the area, featuring in countless photographs and in the New Forest National Park logo.

Nearly 5000 ponies roam freely across the New Forest National Park. Without them, the landscape would not be the one we know and treasure for its beauty and biodiversity. Each pony is owned by a "commoner" - someone who has the right to graze animals on the queen's land. This right is attached to the deeds of their house or land and is often handed down through generations.

Other animals that may be owned by commoners but are in effect "wild", are donkeys, cattle, sheep and pigs. These animals are not fed, sheltered, ridden or petted, foals are born in the wild. They must survive on their own, helped only by a health check once a year when they are rounded up and counted during the "New Forest Drifts". Learn more about this amazing tradition and culture here:

- http://www.newforestnpa.gov.uk/info/20089/rich_cultural_heritage/48/commoning
- <http://www.thenewforest.co.uk/discover/new-forest-ponies.aspx>
- <http://www.thenewforestguide.co.uk/biodiversity/ponies/>
- <http://newforestcommoner.co.uk/2014/11/25/new-forest-ponies-with-moustaches/ponies-browsing/>

What do ponies eat?

In the **summer**, ponies will eat rich grasses, creating the close cropped (short) lawns of the New Forest which are important for rare flowers and insect species. **In the winter their diet is more varied.** Green plants such as holly and gorse are incredibly nutritious for them.

The New Forest breeds of ponies are adapted to the weather and their diet. They have **specially adapted teeth and lips which roll back** allowing them to bite off and chew whole stems of prickly gorse and holly. If you look closely on a holly tree you will see a "browse" line- all the new branches up to the point the ponies can reach up will be chewed off and the bark may be scratched too.

Grass-cuttings, ragwort and green acorns are also bad for ponies. People are asked not to leave out grass for ponies to eat, there are concerted efforts to remove ragwort each year and, in the autumn, pigs are released into the Forest during **pannage** season to eat the green acorns that are tasty for the pigs but poisonous for the ponies.

What's the problem?

Tourists are asked **not to pet or feed the ponies**. They may kick and bite and human food is attractive but not nutritious for them. If you feed the ponies it attracts them to car parks and roads, where they are at serious risk of accidents. Sadly, dozens of **ponies are killed** or injured on the roads of the New Forest each year. Find out more about how visitors are being encouraged to act responsibly here:

- <http://www.thenewforest.co.uk/information/caring-for-the-forest.aspx>
- <http://www.newforestnpa.gov.uk/visiting/help-care-for-the-forest/dont-feed-touch-animals/>

Good for
ponies

Bad for
ponies

Not sure

Good for ponies

Grass Tree bark Gorse

Heather Holly Leaves

All of these food sources grow naturally on the Forest.
Ponies have specially adapted lips and teeth for dealing with the prickly, but highly nutritious, gorse and holly.

Bad for ponies

Acorns are poisonous to the ponies when green.

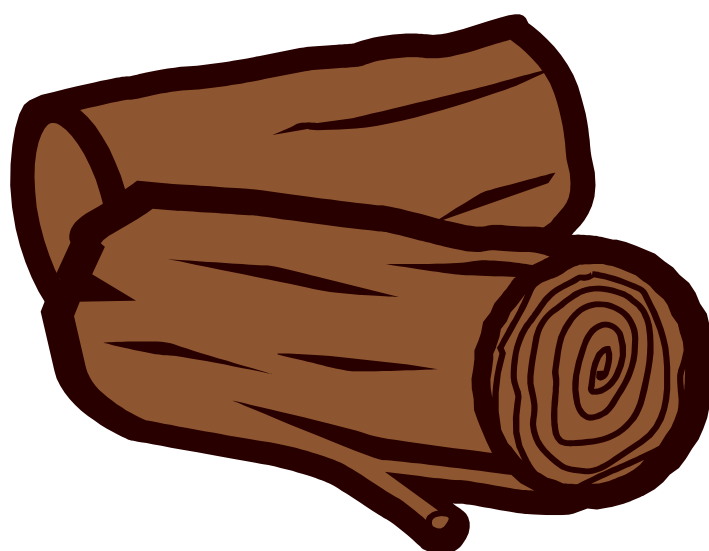
Apple - Fruits and vegetables do not grow naturally on the Forest and large pieces can choke them!

Ice cream, sandwich, crisps and snacks or any human food gives ponies colic (bad stomach ache).

