

Koalas

With the rapid rate of development, infrastructure and population growth in South East Queensland (SEQ) over the last few decades, Koalas and their habitat have severely declined.



Open eucalypt woodland can provide suitable habitat for Koalas.

Most of the essential habitat for Koalas in Southern Queensland is on private land, with Land for Wildlife property owners having an important role to play in Koala conservation. This Note provides information on Koala ecology, habitat requirements and factors that threaten their survival.

Koalas were once plentiful in Queensland but suffered major declines due to the fur trade from the late 1870s to the early 1930s. After the 1930s, Koala numbers began to increase. Koalas in the South East Queensland bioregion are now listed as 'vulnerable' under the Queensland *Nature Conservation Act 1992*. Koalas continue to be found throughout Southern Queensland wherever suitable eucalypt dominated habitat exists.

Indigenous names for Koalas differ between language groups and dialects. The name 'Koala' comes from the Gubbi Gubbi language (north of Brisbane) with the Waka Waka people (west of Brisbane) referring to Koalas as 'go-alas'.

Diet

Koalas are very specific in their dietary requirements. Koalas prefer to eat only a small percentage of the 600 eucalypt (gum) species in Australia. Eucalypt leaves contain very strong chemical compounds that are poisonous to most animals. The leaves are also very leathery and low in nutritional value. Koalas are able to process eucalypt leaves due to their ability to retain food within their digestive system for a relatively long period of time. Koalas acquire most of their moisture from fresh, new eucalypt leaves and water on wet leaves, which enables them to survive without drinking water.

The following table lists some native Koala food trees, the planting of which may encourage Koalas to inhabit your property.

With suitable habitat you may be fortunate to have a Koala visit your property.



Koala food trees in South East Queensland (SEQ)	
Common name	Scientific name
Queensland Blue Gum / Forest Red Gum	<i>Eucalyptus tereticornis</i>
Sydney Blue Gum / Blue Gum	<i>Eucalyptus saligna</i>
Swamp Mahogany	<i>Eucalyptus robusta</i>
Pink Bloodwood	<i>Corymbia intermedia</i>
Spotted Gum	<i>Corymbia citriodora</i> spp. <i>variegata</i>
Flooded Gum / Rose Gum	<i>Eucalyptus grandis</i>
Red Mahogany / Red Stringybark	<i>Eucalyptus resinifera</i>
Grey Gum	<i>Eucalyptus major</i>
Small-fruited Grey Gum	<i>Eucalyptus propinqua</i>
Gum-topped Box / Grey Box	<i>Eucalyptus moluccana</i>
Tallowwood	<i>Eucalyptus microcorys</i>
Scribbly Gum	<i>Eucalyptus racemosa</i>
Narrow-leaved Grey Gum / Narrow-leaved Red Gum	<i>Eucalyptus seeana</i>
Dunn's White Gum	<i>Eucalyptus dunnii</i>
Narrow-leaved Ironbark	<i>Eucalyptus crebra</i>
Grey Ironbark	<i>Eucalyptus siderophloia</i>
Blackbutt	<i>Eucalyptus pilularis</i>
Brushbox	<i>Lophostemon confertus</i>
Broad-leaved Paperbark	<i>Melaleuca quinquenervia</i>

Koala food trees in South Western Queensland	
Common name	Scientific name
River Red Gum	<i>Eucalyptus camaldulensis</i>
Poplar Box	<i>Eucalyptus populnea</i>
Mountain Yapunya	<i>Eucalyptus thozetiana</i>
Dirty Gum	<i>Eucalyptus chloroclada</i>
Pilliga Box	<i>Eucalyptus pilligaensis</i>
White Cypress	<i>Callitris glaucophylla</i> is an important shelter tree

Territory

Koalas are not social and spend most of their time alone. Males are territorial and dominant males will chase out rival males. Stable breeding groups are comprised of one dominant male and several females. Young Koalas are forced out of their parent's territory and must find their own. This behaviour means that areas of Koala habitat need to be large enough and well connected to support breeding populations of multiple family groups. The size required by each family group is variable and depends on tree density, food quality and vegetation type.

Breeding

The breeding season for Koalas runs roughly from September to March. During this season, male Koalas may be heard calling for mates or protecting territories. Male Koalas have deep, grunting calls with female Koalas calling in high-pitched wails. Females are not reproductively mature until they are between three and four years of age. They usually produce only one offspring each year although some produce offspring only every two or three years. The average female Koala's life span is about 12 years.

Threats

The three main threats to Koalas in SEQ are habitat clearing, vehicle strikes and dog attacks in that order. Koala habitat has been significantly reduced by land clearing and is now severely fragmented. Associated with this is increased disturbance by humans, injury or death from traffic and dogs, and increased competition for food and territory. According to the Dept. of Environment and Resource Management, about 300 Koalas are killed each year by dogs in SEQ. Stress caused by the above-mentioned threats has made Koalas more susceptible to diseases, such as *Chlamydia*, which has seriously affected Koala populations. *Chlamydia* and associated diseases can cause blindness, pneumonia, urinary tract infections, reproductive tract infections and ultimately, female infertility.





