

# KOALA



## ABQ BioPark Zoo

### Docent Information Guide



## Queensland Koala *Phascolarctos cinereus adustus*

**Order:** Diprotodontia

**Family:** Phascolarctidae

**Range or distribution:** Coastal regions of Eastern Australia.

**Habitat:** Scrublands and eucalyptus forests.

**Diet:** Feed on leaves of certain species of eucalyptus trees but only for a certain period each year when that particular tree is producing specific oils. Supplement their diet with wattle, tea tree and paper bark. There are 600 varieties of eucalyptus worldwide, 35 of which are eaten by koalas in captivity and 120 in the wild.

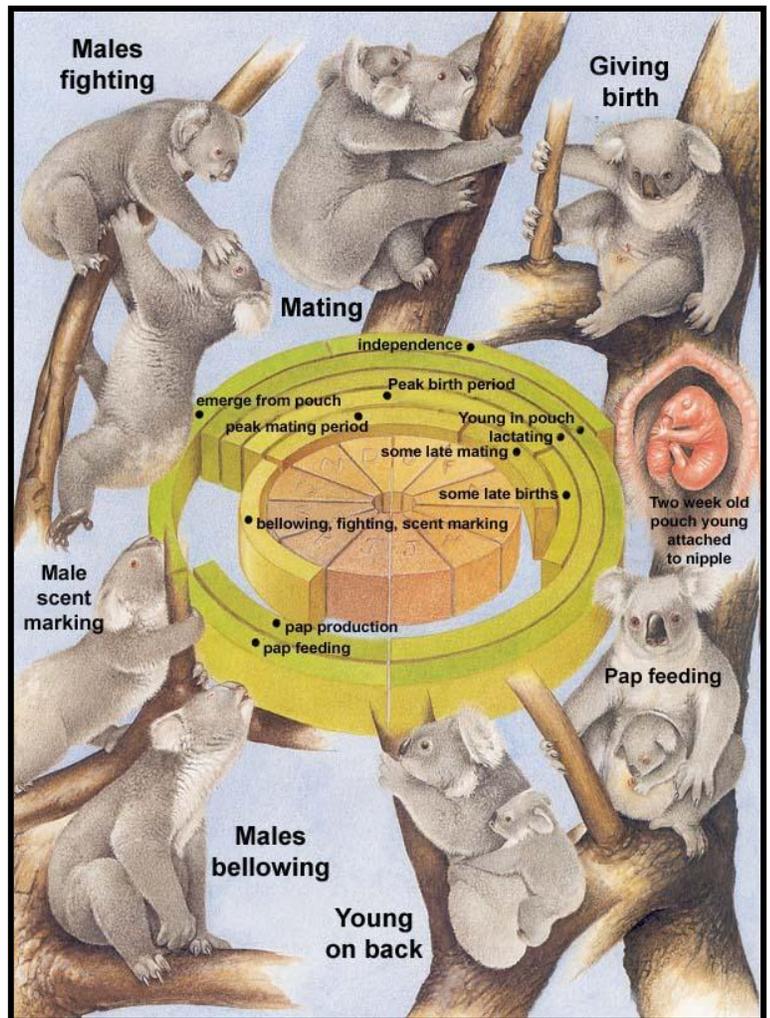
**Life span:** 13 years.

**Size:** Adult males average just over 6.5 kg (14lbs). Females can weigh 5 kg (11lbs). The average size for a Queensland Koala is about 12 kg (26 lbs). Queensland Koalas are relatively small compared to their sibling koalas that live within Victorian territory.

**Behavior:** Slow moving and sleep up to 20 hours a day due to their slow metabolic rate, an adaptation for a diet low in nutrition and for conserving energy. They are nocturnal and arboreal. They are usually solitary except during mating. Males are especially vocal during the summer breeding season. Sounds include bellowing, high pitched yelps, soft grunts, snarls, wails and screams.

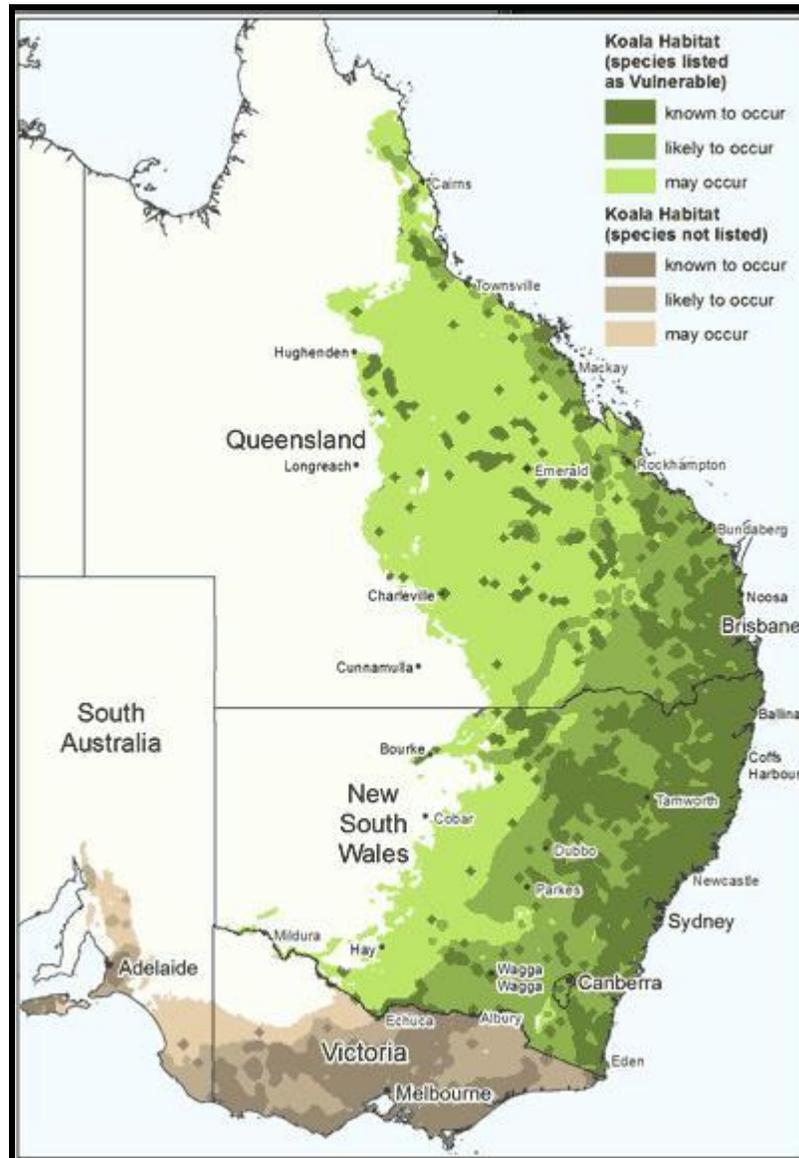
**Adaptations:** Thick fur for warmth. They have the ability to exist on low nutritional food (eucalyptus) which is toxic to most other animals. In order to do this, they have an elongated cecum which is part of the lower digestive track. This enables them to further break down the fibers in their food and pull out the maximum amount of nutrition. Males have a large chest gland; and females have a marsupial pouch which opens normally, but the majority of the pouch is above the opening (upside down).

