

The outback wrangler

Matt Wright is a conservationist with a difference. **Mitch Brook** talks to the crocodile wrangler and wildlife relocator.



There's a crocodile close by. She's a whopper: a big mother croc with lithe, powerful muscles and a killer maternal instinct. The Outback Wrangler stands on a patch of wet marshland. In front of him is a pond with a fully grown crocodile winking reptilian eyes at him. Watching. All the wrangler has is a stick and a blue plastic bucket. The croc smiles at him and he says, "Alright, I've gotta get her away from her nest."

You can hear the rotors of a chopper circling above, but he's alone on the ground. This could go seriously wrong if he doesn't get it right and that's one big, angry mother crocodile, willing to defend her nest to death. Teeth jut from her jaw, dirty and surrounded by leather-like skin. She's still eyeing him, floating in the water, poised to attack.

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There's a flash of movement and he tosses the blue bucket to the croc. She strikes. Her jaws latch on the thing and she shakes it around as though trying to kill it and steals it further away into her marshy nest. She does a death roll – rolling over on herself while trying to destroy the bucket. The wrangler jabs at her with his stick and she swims off.

Matt Wright, the Outback Wrangler, is collecting crocodile eggs. Another man soon drops down from the helicopter and the two men work together to fill another blue bucket with their precious cargo.

"We only have a couple of minutes before she's back," he cautions. When she's back, she'll be back looking for vengeance, instinct going into overdrive and telling her to kill. The pair load most of the croc's eggs into the bucket and are soon pulled to safety, with the mother croc gliding up the swamp towards them.

So proceeds just one of Matt Wright's encounters with the dinosaurs of the Northern Territory. It's all documented on his new National Geographic Channel show, *Outback Wrangler*. Watching the episodes, you're sure to have many open-mouthed and wide-eyed moments as you see how close Matt gets to these powerful creatures, doing plenty to provoke them to attack, but somehow always escaping harm with those blinking blue eyes and a flash of white smile.

Matt is an advocate for the protection of dangerous species such as crocodiles. Many animals are shot by farmers protecting their stock or by townspeople who think they're getting that little bit too close to town. Matt's job is to safely relocate these animals instead of having them slain. They're often not happy about it, but as the wrangler says, it's better to move them than kill them.



"How do I go about catching a crocodile? It's pretty easy actually!"

Wright is almost shocked at being asked, as though the answer is common knowledge or a piece of trivia everyone should know.

"You set a trap... well there are quite a few ways actually. If you know where the crocs are and how they move, you can monitor them before you go in there. Then you can either catch them at night or catch them during the day. You can catch them in a trap and then you just pull them out, tie them up, restrain them and move them to wherever you need to move them to."

Simple as that. Never mind the teeth, claws, or the fact that crocodiles, or the menagerie of other animals Matt relocates, prefer to be left alone. Matt has also dealt with moose and caribou in Canada, elephants in Malaysia and snakes everywhere.

"I grew up catching snakes and lizards and any other wildlife that I'd sort of move out of the way. I'd rather do that than see someone kill them! It's built into me," he says of his childhood.

Collecting crocodile eggs holds the same conservationist ideal. Removing croc eggs from their natural habitat limits their numbers in the wild, making them less of a nuisance to farmers. This is beneficial for the reptiles as it prevents safari hunting from coming into play.

"The crocodile egg collecting has its commercial value so farmers and station owners are going to get paid every year because we collect croc eggs off their farms," Matt explains. "They're going to look after these crocs and not shoot them for eating their cattle. They call us if they want any crocodiles moved."

The eggs are then taken to a farm where the baby crocs are raised and farmed for their skins and meat, also preventing wild crocodiles from being hunted.

"You keep a steady population and a sustainable industry with the crocodiles. They're at a good number now; they aren't going extinct and we want to keep it like that." ☺



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When it comes to his future and the goal of his TV program, Matt is all about education. He wants to show the world a different way of dealing with problem animals and spread that ideal to other countries.

"I can't put a time limit on what I want in the future," he says. "I guess trying to educate as many countries as I can about it. I see devastation in the rainforest and we seem to be using a lot of the earth and not putting much back. If we can educate people that we have to keep a bit of it there for the animals that live in it, that's my goal. I don't know how I'm going to get that message out, but that's what I want to do."

While Matt has often been referred to as Australia's next Steve Irwin, he prefers to make his own mark on the world. "It's a privilege for me to be called that, but it's taking away from Steve," he says. "I don't want to be known as following in someone's footsteps." ☀

