

Podcast 101 - Eucalyptus - Australia's Forest Tree

by Rob McCormack - Friday, May 04, 2018

<http://slowenglish.info/?p=2627>

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Podcast Number 101 – Eucalyptus – Australia’s Forest Tree

<http://traffic.libsyn.com/slowenglish/podcast101.mp3>

Hi,

Almost everywhere that you look in the Australian bush, you can see eucalyptus trees. These trees, apart from a few exceptions, are native only to Australia. Like the kangaroo and the koala, the eucalyptus tree somehow represents the uniqueness of Australia. In this podcast, I would like to tell you a little about these unique trees.

I regularly go for walks along bush tracks near my home in an outer suburb of Melbourne. These tracks wind their way alongside the Yarra River and through many kilometres of bushland. This bushland, as is the case throughout Australia, is full of eucalyptus trees – large and small, young and old. They are also planted by the local council on the grass verges of our towns and cities. They are found in parks, gardens and along roadways. They are found almost everywhere in Australia, including even our coldest alpine regions.

There are many different types of eucalyptus trees. In fact, there are over 700 different species of trees which make up the genus called Eucalyptus. Some are small trees while others grow to over 90 metres. Incredibly, there is a eucalyptus tree in Tasmania which is 99.8 metres high. This tree has a nickname – it is called ‘Centurion’ – a fitting name for a very grand tree indeed. Each eucalyptus species is different in some minor respect to the next, but there are some features which all eucalyptus trees have.



Close up of buds, flowers and leaves of a eucalyptus tree.

(Photograph by Philip Barrington)

Probably the most important distinguishing features of eucalyptus trees are their special buds, flowers and fruits, which are unlike those of any other tree. They are commonly called gum nuts. They vary in shape, but are usually shaped a bit like a bell, a cone or a wine glass. The buds have a unique cover over the large end, a bit like a hat or a cap. The scientific term for the cover is operculum. It's because of the operculum that these trees are named eucalyptus. This name comes from the Greek language and means 'well covered'. When it's time for the flowers to bloom, the cover or operculum falls off and the colourful stamens are exposed. These are the flowers. There are no petals on the flowers, just the long colourful stalks or stamens. The colours can be white, cream, yellow, pink, or red, depending on the species. As you might expect, the colourful eucalyptus flowers are popular with bee keepers. Honey produced from eucalyptus forests is especially sweet and unique. Once the flowers are finished, the seeds are ready to be released from the gum nuts. The hard gum nut eventually falls to the ground. If you are walking under a eucalyptus tree with soft shoes or bare feet, treading on a gum nut can be a little painful.

The bark of eucalyptus trees varies from species to species. For example, some have very rough bark with deep cracks while others have silky smooth bark, almost like skin. Their colours vary as well, from dark brown to yellow to white. Each year, many eucalypts will shed their bark, often in different ways. Sometimes the barks hangs down like long ribbons which cling to the tree. Often these bark ribbons will

hang there for months, making the tree look like it is shedding its skin like a snake.



A eucalyptus tree near the Yarra River in Melbourne. Notice the ribbons of old bark shedding from the trunk and branches.

Nearly all eucalyptus trees are evergreen, which means they keep their green leaves all year round. Notwithstanding that, eucalyptus trees do drop quite a few leaves and bits of bark throughout the year, so it is usually quite messy under a big eucalyptus tree. If you have one in the garden, you will always be cleaning up with the rake. Interestingly, the main food of the koala is the leaves of eucalyptus trees.

Another interesting feature about eucalyptus trees is the fact that many species produce oil in their leaves. This oil can be extracted and has many uses, including in cleaning products and even as an insect repellent. It is this oil in the leaves which makes eucalyptus trees likely to burn easily. Unfortunately, a bushfire in a eucalyptus forest will spread quickly, spreading from one tree to the next as the oil vapour from the leaves burns. Australia has a long history of large bushfires which devastate the landscape (see [Podcast 23](#)).

On the positive side, these trees are full of character. The thing about eucalyptus trees which I find fascinating is that they all look different, even within the same species. It's almost as if they are like people. They come in all shapes and sizes. Their branches are almost always bent and crooked in different ways. Each tree has its own look, its own personality in a way.

Eucalyptus trees produce a strong and hard timber which is used a lot as a building material in Australia, such as in houses, bridges, power poles, fences and retaining walls. It is also used extensively for the making of fine furniture. Furthermore, it is a wonderful material to use for flooring. Our house has hardwearing eucalyptus wood flooring from the spotted gum eucalyptus tree which grows in forests down the east coast of Australia. We chose it because of its beautiful rich colours and also its hardness. Its outstanding colour and warm feeling under foot makes us feel great every time we set foot on it.



