



# Oxford Word of the Month – January: pinkie

**noun:** a baby marsupial that has not yet grown fur, and is too young to leave its mother's pouch.

## THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

Winter months in Australia see a rise in the number of vehicles colliding with animals, especially native animals such as kangaroos. This is due to shorter daylight hours, and the fact that kangaroos are active in the early morning and at twilight – the same hours that commuters are travelling to and from work. The problem is exacerbated in times of drought, when kangaroos venture further into urban areas looking for food.

Wildlife carers urge motorists to check the pouches of dead marsupials for surviving young, and to take them to wildlife shelters for care. Australian English has a word for young kangaroos and other baby marsupials: joey, a term that dates from the 1830s. In recent years, another word has been coined to describe a very young joey: **pinkie** (or **pinky**). **Pinkies** have not yet grown fur or left the pouch, and cannot survive on their own. They are usually seen only when rescued from the pouch of a dead animal.

Early evidence of the term refers to baby kangaroos, koalas and wombats – like this baby wombat:

*Poppet was a 'little **pinky**', weighing just 150g when she was found, but with a special diet and lots of love, she is making a fast recovery. ... 'She was still in her mum's pouch when we got to her. ... Her eyes were shut, and she was just a little, pink ball of skin.'* (Daily Telegraph, 24 October 2002)

The term **pinkie** is now used for the young of other marsupials such as wallabies, possums and even the tiny feathertail glider:

*The glider, all 13g of her, lay zonked out on gas. With tweezers, Todd pulled open a slit on her belly to reveal a pink stub barely bigger than the head of a matchstick. A **pinkie** – a baby not even old enough to have fur.* (Sunshine

*Coast Daily*, 22 July 2015)

The name **pinkie** may refer to the colour of the young joey's skin before its fur grows. It is easy to imagine that the term originated from a scenario like this:

*Mr M. Nethery noticed on the roadside the carcass of a 'possum. Picking it up, he observed in the pouch a tiny, pink baby 'possum, utterly devoid of fur. Mr Nethery took it home, gave it to his 4-year-old daughter. 'Pinky', as it was named, was placed between two hot water bottles, fed with an eye dropper, and soon picked up. (Scone Advocate, 22 November 1949)*

However, it is worth noting that a much older sense of **pinkie** may have influenced the Australian use: it is recorded from the early 1800s with the meaning 'something very small or insignificant'. In recent times, there is some evidence in the pet industry of the term *pinkie mouse* – 'a baby mouse before it has grown fur' – used as food for pet reptiles.

Evidence for the Australian **pinkie** is first found about twenty years ago. Now, however, it is making up for lost time, with recent evidence of two compounds created from it: *pinkie joey* – 'a hairless joey' – and *pinkie season* – 'a period of increased vehicle collisions with kangaroos, wombats, etc.'.

Over the past year, roadkill numbers have been higher than usual in south-eastern Australia, due to drought conditions. Orphaned **pinkies** are one inevitable result.

**Pinkie** will be considered for inclusion in the next edition of *The Australian National Dictionary*.

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