

Follow That Koala!

Scientists track koalas to learn more about the animals and their environment.

By Chris Jozefowicz

Tick. Tick. Tick. Holding an antenna above my head, I'm trying to find a clear radio signal.

Beep. Beep. Beep. I'm getting closer.

Ping! Ping! Ping! That's it! "I'm getting a radio signal up and to the right," I tell my team.

Up the hill we go until we find our target—a gray koala named Abby nestled in a tree. Abby lives in a forest on St. Bees Island, 19 miles off the northeastern coast of Australia.

I am one of eight volunteers visiting this tropical island. We have joined a research team whose members hope to find ways to protect koalas throughout Australia.

Koala Country



Koalas are pictured everywhere in Australia—on cleaning products, on boxes of chocolate, on sports team jerseys. Yet, the animals are found only in isolated pockets up and down the east coast.

Koalas were once found throughout the entire range, but farmers cut down many of the forests where koalas lived. Hunters also killed the animals for their fur. By the early 1900s, "koalas were basically shot out of south Australia," says team leader and **ecologist** Bill Ellis.

An ecologist is a scientist who studies the relationships among living things and their environments.

More Leaves, Please

"Here she is!" yells Jane Stanfield, one of the volunteers, when she spots Abby. Abby is perched in a blue gum, a type of eucalyptus (yoo-kuh-LIP-tuhss) tree. The koalas on St. Bees live and sleep in the trees. Koalas eat a steady diet of eucalyptus leaves—their main source of food.

Although koalas can walk on the ground, they are better suited for life in the **canopy**, the high cover of branches and leaves in a forest. Whenever we find one of the furry leaf eaters, we collect information about the trees in the area. We measure how tall and how fat the trees are. Then we put tags on their trunks so we know they've been recorded.

Tumbling Down



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A few days after tracking Abby, our team encounters more koalas, including one named Yellow. Yellow has a baby, called a **joey**, in her pouch.

We plan to capture the two and give them a quick checkup. My teammates use a long aluminum pole to shake the tree branches on which Yellow sits. "We're going to bring her straight down," says Ellis.

Yellow tumbles into a plastic sheet we hold under the tree, and we gently prod her into the sack. Ellis measures and checks both mom and baby to ensure that they're healthy.

Goat Trouble?

What has Ellis's research taught him so far? Compared with koalas in other areas, the St. Bees koala population seems to be healthy. Yet Ellis wonders whether the koalas on St. Bees could be headed for hard times. The island is overrun with wild goats. Ellis thinks the goats are eating the small blue gum trees.

Without those trees, koalas will run out of food in the future. Ellis hopes more research will help him understand how to protect the blue gums—and the koalas that depend on them.

Did You Know?

Koalas are not bears.

They are **marsupials** (mahr- SOO-pee-uhlz). A marsupial is an animal that typically has a pouch in which to carry its young.

Koalas live only in eastern Australia.

They spend most of their time in eucalyptus trees.

Talk about picky eaters!

A koala eats about 2½ pounds of eucalyptus leaves each day. Koalas eat so many leaves that they often smell like eucalyptus cough drops.

Do not disturb while sleeping.

Eucalyptus leaves are not very nutritious. As a result, koalas spend up to 18 hours a day sleeping. That helps them store up energy.

How Koalas Are Tracked and Tagged

Bill Ellis shakes the branches of a tree where a koala named Yellow rests.

As volunteers hold a plastic sheet to catch Yellow, Ellis gently pushes her into a sack.

Volunteers hold Yellow in the sack as they adjust a radio collar around her neck. The radio collar will help scientists track her. They also place a colored tag in her ear to help tell her apart from other koalas on St. Bees Island.