



PLATE 103

Characteristics

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KOALAS ARE WARM-BLOODED MAMMALS who belong to the family of marsupials with females exhibiting a young-bearing pouch opening toward its back. While Australia is known to have most of the world's marsupials—120 species—South and Central America have seventy-two varieties and North America has one: the Virginia opossum. This leads scientists to conclude that South American and Australian landmasses were connected in a distant past.

Modern-day koalas are indigenous to the East Coast of Australia, spanning southern Australia to Far North Queensland. Although they exist in eastern regions of Australia, their numbers are dwindling at an alarming rate—very few Australians have ever seen a koala in the wild. Fossil records suggest that there used to be at least twelve koala species living in the once-enormous rainforests of Australia, including in areas which are now desert.

The koala's scientific name, *phascolarctos cinereus*, is Latin for an “ash-gray bear with a pouch” and refers to the first koala of the Sydney area caught by original western settlers. Its variegated light- to medium-gray fur is typical for New South Wales koalas, unlike that of southern koalas which display a darker as well as thicker coat.

According to popular belief, the word koala was derived from an Aboriginal word meaning “no drink,” as koalas are described in indigenous legends as stealing water from the natives. As it is not quite clear which Aboriginal language the word came from, chances are it might have been derived from an early typographical error and seems to have been adopted from locals living near the Sydney area. Some of the actual names used for koalas by the natives were: *karbor*, *koolabun*, *koolewong*, *colah*, *koolah*, *colo*, and *cullawine*.

This is a compelling creature with a number of fascinating contradictions: cuddly in appearance, it sports awe-inspiring claws. Placidly contented, it is capable of making penetrating sounds that have made bewildered tourists run for their lives and have kept many people awake at night during mating season. Commonly slow-moving on the ground, it can pick up some speed when leaping on all fours. Softly round faces expose long and curved front incisors that contribute to a risible appearance when caught in a frightful yawn (p. 227). Masterfully adept at climbing, this creature's powerful front paws gently fold inward like a human infant's fingers when resting from an all-consuming climb. This posture is sometimes accompanied by a slight tilt of the head and an expression of goodwill.

KOALAS HAVE TWO OPPOSING THUMBS on each of their front paws. The additional thumb, along with a leathery, thick skin on the inside, is designed for a tight grip around tree branches. The black skin on the paw's underside yields a striking contrast to the lighter, furry outside. Each of the front paw's five digits is topped with a knife-sharp, curved talon. These strong nails act as helpful tools during the climbing process as they are capable of digging deeply into the bark for an extra-tight hold.

The hind paws have five digits on palms resembling the hands of a primate (human or ape), however exhibiting a wider, flatter, and shorter thumb than that of a primate. This short thumb does not have a nail. Koalas are the only non-primate creatures with distinctly unique fingerprints. Being amazingly sure-footed climbers, they manage to keep a safe hold even while they are sleeping in tree forks, as their strong muscles and keen sense of balance still

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