

Koalas

The koala is native to Australia. They are found in eucalyptus forests and woodlands. Wild koalas are found in the eastern states of Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. Koalas are often incorrectly called 'koala bears'. They are actually marsupials, which means they carry their young in a pouch. Koalas are closely related to the wombat, possum and kangaroo. A baby koala is called a joey. Joeys are born blind and earless. They resemble a pink jellybean. After giving birth, a female koala carries her baby in her pouch for about six months. The joey drink only its mother's milk while it grows and develops in its mother's pouch. Once strong enough, the young joey rides on its mother's back or clings to her belly for a further six months, only using the pouch to feed. At around one year old, the joey leaves its mother. The joey is a fully-grown koala by about four years old. On average, koalas live to ten or twelve years of age.

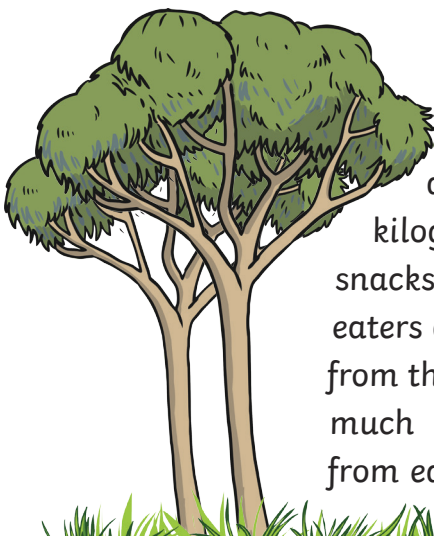


Appearance

Koalas have a thick coat of woolly, grey fur with a cream-coloured chest. They have a wide, rounded nose; small yellow eyes and large, fluffy ears. Koalas have sharp claws which they use to help them climb trees. They have five digits (fingers) on each front paw, with two of them acting like thumbs. This helps them to hold firmly onto the branches and to grip their food. Koalas use their back paws as grooming paws. They communicate with each other by making different noises such as clicking, squeaking or grunting. The most surprising is a sound like a loud snore called a bellow.

Diet

Koalas are **herbivores** (plant eaters). They are one of the only mammals which can survive on a diet of eucalyptus leaves. An adult koala can eat up to one kilogram of eucalyptus leaves each night. Koalas even store snacks of leaves in pouches in their cheeks. Koalas are fussy eaters and will choose the most nutritious and tastiest leaves from the trees where they live. Koalas do not need to consume much water. Instead, they get most of their moisture from eating eucalyptus leaves.



Eucalyptus leaves are tough and poisonous. Luckily, koalas have a long digestive system which allows them to break down the leaves. An organ called a **caecum** helps the koala to break down the leaves and remain unharmed by the poison. Koalas are nocturnal, which means they are awake at night and sleep during the day. Koalas sleep in the branches of trees for up to eighteen hours a day. Koalas need a lot of energy to digest the eucalyptus leaves. Sleeping is the best way to conserve their energy.

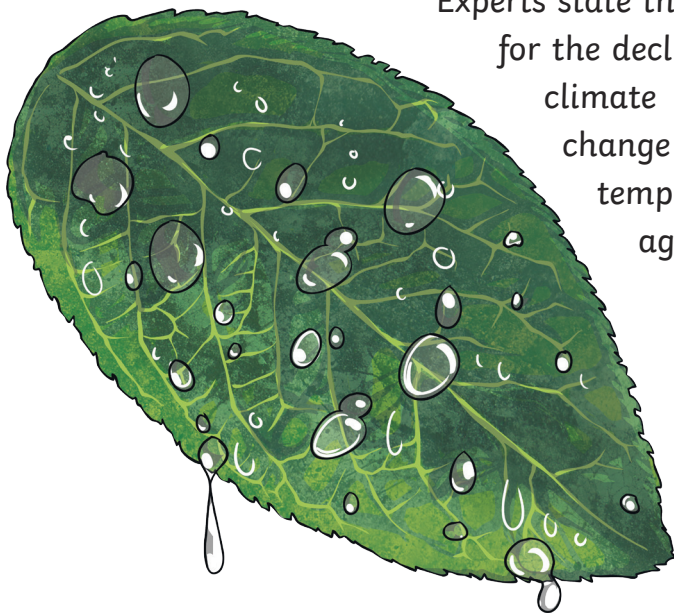


Are Koalas Endangered?

Koalas are very vulnerable creatures. Experts are now warning that koalas are **functionally extinct** in the wild. In Australia, conservation groups want the government to take action to protect the koala. The Australia Koala Foundation estimate that fewer than 80,000 koalas remain in the wild.

Did You Know...?

Functionally extinct means that the koala's population is so low that it will not be able to produce another generation.



Experts state that two main factors are responsible for the declining number of koalas in the wild: climate change and deforestation. Climate change is changing the weather and rising temperature of the Earth. Most scientists agree climate change is caused by human actions, such as burning fossil fuels. Recently, Australia has experienced heatwaves, resulting in little rainfall. This has caused many koalas to die of **dehydration**. This means they did not have enough water.

Deforestation is where a wide range of trees are cleared or destroyed. The eucalyptus forests and woodlands of Australia's east coast are disappearing quickly.

Around 80% of koala habitat has already been cleared construction of human homes. Conservation groups are seeking new laws to protect what is left of the koala's natural habitat.

Drought and forest fires has also resulted in the loss of the koala's natural habitat. Drought occurs when there is not enough rainfall. Forest fires are more common when the weather is very hot and dry. The loss of habitat has resulted in the koala population being scattered and separated by urban areas and farmland. It is estimated that as a result of the loss of their habitat, around 4000 koalas are killed each year by dogs and cars alone.



Questions

1. In which country would you find the koala?

2. What is a marsupial? What other animals are also marsupials?

3. Use the text to fill in the missing words.

Joeys are born _____ and _____. They resemble a pink _____.

4. How long does a joey remain in its mother's pouch? Tick one.

six months

one year

six years

5. Describe the appearance of a koala.

6. Koalas have five digits on each paw. Two of the digits act like thumbs. What do these help them with?

7. What is a herbivore?

8. Why do koalas not consume much water?

9. What are the two main factors which cause the loss of eucalyptus forest and woodlands?

Answers

1. In which country would you find the koala?

Koalas are native to Australia.

2. What is a marsupial? What other animals are also marsupials?

A marsupial is a mammal which carries its young in a pouch. Other marsupials include the wombat, possum and kangaroo.

3. Use the text to fill in the missing words.

Joeys are born **blind** and **earless**. They resemble a pink **jellybean**.

4. How long does a joey remain in its mother's pouch? Tick one.

six months

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5. Describe the appearance of a koala.

Koalas have a thick coat of woolly, grey fur with a cream-coloured chest. They have a wide, rounded nose; small yellow eyes and large, fluffy ears. Koalas have sharp claws which they use to help them climb trees. They have five digits on each front paw, with two of them acting like thumbs.

6. Koalas have five digits on each paw. Two of the digits act like thumbs. What do these help them with?

I think these two digits help the koala to hold firmly onto the branches and to grip their food.

7. What is a herbivore?

A herbivore is an animal which only eats plants.

8. Why do koalas not consume much water?

Koalas do not consume much water because they get most of their moisture from eating eucalyptus leaves.

9. What are the two main factors which cause the loss of eucalyptus forest and woodlands?

Climate change and deforestation are the main two factors which are causing the loss of eucalyptus forest and woodlands.