Berries - some are poisonous but ponies don't usually eat them.



Grass



Tree bark

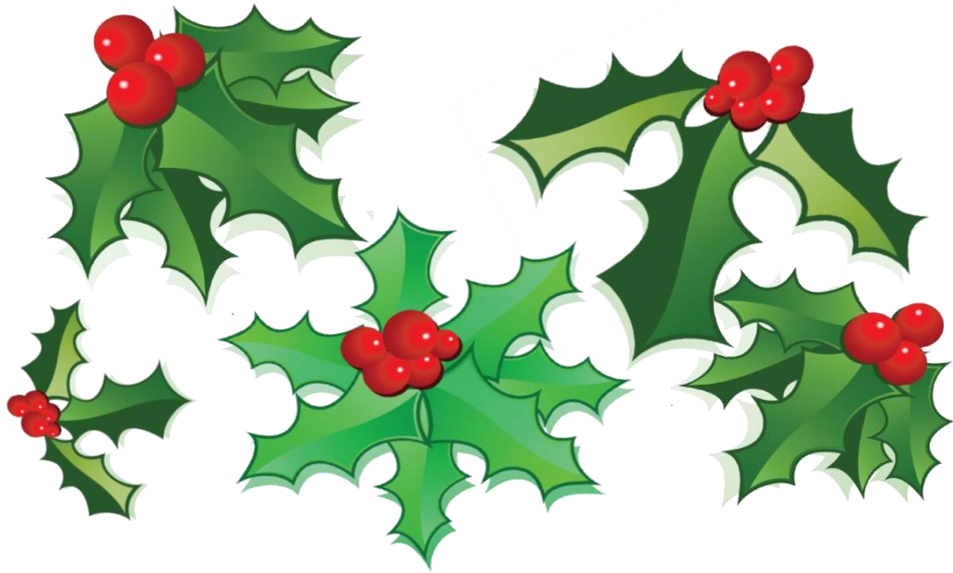




Heather



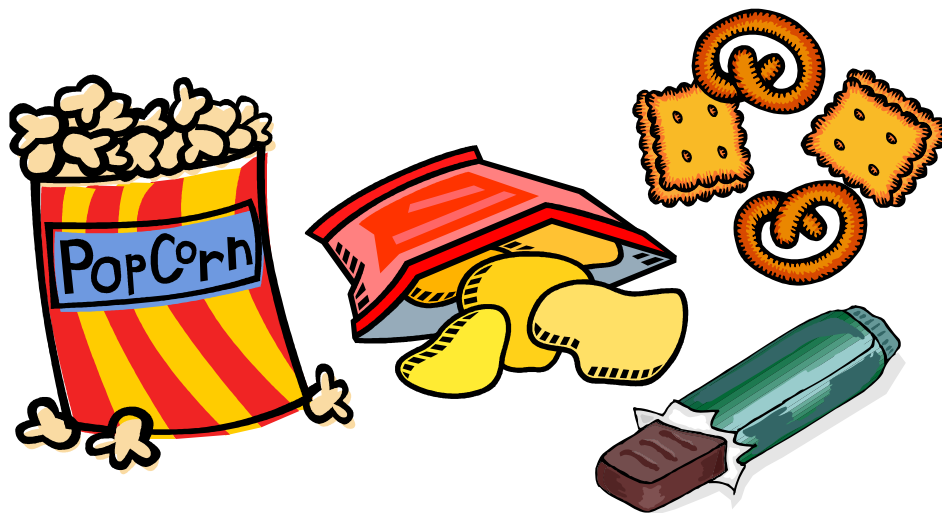
Leaves



Holly



