# Genome Reference Assembly for Bottlenecked Southern Australian Koalas

Blanchard, A.M.,[1*] Emes, R.D.,[1] Greenwood, A.D.,[3] Holmes, N.,[2] Loose, M.W.,[2] McEwen, G.K.,[3] Meers, J.[4] Speight, N.[5] and Tarlinton, R.E.[1]

[1] University of Nottingham, School of Veterinary Medicine and Science, Sutton Bonington, Leicestershire, LE12 5RD, UK

[2] University of Nottingham, School of Life Sciences, Nottingham NG7 2RD, UK

[3] Leibniz Institute for Zoo and Wildlife Research, 10315 Berlin, Germany

[4] The University of Queensland, School of Veterinary Science, Australia

[5] The University of Adelaide, School of Animal and Veterinary Sciences, Adelaide, Australia

*Corresponding author: adam.blanchard@nottingham.ac.uk

**Abstract**

Koala populations show marked differences in inbreeding levels and in the presence or absence of the endogenous Koala Retrovirus (KoRV). These genetic differences among populations may lead to severe disease impacts threatening koala population viability. In addition, the recent colonization of the koala genome by KoRV provides a unique opportunity to study the process of retroviral adaptation to vertebrate genomes and the impact this has on speciation, genome structure and function. The genome build described here is from an animal from the bottlenecked "Southern" population free of endogenous and exogenous KoRV. It provides a more contiguous genome build than the previous koala reference derived from an animal from a more outbred "Northern" population and is the first koala genome from a KoRV polymerase free animal.

## Significance

This high-quality genome build provides a base line comparator for studies of koala genetics and retroviral integration. It is from a genetically distinct population than the current koala reference genome and does not contain intact endogenous Koala retrovirus.

## Introduction

Koalas are an iconic marsupial species classed as vulnerable on the IUCN red list. The species suffers a number of threats including habitat loss and disease with climate change driven fire events further decimating numbers in recent years (Charalambous & Narayan 2020). The disease threats to the population are complicated by stark differences in the disease patterns in different populations driven by underlying genetic differences (Sarker et al. 2020; Tarlinton et al. 2021). Wild koalas are confined to the Eastern Seaboard of Australia, there are 5 major genetic groups (Lott et al. 2022) but for the purposes of population management two major genetic splits are recognised: "Northern" (New South Wales and Queensland) and "Southern" (Victoria and South Australia), the border between the states of New South Wales and Victoria forming a hard cut off between the two populations (Neaves et al. 2016; Quigley et al. 2021).

Koalas in the southern states were essentially extinct by 1920 due to hunting pressure and were restocked across their southern range from a very small number of animals (possibly as few as 18) sourced from offshore island refugia (Martin et al. 1999). As a result of this animals in the southern population have a markedly reduced genetic diversity compared with animals in the northern population (Neaves et al. 2016; Ruiz-Rodriguez et al. 2016; Johnson et al. 2018; Tarlinton et al. 2021). Our own work has demonstrated that many genes are homozygous in the southern animals (Tarlinton et al. 2021). Animals in the southern populations suffer from a number of diseases, such as oxalate nephrosis and testicular aplasia that are not routinely seen in

northern populations (Fabijan et al. 2020; Tarlinton et al. 2021) and are thought to have an underlying genetic basis (Cristescu et al. 2009; Speight et al. 2020).

The other major difference both disease and genetics wise between Northern and Southern animals is the presence of a functional recently endogenized retrovirus (Koala Retrovirus or KoRV) in all Northern koalas but not in the Southern (Quigley et al. 2021; Blyton et al. 2022). Both Southern and Northern animals may have exogenous infectious KoRV but the rate of KoRV associated neoplasia is substantially lower in Southern koalas (Sarker et al. 2020; Joyce et al. 2021; Quigley et al. 2021). While the definitive link is less clear than for neoplasia (McEwen et al. 2021) KoRV is also thought to cause underlying immunosuppression predisposing to chlamydia disease, which is also seen at a lower rate in Southern populations (Polkinghorne et al. 2013; Sarker et al. 2020). Endogenous retroviruses are present in all vertebrate genomes studied to date and the entrance of these transposable elements into genomes is thought to be a major introduction of genetic diversity, potentially triggering speciation. However, most examples in genomes are ancient and are essentially represented by inactive viruses (Zheng et al. 2022). They are thought to be the remnants of past infectious viral integrations that have managed to enter germ line cells and become fixed in a species. KoRV is part of a very small group of recently endogenized viruses, integrated sometime between 200 and 49,000 years ago (Ishida et al. 2015), and is unique in that parts of the species range do not yet have endogenous polymerase gene containing KoRV at all (Quigley et al. 2021).