Spotted Gum eucalyptus flooring in our house. It is tough with beautiful colouring.

My favourite eucalyptus tree is the snow gum. These trees live in the mountain regions of Australia from 1300 metres to 1800 metres high. They are very hardy indeed and can survive the freezing temperatures and very strong icy winds of a winter in the Australian Alps. Even more so than other eucalyptus trees, they often seem to be especially bent and twisted in their growth, almost as if they are hunching over to withstand the cold temperatures and strong wind. The bark of their trunks is mostly white and smooth. When hiking in the mountains, you really know you are getting high up when the snow gums start appearing. In 2014 my wife and I hiked to the summit of Victoria's highest mountain, Mt Bogong, 1986 metres high. One of my most vivid memories is of the final climb through the snow gums and out onto the bare mountain top above the tree line. It meant that our final goal of reaching the summit was getting near.



Snow gums in the Australian Alps.

(Photograph by sammochan)

Australians often use the term gum trees to mean eucalyptus trees. This is because some eucalyptus trees, but not all, exude a sticky gum from cracks in their bark. It's probably not important which term you use. If you talk about gum trees or eucalyptus trees, every Australian will still know exactly what you mean.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MLWzPQmd5sc>

If you have a question or a comment to make, please leave it in the comments box at the bottom of this page. Or, you can send me an email at rob@slowenglish.info. I would love to hear from you. Tell me where you live, a little bit about yourself and what you think of my Slow English podcast. I will write back to you, in English of course. If you would like to take a short quiz to see if you have understood this podcast, you will also find it on my website. Goodbye until next time.

Rob

(My thanks to Chris Frankenberg for his valuable input into the content of this podcast episode.)

[WpProQuiz 103]

Vocabulary

alongside = next to

alpine = an area high in the mountains

appearing = showing, to come into view

bare = (here) no trees

bark = the covering of a tree trunk

bee keepers = people who keep bees and collect their honey

bell = a hollow metal object which makes a sound when hit

bent = not in a straight line

bloom = when flowers open up and show their colours

building material = things used to make building, for example wood, concrete, bricks, etc

bush = forest

bushland = an area of land with forest or bush

cap = a small hat, a baseball hat

character = (here) the good things about a person's personality

cling = hold onto

cone = a shape which has a sharp closed end and is open at the other end

cover = lies over the top of something so that you can't see it

crack = a long shaped hole which is very thin

crooked = another word for bent, but usually not in a good way

devastate = to destroy, damage or break

distinguishing = used to identify one thing as different to another thing

eventually = finally

exactly = (here) without any doubt

exceptions = different from normal

extensively = (here) a lot

extracted = taken from

exude = when a liquid comes out of something

fascinating = when something is very, very interesting

features = the characteristics

fitting = fits well

furniture = tables, chairs, cupboards, desks, etc

genus = a scientific word to describe a group of plants or animals. Species are part of a genus

hardwearing = will not wear out or break easily, very strong

hardy = strong, can live in hot or dry places

hiking = to walk through the bush or forest or mountains

hunching = bending over

incredibly = almost hard to believe

insect repellent = something which makes insects die or go away

local council = a level of government that manages local issues – see <http://slowenglish.info/?p=2132>

messy = when things are not well organised

minor respect (in a) = a detail which is not very important

native = (here) comes from, only found in

nickname = a special name which is different to the correct name. Usually made for fun

notwithstanding = despite this, even though

outer suburb = an area of a city where people live, in this case, a long way from the city centre

outstanding = very, very good, better than the others

petals = part of a flower, shaped like a leaf

planted = when young trees are first put in the ground

power poles = long round length of wood, metal or concrete – here used to hold the electricity wires

rake = used in a garden to pull all the leaves together

regions = an area of land

regularly = often

released = (here) dropped

represents = stands for, takes the place of, is a symbol for

retaining walls = a wall in the garden to hold back the ground

ribbons = long pieces of colourful material

scientific term = a word used in science

seeds = very small part of a plant which is put into the ground and grows into a plant

set foot = to go into

shedding = when something falls off

silky = like silk, usually very soft and smooth

species = a scientific word to describe a group of plants or animals with the same features

spread = when something goes from one place to another

stalks = long, thin parts of a plant

stamens = part of a flower

sticky = when something stays on your fingers if you touch it, for example honey

summit = the top of a mountain

survive = to stay alive

timber = wood

treading = to walk on with your feet

under foot = when something is under your foot, usually talking about floors or the ground

unique = when there is nothing else like this

vapour = when a liquid goes into the air

verges = the strip of land next to the road, between the houses and the road

vivid memories = the things you remember very clearly

withstand = not to give in, not to break

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