

# JR FACT FILE



BORN TO EXPLORE

## KOALA

*Phascolarctos cinereus*



### AT A GLANCE

#### Size:

Males weigh between 6.5 and 12 kilograms; females weigh 5-8kg. They are approximately 72-78 centimetres long.

#### Diet:

Koalas are herbivores (plant eaters), and their diet consists almost entirely eucalypt leaves. They only eat 50 of the 500+ species of eucalyptus.

#### Habitat:

Koalas inhabit a variety of woodland habitats across mainland Australia.

#### Life Span:

Lifespan varies considerably due to their local environment. They can live for fifteen years, although most survive for only three or four years.

#### What is a Koala?

Whilst the koala is bear-like, it is not related to any of the bear species found around the world. The koala's closest relatives are wombats. Like the wombat, koalas are a marsupial mammal which means the female koala carries the young in a pouch.

The koala is named from an ancient Aboriginal word meaning "no drink" as it receives over 90% of its water from eucalyptus leaves. Koalas only drink when they are sick or during times of drought when there is insufficient moisture in the leaves they eat.

The koala has a broad, flat head with large round hairy ears, a flat nose, a short, stocky body, short legs and large feet with very sharp claws. They are covered in thick ash-grey fur with white on their chest, forelimbs and rump. Koalas that live in the cooler southern parts of Australia have a thicker coat of fur.

Their bodies are rounded due to the capacity of their large intestines required to digest eucalyptus leaves.

Koalas spend twenty plus hours a day sleeping and resting due to the low amount of energy they obtain from their leafy diet.

They are generally more active at night and communicate using loud grunts and squeals.

#### Where Does a Koala Live?

Koalas live in forests from south-eastern South Australia, Victoria and through to Queensland. Koalas from

southern Australia are generally larger than those living in northern Australia.

They are generally found in open eucalypt forests. Within the inland part of their range koalas tend to live in trees surrounding rivers and lakes. During the warmest part of the day they will often rest in a fork of a shady tree. In cold and wet weather they may retreat to the thick foliage of low trees for protection.

#### What Does a Koala Eat?

Koalas are often called fussy eaters as they feed almost entirely on only fifty of the 500+ species of eucalypt leaves. An adult koala will eat up to one kilogram of leaves each night. At certain times of the year some eucalyptus leaves can be poisonous and it is thought koalas select suitable leaves by sniffing them first.

Different species of eucalypts grow in different parts of Australia, so a koala in Victoria would have a very different diet from one in Queensland. In Victoria, koalas feed primarily on species such as; Manna Gum (*Eucalyptus viminalis*), Messmate (*Eucalyptus obliqua*), Brown Stringybark (*Eucalyptus baxteri*) and Swamp Gum (*Eucalyptus ovata*).

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## FASCINATING FACTS:

- KOALAS SPEND 20 + HOURS EACH DAY SLEEPING AND RESTING DUE TO THE LOW AMOUNT OF ENERGY THEY OBTAIN FROM THEIR LEAFY DIET. IT'S NOT JUST LAZINESS!

## **A Koala's Family Life:**

Female koalas reach maturity and can breed at two years of age, males mature at three to four years. Spring is the peak breeding season. During this time young from the previous year are weaned by their mothers and male koalas bellow loudly to attract a mate.

Thirty six days after mating the female gives birth to a joey. The joey looks much like a pink jellybean as it is only 2cm long, is totally hairless and blind. It makes its way from the birth canal to the pouch on its own, relying on its well developed senses of smell and touch.

The joey has strong forelimbs and paws to help it through its mother's furred pouch. Once inside the pouch it attaches itself to one of the two teats which swells to fill its mouth, preventing the joey from being dislodged. Female koalas have a backwards facing pouch which contracts strong muscles at the pouch opening to prevent the joey from falling out.

The joey stays in the pouch for seven months, drinking only its mother's milk. It then graduates to riding on its mother's back and feeding on 'pap', which the mother produces in addition to milk, and eventually adds eucalyptus leaves to its diet. Pap is a soft form of faeces which is fed to the joey to provide it with the micro-organisms it needs to breakdown eucalypt leaves once

it leaves the pouch. The joey is weaned at twelve months and the mother is able to mate again.

Young female koalas usually stay in the vicinity of their mothers for a second year and some may establish a home range nearby. Males disperse from their mothers' range when they are two years old and may roam for two to three years before establishing a territory. Koalas are generally solitary animals, although they live in wider communities.

## **Threats:**

Whilst dogs, cats and dingoes are threats to koalas, joeys are more likely to fall prey to owls or eagles. Overall, the major threats to our koala populations include land clearing, the disease chlamydia and fatalities that occur from koalas crossing roads to reach food trees.

## **Where to spot a Koala in Victoria?**

Koalas live in many parks in Victoria including the Great Otway National Park, Mt Eccles National Park, Grampians National Park, Barmah National Park and French Island National Park.