To complicate matters further both Northern and Southern koalas have evidence of historical KoRV infection as defective recombinant sequences between KoRV and another older endogenous retroelement (Phascolarctos endogenous retrovirus or PhER), known as recKoRVs (Löber et al. 2018; Tarlinton et al. 2022). It is not entirely clear how endogenous and exogenous KoRV and recKoRV interact and whether they enhance or inhibit each other's replication and

disease occurrence, but the scenario provides a unique opportunity to study the impacts of the entrance of a new class of retroelements into a mammalian genome in real time rather than by phylogenetic inference of this fundamental genomic process (Tarlinton et al. 2022).

There are two other published koala genomes (Johnson et al. 2018) derived from northern animals "Bilbo" and "Pacific Chocolate" (Johnson et al. 2018), alongside several additional transcriptome resources (Hobbs et al. 2014; Abts et al. 2015; Tarlinton et al. 2022). The most complete existing genome for "Bilbo" is assembled at a contig level (into 1,907 contigs with an N50 of 11.6 Mb). Here we present a genome build of a Southern Australian animal "Wilpena" for use in comparative genomics of koala populations and studies of retroviral integration. This genome is more contiguous than the current reference sequence (1,265 contigs, N50 = 48.8 Mb) and from an animal known to be free of both endogenous and exogenous replication competent KoRV (Tarlinton et al. 2022).

**Results and Discussion**

Using 58 GB of ONT data (consisting of 2,572,260 reads with a mean read length of 24kb and mean Q score of 13.7) and 1,289 million (2x150bp >Q30) Illumina reads were assembled into a draft genome using Flye. This resulted in an N50 of 48,782,874 bases and a length of 3,233,824,327 bp. A first pass polish using Medaka and final polish with Polca using the Illumina data resulting in a final high-quality genome assembly with an N50 of 48,800,306 bases, 1,265 contigs and a total genome size of 3,234,982,288 bp (Table 1).

Table 1: Summary of the genome assembly

| Genome | Wilpena<br>This Study | Bilbo<br>GCA_002099425 | Pacific Chocolate<br>GCA_900166895 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Assembly Size | 3,234,982,288 bp | 3,192,581,492 bp | 3,358,707,742 bp |
| Number of Contigs | 1265 | 1907 | 796,464 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Contigs >= 5,000 bp | 1222 | 1804 | 16,989 |
| Contigs >= 50,000 bp | 651 | 662 | 8361 |
| Contigs N50 | 48,800,306 bp | 11,587,828 bp | 880973 bp |
| Contigs N75 | 22,144,309 bp | 6,857,650 bp | 321,283 |
| Contigs L50 | 17 | 85 | 1100 |
| Contigs L75 | 41 | 173 | 2591 |
| Largest Contig | 232,027,266 bp | 40,558,015 bp | 5,231,295 bp |
| GC Content (%) | 39.09 | 39.05 | 39.03 |
| BUSCO Completeness (%) | 92.9 | 94.0 | 90.0 |
| Genes | 27,669 | 32,109 | 33,654 |

The contigs were assessed for putative contamination using Conterminator (Steinegger *et al.,* 2020). From 1,265 contigs, 1,247 were assigned as koala and 18 were flagged as containing potential contamination. Of those 18, assignments were for North American Opossum (n=2), Common Brushtail (n=2), Grey Short-Tailed Opossum (n=2), Common Wombat (n=7) and Koala Retrovirus (n=2). However, the same eight contigs were flagged multiple times with close marsupial relatives and so are unlikely to be true contamination. There were two contigs assigned as koala retrovirus, these are non-functional partial recKoRV sequences (partial KoRV env and LTR) as reported previously in this animal (Tarlinton et al. 2022) and are not full length endogenous or exogenous KoRV. The genome was soft masked using RED (Supplementary Table 1) and genes predicted used braker2 along with publicly available Koala RNASeq data from multiple biological sites, predicting 52,384 putative genes. Functional annotation using EggNOG mapper identified 27,669 genes with transcriptional support (Supplementary Table 2).

## Conclusion

A highly contiguous reference genome, from a distinct southern population, is invaluable to understanding the challenges faced in conservation genetics for future breeding programmes of Koalas. Not only will this enable more comprehensive comparative genomics to take place, it will also allow researchers to fully understand non-functional KoRV integration sites and whether they appear in similar regions of the genome to the northern population.

