

# WORD OF THE MONTH NOV 2012

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## Ranga

– *noun*: A person with red hair.

### THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

Red-haired people in Australia have often attracted nicknames such as *bluey*, *ginger*, *bloodnut*, *fantapants*, and *Annie*. They are also popularly stereotyped as emotional, volatile, and quick to anger. Along with blonde-haired people (particularly women), it seems that red-haired people are unfairly labelled as a result of their hair colour. The reason for the frequency of these terms is probably because of the small percentage of red-haired people in the population; they are an easily-recognised minority. Some of these terms are quite offensive while others may be tolerated or taken in good humour by the recipients. The Australian word **ranga** is a relatively recent addition to colloquial terms for red-haired people and it has an interesting story.

**Ranga** is an abbreviation of orang-utan (a primate with reddish-brown hair native to the rainforests of Indonesia and Malaysia). The first written evidence for the term as applied to red-haired people appears in Australian newspapers in the early 2000s. There is earlier US evidence for the use of **ranga** as a general term of abuse (equating to calling someone a monkey) but the specific application to red-haired people is Australian. Starting in 2004, early newspaper evidence for **ranga** includes references to schoolyard name-calling as well as references to red-haired Australian football players. In this evidence we can see that the word is intended as a term of abuse in some situations, and as a disparaging jest in others.

The word **ranga** first received wide exposure in 2007 when it was used in the first episode of the popular television comedy series *Summer Heights High*. The context was schoolyard bullying:

**Doug**: How is it OK for you to bully Ben?

**Jonah**: 'Cause he's a **Ranga**.

**Doug**: A what?

**Jonah**: A **Ranga** sir. 'Cause he's got red hair. Orangutan, that's what we call him.

**Doug**: And does that make it OK for him to be bullied, because he has red hair?

**Jonah**: Well, people are racist to FOBs...

**Leon**: To us.

**Jonah**: So, so we can be racist to **Rangas**.

**Doug**: But red-heads aren't a race, Jonah.

**Leon**: But sir, there's heaps of them. They're everywhere.

In 2008, an Adelaide Zoo campaign to bring attention to the plight of the endangered orang-utan used the term **ranga** in its promotional material:

Last week, advertisements ran offering 'free Zoo entry for all **rangas**' during the school holidays ... 'We have a campaign over the school holidays because of orangutans being an endangered species—and so are human redheads', Mr Evans said. Less than 2 per cent of the human race has red hair. 'Because of the way people move around these days, the genes that carry redheads are breeding out to brunettes and blondes', Mr Evans said. 'Eventually it looks like they are

*continued ...*

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going to be extinct, as well.' The Zoo will continue to offer free entry to people with red hair for the next two weeks, to raise awareness about orangutans being endangered in the wild. (*Adelaide Advertiser*, 29 September 2008)

While many red-haired people supported the Zoo's approach, the backlash from other red-haired people who took offence resulted in the end of this promotion. Clearly the term **ranga** was still seen by many as a term of abuse associated with bullying and other forms of discrimination.

The frequency of the term **ranga** – and a shift to a more positive sense – received a boost in 2010 when red-haired Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard publicly expressed her support for red-haired people:

Julia Gillard is happy to wear the title '**ranga** icon' in recognition of her famous locks. Radio host Steve Vizard, on new talkback radio station MTR, told the Deputy Prime Minister his daughter was a redhead and 'she regards you as a **ranga** icon. I just thought I'd pass that on to you.' Ms Gillard said: 'Well, I'm happy to be a **ranga** icon. You know, be up there for the **rangas**.' (Melbourne *Herald-Sun*, 20 April 2010)

Two months after these comments Julia Gillard became Prime Minister and the word **ranga** was more popular than ever. While many red-haired Australians appreciated the Prime Minister's advocacy, the term **ranga** is still considered offensive by many people.

**Ranga** is being included in the latest editions of all our dictionaries.