

WORD OF THE MONTH

OXFORD AUSTRALIA: THE FUTURE OF AUSTRALIAN ENGLISH | OCTOBER 2013

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skippy

- **noun:** 1. a kangaroo. 2. kangaroo meat.

THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

Australians are divided on the issue of eating kangaroo meat. Many people argue it has several advantages over other red meats: kangaroos can be sustainably harvested; they have less impact on native vegetation and use fewer resources than sheep and cattle; they produce very little methane; and the meat is low in saturated fat. But some people are queasy about eating an iconic animal that appears on the national coat of arms.

The two views are illustrated by the following comments. In a newspaper article scientist Mike Archer argues that 'by farming kangaroos instead of sheep or cattle, [farmers] will help save ecosystems...Australians need to eat **Skippy** to help save **Skippy**.' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 October 2005) Another article states just as firmly: 'I would never eat **Skippy**. No one should eat **Skippy**.' (*Melbourne Sunday Herald Sun*, 12 October 1997)

The word **Skippy** alludes to a particular kangaroo that is considered representative of kangaroos in Australia. **Skippy** derives from the name of the pet kangaroo in the children's television series *Skippy the Bush Kangaroo*, which ran from 1966 to 1968. The show recounts the adventures of a young boy and his pet kangaroo Skippy (so-named after the typical bounding motion of a kangaroo). Skippy displays the same kind of intelligence and instinct for danger as the dogs Lassie or Rin Tin Tin did in their respective US television series. *Skippy the Bush Kangaroo* was extremely popular and was repeated on television for many years.

As a result of Australian familiarity with the show, the name **Skippy** was by the 1980s being used allusively to refer to kangaroos in general (as in the quotes above), and by 1990 Australians were beginning to use the word generically to mean simply 'a kangaroo'. Initially it retained the capital 'S' of a proper name, but in recent years the form **skippy** has become more common as it becomes accepted as a generic term:

She said peace and quiet and few distractions apart from abundant wildlife and birdsong were key attractions for her. 'We get a lot of **skippies** on the land at the moment.' (*Townsville Bulletin*, 11 November 2006)

Another shift happened to **skippy** in the 1990s when it took on a second meaning—kangaroo meat. While it has been a traditional Aboriginal food source for over 40,000 years, and early settlers and bushmen ate it of necessity, in the 20th century it was chiefly regarded as a meat more fit for pets than humans:

My antipathy to roo stew stems from the fact I fed kangaroo to the cat... I changed to the tinned stuff after hearing a fellow customer blithely order a 'kilo of **Skippy**'. (Melbourne Age, 31 July 1994)

It is only fairly recently that interest grew in kangaroo meat as a culinary item of choice. Sale for human consumption was legalised in all states by 1993 (South Australia led the way in 1980), and we began to see it on supermarket shelves and restaurant menus:

I ... duly devoured an entree of excellent emu sausages, followed by suitably gamy kangaroo. The latter was perfectly cooked, in spite of my protestation that a piece of rare and bloody **skippy** would induce antiperistalsis. The waitress quite correctly pointed out that anything more than pale pink would turn **skippy** into a piece of leathery wildebeest. (Sydney Morning Herald, 10 October 1998)

Today, **skippy** in the sense of kangaroo meat is consolidating its presence in the Australian lexicon, and evidence for **skippy burgers**, **skippy steaks**, and **skippy sausages** can be found. But debate continues over the desirability and ethics of using kangaroo as a food source, and for many Australians a strong emotional attachment to a national icon remains a stumbling block:

Basically, we agree to disagree. She eats a veggie diet and I eat meat. I always will, but sautéed **skippy** instead of a T-bone? I doubt it. (Coffs Coast Advocate, 7 October 2008)

Both senses of **skippy** are being considered for inclusion in the second edition of the Australian National Dictionary.



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