

# Koalas

(*Phascolarctos  
Cinereus*)



## Species Profile

### Koalas

Koalas are marsupials, which are mammals that give birth to very undeveloped young who then complete development in a pouch. They are only naturally found on the mainland of eastern Australia, however they can also be found on several different islands like Phillip Island and French Island, as they were brought across to protect them from hunting in the 1800's. Koalas have a thick coat of fur which varies from a light grey color to a dark grey/brown on the back, with white on the chest and stomach. Their thick fur acts as a great insulator from the cold and in cold weather they huddle in a ball with their back to the wind. On hot days they stretch out along a branch, seek shade on the ground or in non eucalypt trees with dense foliage. Koalas sleep for approximately 20 hours a day due to their low energy diet.

### Diet

Koalas main food is eucalypt leaves and on Phillip Island, they generally prefer eating coastal manna gum (*Eucalyptus viminalis* ssp. *Pryoriana*), swamp gum (*Eucalyptus ovata*) and blue gum *Eucalyptus (globulus)*. However, buds, fruit and even bark are occasionally eaten and they have also been seen feeding on sweet bursaria, black wattle, coastal teatree, swamp paperbark, and Monterey pine. The 500 - 1000 grams of leaves koalas eat each day provides them with as much energy as one serving of breakfast cereal does for us! Therefore koalas have developed a low energy lifestyle to compensate for their low energy diet. Gum leaves contain:

- 50% water
- 18% fibre
- 13% tannins
- 5% sugar/starch
- 4% minerals
- 8% fat

A koalas digestive system is geared to get the most energy out of the eucalyptus leaves. They have an organ called a caecum which

contains millions of bacteria to help break down the fibre into substances that are easier to absorb. Koalas rarely drink water as they obtain water from the contents and surface of the leaves they eat.

### Breeding

Koalas are capable of breeding when they reach their adult weight – for females around two years, males around three years. However males need to find an opportunity to mate where there is not bigger, stronger, more capable competition. Often males do not start breeding until they are five years old. Koalas mate at a time which allows the young to emerge from the pouch when food is abundant and of the highest quality. In southern Australia, most births are during December-February. Bonds are not formed between males and females for even one season. Once the act of mating is over, the male leaves the tree and the pair have no further contact.

Koala babies are called joeys and are born 34-36 days after conception. They are about 19mm in length and weigh approximately 0.5g (about the size of a jelly bean). Only the forelimbs and lips are well developed - vital for the climb to the pouch and suckling once in the pouch. For the first 22 weeks after birth the joey remains within the pouch without emerging. From this time until 36 weeks it will grow and become more independent spending more and more time out of the pouch. At 36 weeks it weighs about one kilogram and no longer fits in it's mother's pouch. It spends much of the time sitting on the mother's back, but returns to the mother's belly in cold, wet weather and to sleep. At around 6-8 months the mother gives her joey some of her droppings called 'pap'. This process passes along special micro-organisms the joey will need to help break down toxins present in the eucalypt leaves. Koalas are weaned at approximately 12 months old and are fully independent at 18 months.

### Koala Conservation Reserve

The KCR was opened in 1992 to provide a protected population of koalas for viewing by local and international visitors and to aid the conservation and research of the koala

population on Phillip Island. Koalas are restricted to the existing mature vegetation - an area of about six hectares. The KCR is managed by Phillip Island Nature Parks, a not for profit organisation that protects and manages 20% of Phillip Island. The money raised through tourism goes towards helping to protect a variety of flora and fauna through environmental management, education, ongoing operations and research.

Koalas as a species are not endangered, however they are listed as vulnerable across large parts of their range, mostly in QLD and NSW. The greatest threat to koalas is habitat loss. This has resulted from bush fires and land clearing for timber, housing and roads. Many of these practices continue today.

Other threats include disease, road kills and dog attacks. Chlamydia is a disease that is spread through sexual activity and direct contact of infected surfaces. It can lead to infection of the koalas urinary tract, reproductive tract, respiratory tract and eyes. It may result in blindness or infertility and sometimes death. Although there is no cure, captive koalas may be treated with medication to relieve the symptoms. Research into Chlamydia continues.

### Koalas for our future

To ensure a future for our koalas, steps must be taken to help retain the environment they live in. With deforestation causing habitat loss, there are ways that you can help the koalas. Recycling paper and cardboard and buying recycled paper products like printer paper, toilet paper, paper towels and greeting cards, will reduce the amount of trees being cut down to make these products. If you live in an area that koalas inhabit, then make sure your pets are kept safely enclosed and plant koala friendly gum trees in your backyard or surrounds. Drive carefully on the roads, especially at night, as this is the time that koalas usually move around. If we are to ensure the survival of the species, we need to start better managing our environment.