

## Travel

# What are you looking at?

If you're journeying down under, chances are good it's an amazing world of wildlife

BY BETH PARKS  
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

It was only mid-morning in Kuranda, Australia, but the temperature was already more than 100 F. But I had one thought in mind, to snuggle up to a koala, and I wasn't about to let anything get in my way.

If you want to cuddle a koala, Kuranda Village in tropical North Queensland is the place to go. Be sure to get there early in the day, before the crowds arrive, and head straight for Koala Gardens. This is one of the few facilities in the world that will actually let you hold a live koala. A professional photographer will be on hand to take your picture as a rotund, fuzzy marsupial embraces you.

Koalas are every bit as endearing as you might imagine, but they are just one of the wildlife species you'll find at the Kuranda Wildlife Park. You can get up close and personal with kangaroos, wallabies, freshwater crocodiles, echidnas, wombats, flying foxes, and a host of other animals you've probably only read about.

If you prefer feathered creatures, Kuranda's Birdworld houses Australia's largest collection of free-flying birds. Brilliantly colored macaws and other tropical fliers will land on your shoulders and eat from your hand. Look for black swans, ostrich-like emus, dazzling regent bowerbirds, and 6-foot-tall cassowaries with neon blue heads and three-toed feet with a dagger-like middle claw.

Butterflies are another major attraction at Kuranda. The Australian Butterfly Sanctuary features more than 1,500 butterflies native to the local area, and they fly freely in a lush tropical enclosure replete with a running stream. Wear something bright, preferably red or yellow, if you want to increase your chances of having them land on you.

For those who like reptiles, lizards abound in the park. There's even a walk-through snake enclosure, the first of its kind in Australia.

After you see the freshwater crocs at Kuranda, check out their saltwater counterparts in the Northern Territory near Kakadu National Park and the city of Darwin. Although some 80,000 "salties" live in northern Australia, they tend to be secretive and you're not likely to see them in the



An emu pants in the midday heat of Australia's Northern Territory.

BETH PARKS PHOTOS

wild.

A "Jumping Crocodile Cruise" on the Adelaide River remedies that. Crewmen dangle hunks of pork over the water to entice hungry crocs to swim alongside the boat, and the reptiles leap almost completely out of the water to snag the meat.

You'll see plenty of birds, including sea eagles and jacanas, during your cruise on the Adelaide River. Locals tend to call jacanas "Jesus birds" because their superlong toes allow them to walk across floating vegetation in a way that makes them appear to be walking on water. You may also see wild pigs or buffalo wallowing in the marshy floodplains along the river.

For spectacular arrays of fish in Australia, nothing beats the Great Barrier Reef. Take a day cruise from Port Douglas aboard a Quicksilver wave-piercing catamaran to Agincourt Reef at the outer edge near the continental shelf. You can dive or snorkel along the ribbon reef, but be sure to wear a Lycra suit provided on board to avoid dangerous and painful jellyfish stings.

If you prefer to stay dry while watching the fish, take a ride around the reef in a semi-submersible vessel. Be warned, though, that the wave



A koala rests in a eucalyptus tree on Phillip Island near Melbourne.

## If you go...

If you want to see all the critters I've mentioned, consider taking an organized tour through Australia. I went on Trafalgar's Great Australian and New Zealand Adventure, a 26-day jaunt that I booked through [affordabletours.com](http://affordabletours.com). You can speak directly with a tour specialist by calling 1-800-935-2620. As with any tour of this nature the price will vary with the tour company, the number of days, the time of year, and the amenities. Specialty side trips, such as the ones I took to see wildlife, usually come at an added cost.

action might make you a bit seasick. You can also watch divers feed fish from an underwater observatory or take a helicopter ride right from the dive platform.

Landlubbers should skip the Great Barrier Reef altogether and head directly to the Sydney Aquarium in New South Wales. This aquarium

sits at the edge of Darling Harbour, not far from the Sydney Opera House, and is one of the finest in the world. A transparent tunnel makes you feel as if you're walking right through the water: Sharks, rays and an astounding array of fish glide by your sides and over your head, almost close enough to touch.

Perhaps my favorite critter at the Sydney aquarium was the duck-bill platypus. An egg-laying mammal about half the size of a housecat, this strange little aquatic creature has a sensitive rubbery bill, partially webbed hind feet and a tail that looks a bit like a beaver's. Although I didn't see one in the wild, platypus (yes, platypus or platypuses is the correct plural) normally live in the rivers and streams of Australia's deciduous forests.

Kangaroos are the animals commonly associated with Australia, and you'll certainly see a lot of them if you do much driving. They can be quite a hazard on the road, especially at night. You'll find red kangaroos in the hot, dry interior plains and woodlands. Look in the wetter eastern, southern and western coastal areas for gray kangaroos.

If you have a hard time distinguishing between kangaroos and wallabies, remember that wallabies are the smaller of the two.

Penguins may not come to mind when you think of Australia, but you can find lots of them on Phillip Island

near the city of Melbourne in the southern state of Victoria. Once called "Fairy Penguins," they're now officially known as Little Penguins.

Little Penguins are the smallest of the world's 17 species, standing less than 16 inches tall and weighing slightly over two pounds. A boardwalk takes you right through the dunes where the colonies nest, and it's not unusual for a bird to be sticking its head out from a burrow that is mere inches from your feet.

We started with koalas, so let's end with those cuddly creatures. The Koala Conservation Centre on Phillip Island provides an outstanding opportunity to see koalas in their natural habitat. The Centre maintains a eucalyptus forest with a treetop boardwalk for close viewing and even marks the trees where the koalas like to hang out.

Koalas move sluggishly and tend to sleep between 18 and 20 hours a day, so you'll probably have excellent luck photographing them at close range. Look for them dozing in the crook of a tree or munching quietly on a leafy snack.

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