

# **BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS**

## **Kangaroos – an Australian icon**

The kangaroo is one of Australia's most famous animals and has become somewhat of an Australian icon. The kangaroo features on some Australian coins, the Australian coat of arms and is used as part of a logo for many Australian companies including national airline Qantas. While numbers of kangaroos are declining for many species, they are still considered a pest in many areas of Australia. Kangaroos are hunted in many places of the Australian outback and kangaroo meat is now used for dishes in many Australian restaurants and their hides are used for clothing and Australian souvenir products.

## **Species of kangaroos**

Kangaroos come from the macropod (Latin for "big toe") family. The term kangaroo is a generic term for any one of several species from this family – the grey kangaroo and red kangaroo are used in the case and are examples of this. The other animals referred to in this case, the red necked wallaby, swamp wallaby and wallaroo, all come from a group of species generically called wallabies. While there are technical differences between wallabies and kangaroos, primarily their size and social habits, the term "kangaroo" will be used in this task to refer to any of these five species.

Macropods all come from a subclass of mammals known as marsupials. Marsupials are known for the female raising its infant, known as a *joey*, in a pouch. Fully grown kangaroos can stand anywhere from 1 – 2 metres tall depending on the species and weigh up to 80kg.

## **Habitat, social lives and feeding**

Kangaroos live in most areas of the Australian outback. They prefer areas that contain trees for shelter during the hot days and grassy plains for feeding. They are also found in very limited numbers in New Zealand, New Guinea and Hawaii. Most species of kangaroos are nocturnal, feeding during the cooler evenings and night while finding shade to rest in during the middle of the day when it can get very hot in the Australian outback. They are herbivores, generally feeding on grasses, leaves and twigs. Most species of kangaroos live in families of 7 – 10. Wallabies are generally known for living solitary lives.

## **Movement**

Kangaroos move around the wide expanses of the Australian outback by using their strong hind legs to hop or jump, often several metres in a single bound. Comfortable travelling pace for most kangaroo species is around 20km/h while speeds of up to 70km/h have been recorded. Given the size and speed at which a kangaroo can travel, collisions with cars are a regular occurrence and serious concern in the Australian outback. Kangaroos wondering near roads are often blinded by head lights or startled by engine noises and become stranded in front of cars. This collision will often kill

the kangaroo and do serious damage to the car. The scenario presented in this case of a mother kangaroo killed by a car with a joey in its pouch is a very common scenario on outback roads in Australia.

### **Reproduction of kangaroos**

Kangaroos are born after a very short gestation period – approximately 30 days. At this stage the joey is very underdeveloped and must immediately pull itself unaided up through the mother's fur and climb into the pouch (as shown on video). A teat inside the pouch will provide milk to the joey, its sole source of nutrition for approximately the 8 – 10 months. As the joey develops within the pouch and eventually starts to venture outside, the mother's body will automatically regulate the composition of the milk the joey feeds on. It is possible for a mother to provide for two joeys of different ages by having two teats providing different milk at the same time. The change of powder indicated in the feeding tables during this case provides the necessary changes of composition in formula the growing joey requires.

### **Further reading**

For more information for students or teachers on kangaroos or wallabies, the following websites may be of use –

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kangaroo>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wallaby>

<http://teachit.acreekps.vic.edu.au/animals/marsupialshomepage.htm>

<http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/trade-use/wild-harvest/kangaroo/biology.html>

<http://www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au/npws.nsf/Content/Kangaroos+and+wallabies>

<http://koalaexpress.com.au/kangaroo%20facts.htm>

[http://www.dierinbeeld.nl/animal\\_files/mammals/kangaroo/index.html](http://www.dierinbeeld.nl/animal_files/mammals/kangaroo/index.html)

<http://www.dfat.gov.au/facts/kangaroos.html>

[http://www.panda.org/news\\_facts/education/middle\\_school/species/herbivores/kangaroo\\_intro/index.cfm](http://www.panda.org/news_facts/education/middle_school/species/herbivores/kangaroo_intro/index.cfm)

<http://www.crystalinks.com/kangaroos.html>

The following sites provide more details on the feeding products that can be used for an orphaned joey (and other animals) –

<http://www.wombaroo.com.au>

<http://www.wombaroo.com>