

## Herp Expert Steve Irwin Interview - Part 2

**An interview with reptile expert Steve Irwin.**

*Interview and photo by Jeff Lemm*

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Regular Reptiles writer Jeff Lemm conducted the following interview while in Australia during December 1998. Part 1 appeared on the Web site last week; look for it in the Library section if you missed it.

Jeff Lemm (JL): America loves your [television] show, Steve. I've known you for awhile now, and I also know a number of other herpers around the world. I'm on the Internet, I talk to a lot of people and everyone's talking about Steve Irwin.

Now, most Americans think that Aussie herpers have a pretty crazy way of doing things, maybe because we don't work with the same kind of animals and aren't aware of the easiest ways to handle animals such as elapids, for example. Things here are different, and the animals are different. So Americans naturally think you're not careful and that you do some pretty crazy things. For these people, have you ever been severely injured or envenomated by a reptile or other animal?

Steve Irwin (SI): Never. As a testimonial to how crazy Australians are, you're right, we are. But I would like to add to that, Jeff, if I could. What people see me doing, predominantly with venomous snakes, I hope they would never try. My apprenticeship has been 36 years. The gift that I've got I share with one other person, Wes Mannion, my definite right-hand man. The gift that we got was Bob Irwin. He was out in front of his time, mate. He showed us how to do it. We now possess a force that has taken us a long time to get. He never trusted us until we could prove to him that we could do it. And it is becoming at one with an animal. When you go in on a venomous snake, the first time you touch it, it thinks you're going to kill it. Now it goes into predator/prey mode, of course. It's loaded. I encounter some of the worst snakes in the world, but I'm tailing them, handling them freehand. And it's because pretty soon the snake understands that I don't mean to kill it. And this might sound really weird, everyone calls it "the force." You've seen it happen, mate. When I grab hold of them, this karma exudes through my fingertips into the animal and they feel a lot more comfortable, and I don't get bitten. And I take great pride in telling you, the world, REPTILES magazine, everyone, I don't get envenomated. I don't carry antivenin, never have, never will.

JL: What would happen if your dad found out you were bitten?

SI: I tell you what, I would sooner die of a taipan bite than tell my dad that I got bitten by a taipan. Because my nose would bleed from his kicking my a\$@. I still live in fear of this man, and I love him more than anyone else.

JL: Okay, a second part to my previous question: I hear all the time about Steve Irwin, how crazy he is and how he's going to get hurt. Why do you get so close to the animals in your films? I've seen you stick your face right up next to venomous snakes, and get right in with big crocs.

SI: The easiest way for me to answer this is to point out the obvious. A lot of people who work with wildlife work with wildlife to satisfy their own egos. And I don't really agree with that. What Terri and I do is we get in nice and close to the animal to make the animal look good.

My aim in this world is to make that brown snake, that crocodile, that koala, that red-backed spider, that black widow, look good. That's my job. I have absolutely no problem with my ego or my staff's ego. The first rule you learn when you come into Australia Zoo, when you enter into this family unit, is you leave your ego at the back door. And that is the only way we can work, because our job is to make the animal look good. I believe that the technique that we have, as a filming unit, as Steve and Terri Irwin, as the Croc Hunter, is to get that camera right fair smack into the action. And it works.

Typically speaking, there are only a small percentage of people who would watch wildlife documentaries because they're filmed on a long lens, on a tripod, at a distance. Well, we have made some of the greatest documentaries in the world because we get ourselves and the camera involved, because we want to make the audience feel what we feel. We've gotta have the sensation of the fierce snake's tongue coming out! You know, that's what ya gotta do, if you can't feel, hear, see and smell this animal, then you can't interest people, and you can't conserve that animal.

As an example, the other day I was reading this very upsetting letter which was bagging people who do whale watching. This man was going on about "Stop harassing the whales, whale watching is wrong." And it near makes me cry, it makes me so upset. I wish he could focus his passion and aggression towards the real enemy-whale hunting, whale killing-which is happening this very second in Australia's great Southern Ocean. If it weren't for whale watching, if people couldn't see the whales through the camera or on a boat, then the whales would have been extinct a long time ago. And that is what we've gotta go for. So, I applaud this man's enthusiasm and aggression in (not) harassing whales, but we need to focus that aggression on people who are killing them. So Terri and I are a little bit sick of sittin' on the fence. We wanna get you involved in wildlife-that's what we do.

