

Koala release site checklist

Guiding volunteers in applying Standards 10.2 and 10.3 of the Code of Practice for injured, sick and orphaned koalas.

Koalas must be returned to their rescue location wherever possible. Research shows that koalas moved even short distances may display abnormal dispersal behaviour while trying to re-establish a home range or relocate

1. Pre-release preparation

Determine the koala's risk profile

My koala is:

- Young male
- Young female
- Mature breeding female
- Mature breeding male
- Post-breeding male
- Post-breeding female.

Time spent in care

- Less than 7 days
- 7–30 days
- More than 30 days (extended care)
- Raised in care from joey (extended care).

Why this matters

Adult koalas generally have high site fidelity and established home ranges within a colony. Higher-risk individuals (e.g. young males, breeding males or koalas in extended care) may show increased roaming or social conflict after release.

2. Assess release site suitability

Evidence of other koalas

I have confirmed that koalas are using the area:

- Koala scats present
- Tree scratches or markings
- Koalas visually observed (local knowledge or recent sightings)
- Koala vocalisations heard.

Local koala population assessment

I have assessed the local population by:

- Checking nearby trees for koalas
- Observing the condition of nearby koalas where possible (e.g. no signs of koalas with wet bottom indicating chlamydia)
- Considering social hierarchy and territorial boundaries
- Identifying dominant males (e.g. vocalising or repeatedly present).

Be cautious when releasing young or adult male koalas. Where possible, select a release location on the periphery of an established koala population, away from the core territory of dominant males.

Habitat suitability

I have assessed the broader habitat and confirmed that:

- There is connectivity to other suitable habitat if the koala moves away
- Tree canopy or stepping-stone connectivity is present
- Vegetation quality around the surrounding site is suitable
- The habitat supports a range of climatic variation (shade, shelter, breeze, water availability and sun exposure for basking in winter/cold conditions)
- No major barriers (e.g. highways without fauna crossings)

- Land tenure is secure (no planned clearing or development)
- If near farmland, adequate tree connectivity exists to reduce risk from cattle and livestock.

Tree selection at the release site

I have assessed the release tree and confirmed that:

- Tree size is appropriate for the size of the koala
- Tree is large enough to provide food and shelter
- Lower limb branches are present for climbing
- Food quality is adequate (healthy foliage and evidence of new leaf growth)
- The tree is not severely impacted by insect damage or defoliation
- Bark type suited to koala abilities observed in care (e.g. smooth or rough bark)
- The tree is not currently occupied by another koala (noting limited co-existence may occur, particularly among females).

3. Soft-release support

Determine whether soft-release support is required:

- I have assessed whether the koala requires soft-release support.

Soft release must be provided for koalas in care for more than 30 days that have not been held in pre-release enclosures, and should be considered for other koalas that may require additional support.

Soft-release setup

I will:

- Select a site with low public access (away from tracks, roads, and high-use areas)
- Ensure the site is suitable for temporary fencing
- Ensure minimal canopy overlap to prevent easy escape
- Ensure safe monitoring access without causing disturbance.

During soft release support, I will:

- Replenish with fresh browse and water daily (placed at various heights)
- Monitor koala behaviour daily, using remote cameras where possible
- Monitor leaf browsed and scat quality and quantity
- Plan to provide soft-release support for up to 7–10 days

- Re-assess the site and intervene if the koala shows:
 - bleating
 - repeated ground use
 - persistent screaming or squealing
- Remove fencing once the koala demonstrates adequate fitness levels (e.g. climbing skills) and normal behaviour.

Note: Some territorial vocalisation may be normal immediately after release. Screaming and squealing (bleating) is a sign of distress. Monitor koala behaviour throughout this period until it settles.

Surrounding risks and environmental checks

Before release, I have confirmed that:

- No hazard-reduction burns are planned
- No release will occur during extreme heat (above 35°C), and conditions above 30°C will be reassessed
- No flooding or severe storms are forecast
- No recent reports of uncontrolled wild dogs or other major predators nearby.

Disclaimer

This checklist provides best-practice guidance to support release site selection. It must not be used as justification for failing to return a koala to its original rescue site where that site remains suitable.

More information

Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW) 2025, Code of practice for injured sick and orphaned koalas, NSW Environment and Heritage website

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