



P L A T E 3 6

Life Cycle

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KOALA MATING SEASON starts in the Australian spring, spanning from September through March. Females are sexually mature in their second year of life. Male koalas reach maturity after they are old enough to compete with rivaling males, which is usually after their second to fifth year.

The koala's mating call is famous. The male will grunt loudly while pointing his nose skyward, sounding similar to a donkey in the way he inhales and exhales while pushing out a deep sound reminiscent of a pig's grunt or long burp—except that it is much louder and can sometimes be heard for miles. It has also been likened to the sound of a starting motorcycle from a faraway distance. The call is used to set his territory and to attract females.

Koala babies are called "joeys." They are blind as well as deaf when born in an embryonic state typical for marsupial species. They are born after a 35-day gestation period, weighing less than half a gram. A newborn koala measures less than one inch (<2cm), or roughly the size of a small gummi bear.

It is believed to instinctually find its way to one of the two nipples in the mother's pouch via an extraordinary sense of smell with help of two determined forelegs. It takes around five minutes for the newborn to make it from birth canal into the pouch. Once the joey is attached to the nipple, the teat swells to prevent the joey from becoming dislodged from its food source. The joey stays locked-on to the nipple with its mouth for several months. Its grip is so tight that prying it off would cause it to bleed around its mouth area. The baby begins to occasionally poke its head out into the great new world at the age of twenty-two weeks (5.5 months) and will stay in the pouch until the age of six to seven months.

On rare occasions, mothers have a twin birth. The survival rate for twins in the wild is smaller as the pouch becomes too tight after only five months.

WHEN THE KOALA FIRST CLIMBS OUT of the pouch, it weighs about fourteen ounces (400g), is approximately eight inches (20cm) long, with shorter fur, little ears, over-sized nose, and proportionally larger eyes—all adding up to an impish expression. As the joey grows, the eyes and nose stop growing at the same rate as the rest of the body, and hair fills in to yield a thicker coat and large, fluffy ears. The appearance of baby koalas is evocative of live toys.

Once a joey reaches the age of twenty-two to thirty weeks (5 to 7.5 months), its mother develops a food to introduce the taste of eucalyptus and get the joey's stomach used to the bacteria it depends on for digestion. This new food, known as "pap feed," is a yellowish liquid containing partially digested eucalyptus leaves. The young will feed on its mother's milk for approximately one year. By the time the koala is already riding on the mother's belly, back, and head, it will begin to supplement its diet with eucalyptus leaves.

After eight months of age, the joey starts getting too big to go in and out of the pouch all the time. The youngster will occasionally stick its head in to feed. A joey at this age begins to show a marvel at the new surrounding world and sometimes jumps from tree limb to limb, bringing smiles to the faces of those who witness the improbable sight of a little ball of fur morphing into the shape of a leaping frog. The concentrated protein from its mother's milk helps to account for the higher energy level the animal still enjoys at this age.

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