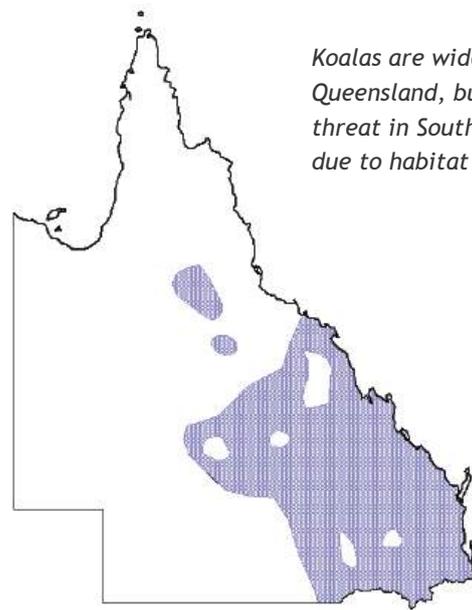
*Many Koalas die on Queensland roads each year.
Photo by Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service.*

A sick, injured or orphaned Koala:

- Has red, swollen infected or crusty eyes.
- Has fur loss around eyes, face or body.
- Has discharge from mouth, ears, eyes or cloaca.
- Has a brown stained rump, dry brown or matted fur.
- Has an unpleasant smell.
- Is found low to the ground or on the ground other than when moving between trees.
- Has an abnormal or uneven gait and are often disorientated including walking in circles.
- Has poor body condition.
- Can be smaller than a soccer ball when curled up and may be an orphan. This should be assessed by an experienced Koala rehabilitator.
- May be sitting on the ground and is unresponsive to what is happening around it.

A healthy Koala:

- Has a thick coat.
- Responds when startled and moves and climbs well.
- Spends most of its time high in trees.
- Has bright alert eyes and a rounded, full belly.
- Has no discharge from eyes, nose, mouth, ears or cloaca.
- Has a scent that is not unpleasant.
- Will bite and scratch if handled by humans.



Koalas are widespread in Queensland, but are under threat in South East Queensland due to habitat loss.



*Red, swollen, infected or crusty eyes or fur loss around eyes, face or body are all signs of a sick Koala.
Photo by Gold Coast City Council.*

Who to contact if you find a sick, orphaned, injured or dead Koala

- 🐾 Daisy Hill Koala Centre, 3299 1032
- 🐾 Moreton Bay Koala Rescue, 0401 080 333 (24 hrs)
- 🐾 Wildlife Volunteer Association Inc (WILVOS), 5441 6200 (24 hrs)
- 🐾 Australian Wildlife Hospital, 1300 369 652
- 🐾 Wildcare Australia, 5527 2444
- 🐾 Dept. of Environment and Resource Management
Wildlife Hotline, 1300 130 372
- 🐾 RSPCA Animal Ambulance, 1300 852 188
- 🐾 Your local wildlife carer group

What you can do

- ✓ Protect existing Koala habitat.
- ✓ Plant Koala food trees, full species lists are available from your Land for Wildlife Officer.
- ✓ Drive slowly and carefully in Koala habitat. Look out for Koalas crossing roads at dawn and dusk, especially during the spring breeding season.
- ✓ Restrain your pets, particularly at night.
- ✓ If you live in a Koala habitat area and have a pool, tie a rope around the fence and trail it into the water so that if a Koala gets in, it can pull itself out.
- ✓ Attend a Koala education day at the Daisy Hill Koala Centre near Brisbane.

References and further reading

Australian Koala Foundation, www.savethekoala.com

EPA (2005) *Nature Conservation, Koala Conservation Plan (Draft)*, Queensland Government Brisbane.

Land for Wildlife Note G5 - Responsible Pet Ownership.

Land for Wildlife Note V2 - Natural Regeneration.

Land for Wildlife Note V3 - Revegetation Principles.

Land for Wildlife Note V4 - Revegetation Practicalities.

Lone Pine Sanctuary (2007) *The Koala, Information Sheet*, www.koala.net/download/koala.pdf

The Department of Environment and Resource Management website has a number of good fact sheets including *Koalas and Dogs* and *Koalas and Cars*, which can be downloaded from www.derm.qld.gov.au/wildlife-ecosystems/wildlife/koalas/koala_information.html or obtained by contacting your Land for Wildlife Officer.

www.thekoala.com/koala (excellent reference with information compiled from a number of sources).



*Koala scats have a distinctive shape and smell strongly of eucalyptus if broken.
Photo by Gold Coast City Council.*



*Urban encroachment is a major contributor to habitat loss and threatens Koala survival in South East Queensland.
Photo by Gold Coast City Council.*

Land for Wildlife is a voluntary program that encourages and assists landholders to provide habitat for wildlife on their properties. For more information about Land for Wildlife South East Queensland, or to download *Land for Wildlife Notes* free of charge, visit www.lfwseq.com.au

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