## Materials and Methods

*Sample Collection*

DNA was derived from liver tissue from a 3 year old female south Australian Koala, housed in a collection in the UK. The animal was originally derived from the Mt Lofty Ranges and Kangaroo Island populations in South Australia. Sample collection and nanopore sequencing from this animal was described in (Tarlinton et al. 2022). Ethics approval for the use of post mortem material was granted by the University of Nottingham School of Veterinary Medicine and Science Committee for Animal Care and Research Ethics

*Sample Preparation*

DNA was extracted from frozen liver tissue using the QIAGEN Genomic-tip 100/G Kit and the QIAGEN Genomic Buffer Set (QIAGEN; 10243 and 19060). Frozen tissue was ground under liquid and 100 mg of frozen powder was added to 9.2 ml of buffer G2 containing 5 µl of RNase A (100 mg/ml) (QIAGEN; 19101) and the suspension was incubated at room temperature for 10 min. Proteinase K (100 µl) (QIAGEN; 19131) was added and the suspension was incubated at 50 °C for 1.5 h. The Genomic-tip protocol was then followed, according to the QIAGEN Genomic DNA Handbook 06/2015.

*Genome Sequencing*

Genomic DNA was needle sheared 30 times with a 26G needle (BD; 300300) and then treated with the Short Read Eliminator (SRE) Kit (Circulomics; SS-100-101-01) to remove fragments < 10 kb and progressively deplete fragments shorter than 25 kb. The processed DNA was used to generate a sequencing library using the Genomic DNA by Ligation PromethION Kit (Oxford

Nanopore Technologies; SQK-LSK109). Library quantification was performed using the Qubit fluorometer and the Qubit dsDNA HS Assay Kit (ThermoFisher; Q32854) and 600 ng of library was run over one PromethION flow cell (Oxford Nanopore Technologies; FLO-PRO002) on a PromethION Beta device. The same DNA preparation was subjected to Illumina Novaseq 6000 paired end 150bp read sequencing (with automated plant and whole genome library preparation) by Novogene, Cambridge UK.

*Read Processing*

Illumina reads (both RNA and DNA) were trimmed to remove adaptors and reads with an overall quality of <Q30 using FastP v0.23.1 (Chen et al. 2018). The raw Nanopore data was base called using Guppy v6.1.7+21b93d1a5 and the super-accurate mode (https://community.nanoporetech.com/downloads). Nanopore adaptors were removed using Porechop v0.2.4 (Wick et al. 2017) and reads shorter than 1000bp and with a quality of <Q10 were removed with NanoFilt v2.6.0 (De Coster et al. 2018).

*Assembly*

The Nanopore reads were assembled using Flye v2.9.1 with the --nano-hq and --keep-haplotypes flags. The Flye draft assembly was first polished with Medaka v1.6.1 (https://github.com/nanoporetech/medaka) and then with the Illumina reads using POLCA (from MaSuRCA v4.0.9) (Zimin & Salzberg 2020). The resulting polished assembly was then gap filled using Samba (from MaSuRCA v4.0.9) (Zimin & Salzberg 2022) before being assessed for completeness using BUSCO v5.4.2 (Manni et al. 2021) in genome mode with the Mammalian lineage database.

*Contamination assessment*

Each contig was assigned a taxonomic ID using blastn (Altschul *et al.,* 1990), this was parsed into Conterminator (Steinegger *et al.,* 2020) to identify potential regions of contamination in the genome.

*Annotation*

The final version of the genome was parsed though REpeat Detector (RED) v 1.16 (Girgis 2015) to soft mask regions of repetitive elements. An index was created using HISAT2 v2.2.1 (Kim et al. 2019) , and RNASeq data from accession: PRJNA230900 (Hobbs et al. 2017) was aligned producing sam files. SAMTools v1.15 (Danecek et al. 2021) was used to convert sam to bam before being used in Braker2 v2.1.6 (Brůna et al. 2021) for genome annotation. Functional annotation was completed using EggNOG mapper v2.1 (Cantalapiedra et al. 2021).

**Acknowledgements**

Sample access was facilitated by Longleat Safari park, Funding was provided by the University of Nottingham and A.D.G. and G.K.M. were supported by grant GR 3924/15-1 from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG)

**Author Contributions**

RT oversaw project management, wrote funding proposals, collected post mortem samples and wrote parts of the manuscript. NH performed the DNA extraction and nanopore sequencing. ML and AB performed bioinformatics analysis. AB wrote parts of the manuscript and performed data deposition in public repositories. AG and GM project managed the illumina sequencing. NS

performed initial screening testing for KoRV on the animal. NS and JM provided critical review of the manuscript. All authors read and reviewed the manuscript.

## Data Availability

All raw sequence data is available on the NCBI SRA under the accession SAMN30742200. The final genome build (Phascolarctos cinereus K01) is available under the NCBI accession number JAOEJA000000000.

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