Koala

Phascolarctos cinereus

Endangered in NSW

Endangered nationally (Qld, NSW, ACT)



Photos © Peter Rowland



Asleep in a tree fork

SIZE
68–82 cm long, bigger in the south

FOOD
Only leaves, mostly of certain eucalypts

YOUNG
One joey, raised in its mother's pouch

SLEEP
Up to 18 hours a day, saving energy

Koalas close to home

South Coast koalas are rare and scattered: in forests near Bermagui and Eden, around the Shoalhaven Gorge and in Morton National Park. Just over the escarpment, the Southern Highlands has one of the largest koala populations in southern NSW, an estimated 3,000 or more.

The climate connection

Koalas get most of their water from gum leaves. In heatwaves and drought the leaves dry out, and koalas must climb down to search for water, where cars and dogs are a danger. A 2009 heatwave killed about a quarter of the koalas in Gunnedah, in north-western NSW.

A gut full of helpers

Gum leaves are tough and slightly poisonous. Koalas rely on bacteria in their gut to break them down, but a joey is not born with these helpers. It gets them by eating pap, a special soft poo from its mother, before it starts on leaves.



WONDER QUESTION

If a koala hardly ever drinks, where does its water come from?

Turn over for teacher notes

Teacher notes

Curriculum links (new NSW syllabuses, 2026 to 2027)

Stage	Outcome	Where the Koala fits
Early Stage 1	STe-SCI-01 (S&T K–6)	What a koala needs to survive: food, water, shelter and lots of sleep
Stage 2	ST2-SCI-01 (S&T K–6)	Habitat: feed trees, and safe paths to move between patches of forest
Stage 3	ST3-SCI-01 (S&T K–6)	Adaptations: gripping paws, pouch, gut bacteria; planting feed trees
Stage 4 (Year 8)	SC4-LIV-01 Living systems	Interactions: koala and gut microbes; disease, dogs and cars as threats
Stage 5 (Year 9)	SC5-ENV-01 Environmental sustainability	Effects of climate change on ecosystems: heatwaves and drought dry out leaves
Year 11 to 12	BI-12-03 Biology 11–12	Habitat fragmentation, wildlife corridors and genetic diversity

In the classroom

K–2

A koala's day

Make a 24-hour clock showing how a koala spends its day (up to 18 hours asleep), then one for a child. Talk about why a leaf diet means saving energy.

YEARS 3–6

Feed tree survey

Identify the eucalypts in the school grounds and check them against your area's koala feed tree list. Look for scratches on smooth trunks and droppings under trees, and map what you find.

YEARS 7–12

Water for koalas

Read the University of Sydney study of koalas using drinking stations in Gunnedah. Discuss whether water stations are a good way to help wildlife adapt to a hotter climate, and what else is needed.

Get outside

Look for scratch marks on smooth-barked gums and oval droppings at the base of trees. In spring, listen at night for the deep bellow of male koalas. Report injured koalas to WIRES on 1300 094 737.

First Nations perspectives

Through your local AECG or Land Council, invite knowledge holders to share how koalas are understood on Dharawal or Yuin Country. Dharawal people call the koala Garilwa. *[Local story, added with permission]*

Hope and action

In 2016, about 11,800 hectares of forest near Bermagui became the Murrah Flora Reserves, closing them to logging to protect the local koalas. In the Southern Highlands, a council project maps koala habitat and works to cut road deaths. Small things students and schools can do:

- Plant local koala feed trees
- Slow down in koala zones at night
- Keep dogs inside at night
- Report injured koalas to WIRES

Talking tip: lead with wonder and action rather than loss. A gum tree planted today could feed and shelter koalas for generations.

Scan for the full fact sheet: prpw.com.au/project/koala

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Sources: Rowland and Farrell, A Naturalist's Guide to the Mammals of Australia, 2nd edn; NSW Threatened Species Scientific Committee final determination (2022); Australian Government EPBC Act listing (2022); NSW Koala Strategy; Wingecarribee Shire Council; University of Sydney Water for Koalas research (Mella et al. 2019); NSW Natural Resources Commission (2021). Check curriculum links at curriculum.nsw.edu.au.