JL: So, by getting so close are you also trying to show that these animals don't want to harm people, that they don't attack people?

SI: Exactly!

JL: Okay, so when you're doing this would you agree that you put in a little showmanship? Also, going into my next question, since the first "Crocodile Hunter" episode, you've become more noticeably animated. You're more hyper, more excited. I know the truth, but for those who think you're an actor, is that something you're doing on your own or are the producers trying to get you to do more of that because people like to see you being excitable or spastic on television?

SI: Great question, mate. You know better than anyone, I am Steve Irwin. What you see is what you get. Whether it's here at this interview or tomorrow down in the voiceover, or last week when I was in Africa, I am Steve Irwin-here he is, this is what he looks like, this is how enthusiastic he is, he doesn't change for anyone. And, as a man who's met and worked with our film crew, you'd have to agree that our director/producer Johnny Stainton sits back and lets it happen. He doesn't say anything. It's a beautiful way to work.

Wes Mannion: Here's an interesting point to make if people are saying he's acting different than what he was when he started. They have to realize that in the beginning he'd never been on camera before. And when you first get a camera shoved in your face, until you can work it out and become yourself, it's a long time in between. When that camera gets stuck in my face, I clam up and don't say a thing. So it's taken a long time for Steve to be himself. I saw you (Jeff Lemm) change dramatically when that camera was in here a few minutes ago (taping for an upcoming show about Australia Zoo). That wasn't the bloke I know. But now that there's no camera here, you're acting like your normal self.

JL: (Laughing) Thanks, Wes. I thought I was getting good at it. But it's true, with the work we've done on camera, it's very difficult to be yourself. Especially when they get right up on you.

SI: It's true, we've got a series of cameramen, everywhere I go, they go. How's this? They filmed Terri givin' birth.

JL: Really?

Wes Mannion: We've even got one (a camera) in the bowl of the toilet!

SI: (Laughing wildly) There's no camera in the bowl of the toilet! But Wes hit the nail on the head in good words, and if you don't mind I'd like to spew 'em back up to ya. That is, now I'm a little more at ease with the camera and I've learned "Don't change! Just be Steve Irwin, you'll be cool!" It's the way to go.

JL: Another question that I seem to hear people ask all the time is "How much of the show is staged?" Are any sequences staged, or are any tame animals used?

SI: Very little. Some of our shows are done in zoological facilities and that part is all very obvious. But when we're out in the wild, quite often it takes us months and months to locate the target animal, and sometimes we have to put up with not finding the target animal. (Smiles) For example, I spent a lot of my time looking for sidewinders and I never got 'em. And that really hurt my feelings. But myself and an expert on sidewinders spent a long time...

JL: (Laughing, because he is the referred-to sidewinder expert.) Easy, easy! I brought you out in the prime month!

SI: (With a large grin) And ya know, the weather conditions can never be that good. But we made do with what we found in the sidewinder location. And it's good television and they're beautiful animals. So we missed the sidewinders, but we got a lot of other good species and I had a really good adventure, which makes up for everything. So rarely, if ever, do we go into captivity. Our documentaries are about goin' into the wild-and what you see is what you get.

JL: More family stuff. Congratulations on your new daughter! Tell us about how you chose her name, and how she's affected your job and your behavior.

SI: Well, just four months ago the most exciting time of my entire life took place. My wife gave birth-there was a camera in there I might add, I have a bloody camera crew following me wherever I go, but there is no poo-cam in the toilet!

Anyways, Terri's givin' birth with her fingernails firmly embedded in my thigh, and this little baby pops out-I actually delivered her. Her little head came out, and our obstetrician said, "Grab it!" So I'm grabbin' it, and I'm like "Oh, my God!" and he says, "No, really, grab it!" and puts his hands around mine and made me really grab the head of this newborn child. I pulled it out, and its shoulder got caught, and I had to pull it up and "Bang!" out she came, this beautiful little baby girl.

