

PROFILE OF A CROCODILE HUNTER

Don't try this at home



David Ottway is a crocodile handler at Crocodylus Park in Darwin, NT. He has worked with crocodiles for almost 20 years.

Q Have you ever wrestled a croc?

A I forget how many times I have, more than I can count. Every time you have to move an animal you have to knock them down, grab them and shift them.

Q Do you need any special training?

A Most of the training is on the job. There's not any university degree for handling or catching crocs and it really comes down to being able to work with your hands.

Q Best thing about being a croc handler?

A It's not like a nine to five job. One day you might be catching crocs, the next day you might be building pens, research filming, collecting eggs or hatching out animals. You get such a variety of work right throughout the year.

Q Most interesting fact about crocodiles?

A They've been here a lot longer than us. And they've survived all of it.

Q Scariest experience you've had?

A It was out in the field during nesting season. A female croc surprised me, we weren't even in the nest area, so we didn't expect her to be there. But she came roaring out and I was pinned against a tree, she was only a metre away ... and she stopped. That's pretty well the scariest experience I've had. I don't know why she stopped but she just turned and left. I sat down for a drink after that, a little think, then finished the job.

Q What angers a croc the most?

A If you corner a croc, that's it. It's only got one way to go and that is through you.

Q What differences are there between freshwater and saltwater crocs?

A The freshwater jaw is very thin with angled teeth, designed for catching small prey and fish. The salties have a broader jaw with interlocking teeth for taking down larger prey. The salties are twice as long and twice as angry.



Q How high can crocodiles jump on land and on water?

A Jumping on land is unusual. Small crocs can sometimes jump up using their tails as a spring, lifting a third of their bodyweight, to lunge up at you.

In the water they can jump a bit over half their body length, so their legs come out of the water.

The safest spot on the croc is actually behind them. If you grab their tail they can lunge around and bite their own back legs. If you ever jump on a croc you have to jump on the back behind its neck. It's the safest place.



Images are courtesy of Crocodylus Park



Q How much force do crocs have in their jaws when they clamp down on prey?

A I've seen them clamp down on pigs' heads and solid timber boat oars and crush them. We've done a few experiments and had them bite down on a steel wire hydraulic hose with a gauge on it; the problem is their teeth actually go through it.

Depending on how many teeth bite you and how far back they are in the jaw, you can get anywhere up to two tonnes per square centimetre.

Q Have you ever met a vegetarian crocodile?

A No, I think all the other ones ate them.

Q Is it true that running in zig zags confuses the croc so you can get away?

A You're more likely to trip over if you're trying to zig zag. If you do run, it's usually just straight back as fast as you can. Most times I don't even turn around I just run backwards, that way you are facing them coming up to you. For a lot of people that's when they get taken, when they turn. The croc grabs them in the back of the legs or on the buttocks.



Advice to aspiring crocodile handlers

A lot of farms are starting up and the industry is getting bigger. It's quite a fun job. If you want to do it get in there, volunteer, have a go and see if you like it.



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