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# Oxford Word of the Month – April: Kangaroo mile

**noun:** a distance usually longer than an actual mile because of the nature of the terrain.

## THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

In 1842, on an overland expedition with Sir John and Lady Jane Franklin in Tasmania, settler and author David Burn wrote in his diary: ‘The path throughout, Mr. Calder reckons at six miles. To his long limbs they might seem no more; but my little legs considered them to be **kangaroo miles**. At all events they are very weary ones.’ (*Narrative of the Overland Journey ... from Hobart Town to Macquarie Harbour*, ed. G. Mackaness, 1955) The journey was made worse by bad weather and flooded rivers, so that much of the wild terrain they covered must have seemed like **kangaroo miles** to the expeditioners.

This diary entry is the first written record of the term **kangaroo mile**. A later variant is *bush mile*, which has the same meaning, as evidenced in William Westgarth’s comment: ‘Bush miles often prove of vexatious length.’ (*Victoria, late Australia Felix*, 1853) Both these Australian terms hark back to the earlier British English term *country mile*, dating from the 18th century. A *country mile* originally referred to ‘a distance thought of as a mile in the countryside, typically regarded as longer than a standard mile’, but that sense is now obsolete, overtaken by the figurative sense ‘a very long way’. The origins of *country mile* and *bush mile* are self-evident. They are expressions of distance used in the context of country or bush travel.

A **kangaroo mile** expresses the notion of outback distance in a different way. It alludes to the fact that a kangaroo can cover bush terrain much more quickly than we can, and in a more direct line—almost as the crow flies. Thus a distance that may appear short from a kangaroo’s point of view seems longer to us. **Kangaroo mile** also implies the difficulty of such travel, and the following writers illustrate this:

*Notoriously, local computations of distance are invariably based on kangaroo miles, and, including a couple of retracings, due to tracks abruptly ending in*

*settlers' fences, five hours were occupied in the so-called 10-mile journey. (Perth Western Mail, 21 March 1908)*

*We had to cut our road through the scrub to get to the house, which was three kangaroo miles from the railway. (Geraldton Guardian, 7 August 1928)*

**Kangaroo mile** has largely fallen out of use in the last few decades, but diarist David Burn and Sir John and Lady Franklin would have empathised with this 20th century Tasmanian tale of woe:

*Country people reckon distance by 'kangaroo miles'. Whatever the cause my feet had swollen, so that I had to walk the six or seven miles to West Montagu in my socks. (A.G. Horner, *Tasmanian Journey*, 1974)*

**Kangaroo mile** will be considered for future inclusion in the Australian National Dictionary.

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