**Reproduction:** Koalas are not bears; they are marsupials. Gestation is 25-35 days. At birth, the underdeveloped, 3/4 inch long, 1/5 oz. baby crawls from the birth canal to the mother's pouch where it attaches to a teat that swells to hold it in place. It nurses for 6 months while it continues to develop. The pouch is unusual as it opens from the bottom. The mother keeps it shut with



muscular control. The young depart the pouch for good at 9 months and travel on the mother's back until weaned at about 1 year old. After the baby leaves the pouch, it eats droppings from the mother which provide it with microorganisms needed to digest eucalyptus tree produce.

**Status:** The Australian government currently lists the koala as a priority species for conservation status assessment. Like many species, in some parts of Australia their habitat is declining and their numbers are down, but in other parts of Australia the koala population has expanded to the point that some need to be relocated to other areas lest they destroy their own habitat. The [IUCN](#) lists the species as "Least Concern".



## **QUICK FACTS**

- The scientific name comes from the Greek words 'phaskolos' meaning pouch, 'arktos' meaning bear, and the Latin word 'cinereus', which means ash-colored. Its Australian indigenous name is koobor which means 'does not drink water.' Its common name 'koala' is an aboriginal name from the Hawkesbury River district (near Sydney).
- Victorian Koalas are larger and have darker fur with brown coloring, and the fur is longer and thicker; these are adaptations to the cooler climate. The Queensland population is a lighter grey color, with more prominent light ventral coloring.
- The koala is adapted for movement in the trees, with long and strong digits and claws. The koala's hands have two 'thumbs', and their feet have a joined second and third digit with two claws used for grooming.
- Koalas are not bears. They are MARSUPIALS, which means that their young are born immature & they develop further in the safety of a pouch.
- Generally solitary
- Mostly nocturnal (inactive for most of the day)
- Males survive for up to 10-12 years and females 12-14 in the wild, but may survive for up to 24 years in captivity.
- There is a myth that koalas sleep a lot because they 'get drunk' on gum leaves. Fortunately, this is not correct! Most of their time is spent sleeping because it requires a lot of energy to digest their toxic, fibrous, low-nutrition diet and sleeping is the best way to conserve energy.
- Chlamydia is an organism which lives in the body tissues of most healthy koalas. In normal populations, we believe that Chlamydia may act as an inbuilt control mechanism to limit the population so that the trees are not over browsed, ensuring that only the strongest and fittest animals survive to breed.

## **CONSERVATION**

As of 2012, Koalas in the various Australian territories were listed as:

- Queensland, New South Wales, & Australian Capital Territory – Listed as "vulnerable".
- South Australia – classified as *rare* (although the population on [Kangaroo Island](#) is thriving).
- Victoria – The koala population in Victoria was considered *large and thriving*, according to an article which was last reviewed on 29 October 2007.<sup>[44]</sup> Unfortunately, the gene pool is very limited, which means that Victorian koalas are also at risk with environmental change.

## Threats:

- Habitat loss is the greatest problem facing koalas. The main reasons for this are land clearing, bush fires and diseases of the eucalypts, like 'dieback', which causes the trees to die.
- Australia has one of the highest land clearing rates in the world. Eighty percent of original koala habitat has already disappeared.
- Although koalas themselves are protected by law, around eighty percent of any remaining habitat occurs on privately owned land and almost none of that is protected by legislation.
- Rampant Chlamydia can make koalas sick or sterile, and is usually aggravated when they get stressed, such as when their habitat is destroyed and, as a result, they have to cope with the dangers of cars, dogs and lack of food.
- Before they were federally protected, koalas were hunted by the thousands.



1927 'Black August'

*When 600,000 Koalas were shot and skinned across Queensland*

## **WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP THE KOALA?**

- **Support breeding programs** by coming to visit koalas at you local zoo! Through the efforts of governments and zoos (like the ABQ BioPark!), healthy and genetically diverse koala populations are ensured.
- **Support eco-tourism.** Animals like the koala can be saved if their tourism value is used to help them coexist with human populations.
- **Promote habitat conservation** in all facets and help spread the word- Our Actions Matter!!
- Learn more about the koala: <http://www.ehp.qld.gov.au/wildlife/koalas/koala-ecology.html>