Gorse



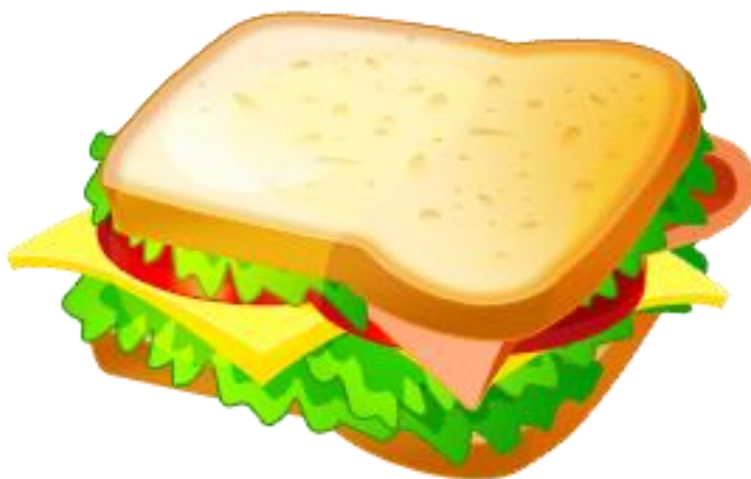
Crisps and snacks



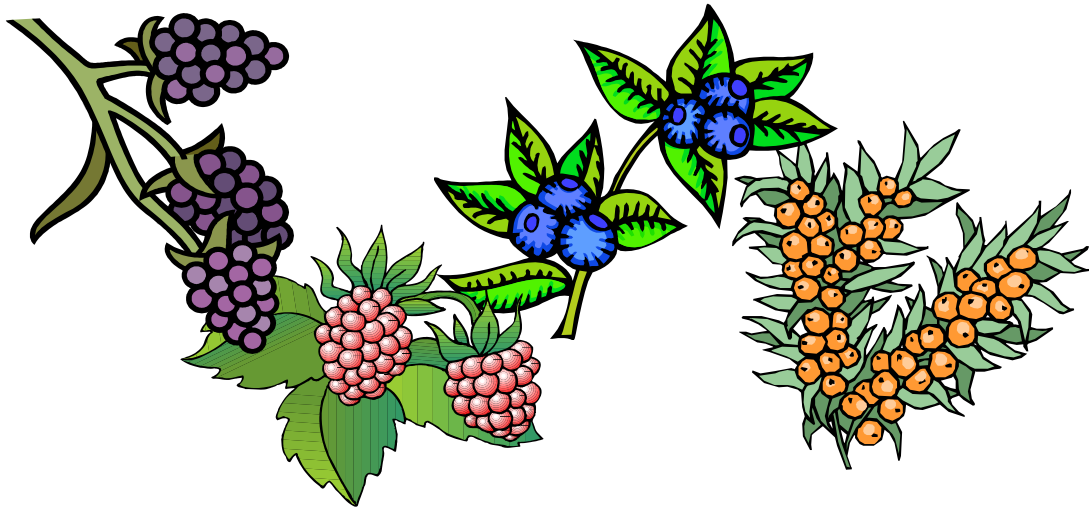
Ice cream



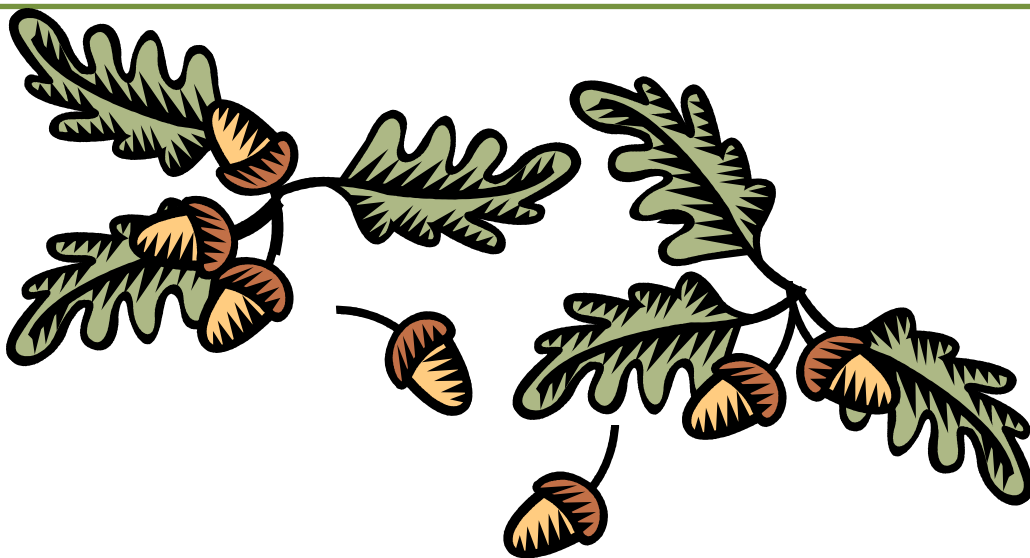
Apple



Sandwich



Berries



Acorns