



KOALAS

ZEN IN FUR

Edited by Joanne Ehrlich



"*Koalas: Zen in Fur* is a book to be treasured. It captures magnificently the beauty of a beloved Australian native species that delights and captivates animal lovers the world over. Each image compels us, more than words ever could, to do our utmost to ensure the koala's continued care and protection. By purchasing this book you will be assisting in this endeavor and sharing the dream of Steve Irwin, the original Wildlife Warrior."

—Michael Hornby, CEO
Australia Zoo Wildlife Warriors Worldwide Ltd

Drawn from what the American Library Association has named "the best collection of koala images available," *Koalas: Zen in Fur* consists of 320 mostly previously unpublished photographs accompanied by descriptions of Australia's most beloved native.

"Like a walk in the forest, the pages of this book bring us into the world of koalas. We see them at rest, at play, nurturing their young, dining on eucalyptus—most of all we are able to see the presence, groundedness, and openness in their expression.

"A welcome balance of facts, insights, and images brings an understanding of the nature and habits of koalas—but it goes much further. It awakens an emotional connection even for those of us who have never felt the softness of their fur or watched them revel in a meal of tender leaves.

"Most important, this book reminds us of our spiritual connection to the koala. In the directness of their gaze, the simplicity of their lives, and the gentleness of their actions we find a model for how and who we wish to be in the world."

—Jan Allegretti, Author
*The Complete Holistic Dog Book:
Home Health Care for Our Canine Companions*

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Koala Jo Publishing
San Mateo, California



PLATE 3

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PLATE 4

The Allure of Koalas

WHAT IS THE HOLD KOALAS HAVE on people worldwide? Photographs of koalas have been snapped ever since the first camera shutters sounded at the shores of Australia. Koala portraits have appeared on countless postcards and daguerreotypes since then.

Perhaps Photographer Daniel Dy summed up the mystery with a few words when he said, “I was originally drawn to the koala simply because of its cuteness. Observing it more carefully, I couldn’t help but notice how contented it seemed, innocently sleeping on a tree branch without a care in the world.”

Is it possible that humans are riveted by its seeming refusal to be bothered by anything? How can it be so blasé a creature? Is it because of its serenity that it is so appealing?

As if they took notice of our fascination, koalas will occasionally humor us by locking their eyes with ours without batting an eyelash for what seems to be an eternity, engaging in a seemingly knowing interchange while concurrently displaying an expression of goodwill. Koalas often appear to hold a smile —not unlike the Mona Lisa, whose enigma stems from the fact that we are not certain whether she smiles or only appears to.

FOR HUMANS who have fallen in love with the koala, there is no single word to accurately describe it. People have called it wide-eyed, kind, genial, non-offensive, gentle, serene, tranquil, knowing, delightful, modest, enchanting, wise, unobnoxious, guileless, inculpable, innocent, angelic, blameless, bashful, droll, primordial, farcical, funny-looking, impish, whimsical, mischievous, humanoid, eternal, dainty, dreamy, ancient, and majestic.

No other living being on earth more resembles a teddy bear, and strangely, this most affable creature is the farthest thing from being a bear. Even though it is sometimes still called a “native bear” even by Australians themselves, it’s a pouch-bearing marsupial which places it in a completely different zoological family from real bears.

Adored by people around the globe, the koala is the iconoclastic mascot of countless businesses worldwide. It is unquestionably deserving of its popularity, one of Australia’s most precious ambassadors to the rest of the world, as well as a link to the island continent’s primordial past when animals coexisted in a predator-free and undisturbed paradise-haven.

KOALAS ARE NATURALLY-BORN ZEN MASTERS. The trees they dwell in provide everything—home, food, and drink. They remind us humans that our basic needs are few if we can manage to steer clear of our many daily concerns. Perhaps it is not a coincidence, that cultures marked by values of high achievement, such as Japan, England, Germany, and the United States, are known to be most attracted to koalas. This observation comes first-hand. It seems as though koalas utter a gentle whisper that can only be heard by our true selves, rousing our soul’s essential desire to take time-out. It asks us to embrace reality in its purest form and to become better masters of our own lives; some might even suggest, “to get in touch with a koala within.” Koalas don’t stand in judgement of us. The special tenderness of a koala’s embrace, the apparent love shared by a mother koala and its reposing child, its seeming smile of contentment, all make us want to capture a little bit of that koala power to keep for ourselves.

LIKE HIMALAYAN MONKS who are helped by people from around the globe, koalas invoke our protective instinct, making us feel good about being good, as though we have noticed our conscience for the very first time. Reflected in their trusting eyes, one feels an inkling that to give is better than to receive and that we are all connected. By disconnecting, we may not only harm ourselves, but the flow of all things.

Australian Aboriginal legends regarded koalas as tree-dwelling gods that can decide when it rains while looking down on humans with congenial grace if we decide to live in harmony with them. Myths suggested, that if we disrespect koalas, the earth will be plunged into drought. Aboriginal lore is filled with many stories in which koalas teach humans important life-lessons. Aborigines referred to koalas as reincarnated spirits of little children, due in part to the whimpering sounds they make when in a state of distress. Like American Indians who honored the buffaloes they hunted, Australian Aborigines had a reverential respect for koalas even though they doubled as their food source. Although eating of their meat was allowed, it was not permitted to use their skins as was done with other animals. Some Aboriginal tribes called them *colo*, which literally translates to “our little favorite.”

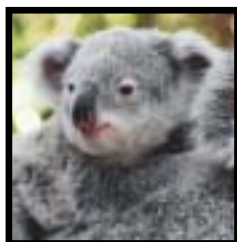
Because of the lack of natural predators in their distant past, koalas have underdeveloped adrenal glands and therefore did not develop the same fight-or-flight response mechanisms very common to most other animals. Koalas’ gentle disposition has made them vulnerable to modern dangers and also made them one of the most spellbinding creatures. Their unblinking stare, which is reminiscent of a newborn child, has helped raise awareness among

modern-day humans that the world would not be the same without koalas, and, that we all share in the responsibility of preserving a future for these kindly earth-spirits.

IT IS MY HOPE that this book will shine a small light on the dignity and personality of this furry little animal experienced first-hand by very few people outside as well as inside of Australian borders. I have placed together related frames taken by individual photographers, intending to capture a sense of flow as though moving pictures have been laid out in streaming slow motion, thereby making the images come alive in some small way. My second intention throughout was to include images that indicate a rapport between photographer and subject, allowing the feeling of the koala's famous gaze to be shared with people who have never seen one. A third guiding motive for the selection of photographs was to depict this creature's unusual nature and inherent grace that has captivated so many people.

The visual attributes of the photographs vary. Photos were taken in different lighting situations. Differences are compounded by the countless technical variables of individual cameras, such as film speed and -size, aperture settings, depth, and digital- versus traditional camera use—to name a few.

My wish is, that this selection of images from talented photographers from around the globe can help you come to your own conclusion about what attracts us to this phenomenal creature "without a care in the world."



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Mike Larder | Australia







PLATE 35

Life Cycle

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 gummy 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.



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