

# THE KOALA

The koala was given its scientific name *Phascolarctos cinereus*, meaning "pouched bear" and "ash grey", in 1816 by the early European settlers.

It was these same settlers, who hunted koalas to the brink of extinction. Fortunately, in 1927 public outcry brought the end to this slaughter. Harvesting ceased and the koala population recovered slightly.

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## MARSUPIAL

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People often incorrectly refer to the koala as a "koala bear". It is no relation to the bear. Koalas are marsupials, meaning that females give birth to extremely underdeveloped young, which must complete their development in a pouch.

The closest relative to the koala is the wombat. One of the many things that they have in common is they both have a backward-opening pouch.

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## PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

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The koala is well suited to its arboreal lifestyle. It has very strong arms and legs; rough pads on its hands and feet; sharp claws and the first two digits of the hand are opposed to the other three, forming a powerful clamp (two thumbs).



Foot



Hand

The first digit of the foot has no claw and is opposed to the others. The second and third digits are fused together and are used as a comb to groom the fur.

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## DIET

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The koala will only eat eucalyptus leaves. They consume 60 of the 800 eucalypt species found in Australia. Generally, the leaf contains 50% water and 5% sugars and starches. This low energy diet means that the koala needs to sleep or rest 18 to 19 hours each day.

A koala will eat approximately 400 to 600 grams of leaf per day.

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## DISTRIBUTION

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On a national level the koala is not endangered. However, their status in each state varies eg. in New South Wales they are vulnerable and in Queensland they are common.



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## COMMUNICATION

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Vocalisation consists of an inhaling sound similar to a 'snore'. This is called a bellow. Males do it to make their presence known to other males and to attract females. Females only bellow during the breeding season.

Males have a scent gland in the centre of their chest. It is used to mark their territory and to attract females during the breeding season.

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## NORTHERN & SOUTHERN KOALAS

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There is only one species of koala, but their appearances differ depending on the climatic zone they are found in:

### Northern koala

- Found in Queensland and northern New South Wales;
- Short, grey fur; and
- Maximum weight of 9.5 kg.



Norther

### Southern koala

- Found throughout Victoria, southern New South Wales and South Australia;
- Long, dark brown fur; and



Souther

- Maximum weight of 14 kg.

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## MALES AND FEMALES

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### Female

- Has a pouch; and
- Smaller than males- northern koalas weigh up to 7kg.

### Male

- Has scent gland on chest; and
- Larger than females- northern koalas weigh up to 9 kg.

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## REPRODUCTION

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Koalas breed from September to March.

Being marsupials, they have a short gestation period of 33 to 35 days. Normally a single young is born, twins are rare. At birth the joey is pink, furless, and weighs ½ gram.

After climbing from its mother's cloaca to the pouch the joey attaches itself to one of two teats. At 6 to 7 months of age, it emerges from the pouch for the first time.



Pouch opening

The transition from milk to a diet of eucalypt leaves is supported by the joey eating pap. It is a special faeces, which the joey encourages the mother to produce by nuzzling her cloaca. Pap contains bacteria needed in the gut to digest eucalypt leaves.

At 8 months of age the joey is too big to fit inside the pouch. It is usually found riding on the stomach or back of its mother. The weaning process begins at this age. Independence is reached at approximately one year of age.



Koalas usually live for 8 to 10 years in the wild and 12 to 14 years in captivity.

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## THREATS TO WILD KOALAS

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### Habitat destruction

Habitat destruction is the greatest threat to koalas in the wild. 80% of their home ranges have been destroyed.

### Cars

Many koalas are hit by motor vehicles as they cross roads in search of food or a mate.

### Predators

Koalas have few natural predators. However, young and sick koalas can be killed by dingoes, goannas, snakes and birds of prey.

### Bushfires

Bushfires are a natural threat to koalas. Those koalas that do survive, can suffer smoke inhalation, dehydration, loss of condition and minor burns.

### Disease - Chlamydia

Chlamydia is the most publicised disease effecting koalas. It has two symptoms. Conjunctivitis is an eye disease, which, if left untreated, can cause blindness. Cystitis affects the urinary tract and can render females infertile, this is not treatable.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP

- Plant koala food trees;
- Drive slowly and carefully in koala habitat areas, especially at night as they are semi-nocturnal and most active at dusk and dawn;
- Restrain your dog at night. Dogs and cars alone kill over 4000 koalas each year;
- Report any sick, injured or dead koalas to Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service;
- If you live in a koala habitat area and have a pool, tie a rope around the fence and trail it into the water so that if a koala gets in, it can pull itself out;
- Join a local conservation group that cares for native wildlife.



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