

Nature Notes

Junior Ranger

FLEET-FOOTED FURRIES

The Top End's most common roo was named the Agile Wallaby by the early settlers at the Cobourg Peninsula in the 1830s. They were impressed by its ability to elude their hunting dogs.

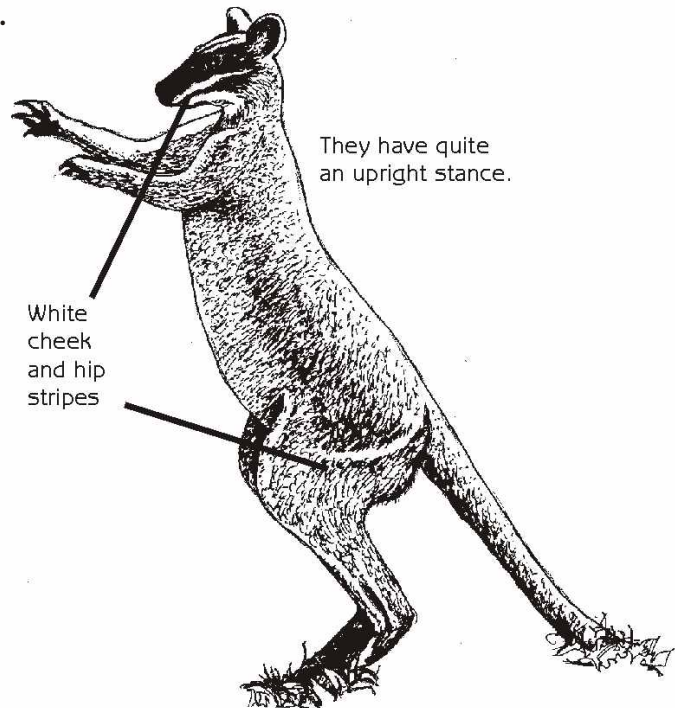
KANGAROO OR WALLABY?

There's no real difference between kangaroos and wallabies except size. Generally a wallaby is smaller and has a stockier more solid build. All are now classified in the genus *Macropus* which means 'big foot'.

The Agile Wallaby *Macropus agilis* is mostly a sandy colour but has a white tummy and white stripes on its cheeks and hips.

It isn't a big roo and the girls are noticeably smaller than the blokes.

The Agile Wallaby's distinctive droppings are shiny black when fresh. It's OK to handle them. They're just dry grass.



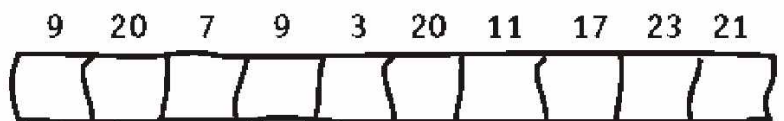
DIFFERENT FLAVOURED MILKS FROM THE ONE COW

You don't normally see pictures of Kangaroos on Mother's Day cards. It's a pity because they're pretty clever mums. A female roo can have three babies on the go at once: a young joey at her feet; a small one growing in her pouch and a tiny embryo in her tummy. She's also got a great milk bar. The stuff she feeds the toddler at her feet is quite different to the milk she supplies to the bub in her pouch. Cows aren't so clever! Imagine how good it would be if we could breed a cow to produce chocolate, strawberry and iced coffee from the same set of udders!

The Agile Wallaby is a very social animal, often seen in large groups. Biologists have a word to describe animals like this.

Can you decode the word?

(Clue: J = 12, K = 13, L = 14)



CAPTAIN COOK'S KANGAROO

In 1770 Captain Cook and his crew spent 7 weeks ashore in North Queensland repairing their ship, the Endeavour, which had been damaged on the Great Barrier Reef. While there they saw Australia's extraordinary hopping mammals for the first time.

Cook wrote:

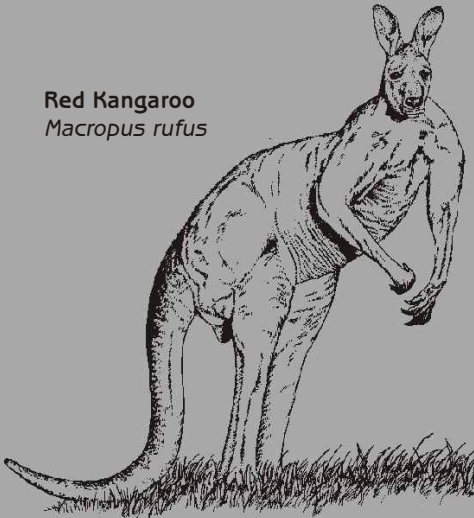
'I saw myself this morning a little way off from the ship, one of the animals before spoke of: it was of a light mouse colour and the full size of a greyhound with a long tail....Its progression is by hopping or jumping 7 or 8 feet at each hop upon its hind legs only....It bears no sort of resemblance to any European animal I ever saw.'

For many years scientists wondered what kangaroo Captain Cook and his men saw. Some thought it might have been the Agile Wallaby which is found in North Queensland as well as the Top End. However, it's more likely it was the Whiptail Wallaby *Macropus parryi*. It looks a lot like an Agile but is smaller, grey rather than sandy coloured, and has a long slender tail like a whip.

The story goes that the local Aboriginal people replied '*kangaroo*' when the white men pointed to these animals. They assumed this was the Aboriginal name for the creatures. Little did they realise the word kangaroo actually meant '*go away*'!



Red Kangaroo
Macropus rufus



DESERT ROOS - MASTERS OF SURVIVAL

Desert Kangaroos can go a long time between drinks. Their specially modified kidneys enable them to excrete very concentrated urine to save water. They also have a low **metabolic rate**. (An animal's metabolic rate is a bit like the speed at which a car's engine ticks over.) Because a roo's 'engine' is running at fairly slow 'revs', it generates less body heat than other mammals. So it doesn't have to waste a lot of water by sweating. Having a low metabolic rate also reduces its protein requirements. This means it can get by on grass feed that's too poor in quality for many other grazing animals.

GREAT FUEL ECONOMY AND AN EXCELLENT SUSPENSION SYSTEM

Kangaroos hop at a fixed rate. The tendons in their legs store energy and are just like springs so roos actually don't have to use much muscle power. This is very fuel-efficient. If they need to go faster, they lengthen their stride (requiring very little extra effort) but don't change their hopping frequency.

Want to learn more about Kangaroos?

Check out the reference books *Kangaroos* by Terry Dawson, *The Mammals of Australia* edited by Ronald Strahan and *A Field Guide to the Mammals of Australia* by Menkhorst and Knight.

