MIXED-UP MARSUPIALS?

FIND OUT WHY QUOKKAS ACT LIKE GIRAFFES, KOALAS, AND BATS.

BY ALLYSON SHAW

When explorers in the late 1600s first spotted this fuzzy, friendly-looking animal in Australia, they figured they’d stumbled on a house-cat-size rat. Not even close. Quokkas might be related to kangaroos and wallabies, but they’re way weirder. This marsupial has traits more often associated with other animals—and that makes it one wacky critter.

Quokkas eat their food in a way that is similar to giraffes. Both animals use their large, flat molars to grind tough treats like leaves to release moisture and nutrients. The difference? Giraffes later regurgitate the food (meaning they basically throw it back up into their mouths—youck!) and chew it some more. When a quokka swallows food, the meal enters its first stomach (yep, quokkas have two tummies!), where the food is broken down more before entering the second stomach.

If you spot a brown fuzz ball bouncing through the brush, it’s not a rabbit—it’s a leaping quokka! Although they usually crawl on all fours, quokkas also use their strong back legs to jump. These animals also create passageways in the bushes and grass as they move through the brush, similar to the underground tunnels bunnies create. Furry, cute, and hoppy? Yes, please!

Ground-dwelling quokkas sometimes climb five feet up a tree trunk to reach a tasty-looking leaf or berry. That might not sound impressive, but it’s something its closest relatives—kangaroos and wallabies—can’t do. Tree-loving koalas have strong, large paws made for gripping branches all day. But the quokka can hold on only for a few minutes. Just enough time to swipe a snack!

They hop like rabbits

They reach for leaves like koalas

They catch z’s like bats

They chew like giraffes

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Quokkas have smiley faces and are sometimes friendly around people, so tourists to Australia’s Rottnest Island often get too close. The extra attention could put quokkas in danger—or it might help the species survive.

Authorities on Rottnest Island protect the critters with rules against touching or feeding the quokkas. Human food can make them sick, plus giving them snacks (and even water) can make the quokkas too dependent on people. But by following the rules, island tourists help give authorities more power to support the quokka’s habitat. For instance, conservationists can use the money generated from tourism to protect the island and monitor the quokka population.

So if you want to protect the quokkas and get an epic picture, just use a selfie stick!

Rottnest Island, one of the places quokkas live, got its name after explorers thought quokkas were rats. Get it? Rottnest? Rottnest?

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