I put it on Terri's chest and out of the blue I went, "Sweetheart, what do you think about Bindi?" And Terri responds by goin', "Bindi Sue!" So it was Bindi Sue Irwin. It stuck. Bindi is aboriginal for "young girl," but most importantly, Bindi is one of our favorite female crocodiles. She's full of guts and personality. "Sue," that's her second name, and that's after Sui, my dog. And Irwin, our family name. Bindi Sue Irwin-after a croc, my dog and our family name. We didn't want to know what gender the little baby was going to be, we wanted to keep the excitement there and it was beautiful. And so, four months later down the track I'd have to say as far as changing my lifestyle, it hasn't altered mine a great deal except for that I'm a very doting, very proud, very prejudiced father. If I look at her for any more than two minutes I start to cry. She's so beautiful. I mean she's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. It has changed Terri's life a lot. Now I'm doing these wildlife films on my own. And it's a real hummer because everything in our world is 50/50, me and Terri. But she's a very good mum. And so the last three or four wildlife films I've done I've been in very remote areas, so it's put a lot of pressure on Terri to just let the documentary thing slide and just let me do it. I don't have as much fun doing it, but pretty soon Bindi will be able to handle some of the vaccinations for Malaria or yellow fever, or whatever, and we'll be able to travel together as a family unit and all three of us will be on the wildlife documentaries. I'm pretty sure of that. It's the same with poor little Sui. I'd like to have Sui involved every step of the way but she can't go to other countries. So Bindi has changed my life a lot in that I really miss them when I'm on a wildlife shoot. Man, I could cry about it right now 'cause they're in America and I've only been back for two days, and I totally miss them.

JL: How about when you're in with the crocs or tailing a taipan...

SI: No, mate, nothing's changed. I just came back from Africa tailing black mambas, green mambas in the trees. "Woo hoo!" I never thought I'd get to see the day when I was in a tree with a green mamba! Good stuff!

JL: Since I was here last (1996) and since your show became a huge hit, I've seen the park expanding. What is the future or what do you want the future of Australia Zoo to be?

SI: People cruise around this world thinking that Terri and I are millionaires. I love that! It's a stigma that's attached to anyone that's on television. First, I've got to say that every single cent that we have earned, that we are earning, that we will earn, will go into Australia Zoo and the conservation of wildlife in this world. As an example, Australia Zoo just purchased 325 acres of prime koala habitat. And that is the new strategy of this zoo. It's that before we get koalas, we are going to secure the most important conservation thing in this world, and that is habitat. So we went out, we bought a block of land that has a diminishing colony of koalas on it, we planted 40,000 koala food trees. We are rejuvenating it back to its natural state so as this colony of koalas will flourish and get back to a very natural level. So we did that and now we've got koalas here, which are utilized to promote education about koalas, eucalyptus forest destruction and habitat destruction. And so until the day we die we probably won't have a great personal wealth, but by crikey, there's gonna be some great habitat and some beautiful conservation taking place.

JL: What about here on site? What are you going to do with all the land you just purchased next to the zoo? Is it going to be strictly Australia or are you going to move into the "big zoo" realm?

SI: Globally there is a new zoo strategy. It's called regional awareness. Our region is Australasia, which incorporates Southeast Asia Pacifica, and so we believe in it, this regional zoo approach. So we will be expanding into a regional approach to our wildlife. Currently we are going on like a bull at a gate, enhancing our native Australian mammalian species and bird species, 'cause we've already got one heck of a reptile exhibit-Australian reptile exhibit with some exotics. Soon we will be expanding into Southeast Asian or Asiatic species so we can best represent our region

JL: Are we talking elephants here?

SI: We're talkin' Indonesian elephants, man. I've just come back from Sumatra, and I'm not just gonna do elephants, I'm gonna go fair smack into Sumatra, into Way Kanbas (now so excited he's stuttering). Man, I've just come back from there, Jeff. I'm ridin' the elephants, I'm seein' with my own eyes the habitat destruction. I'm in there with the loggers, I'm catchin' wild elephants out of a crop of corn, I'm smellin' it. I'm in there talkin' to the villagers who just got rampaged by "Gladiator" the bull elephant who killed eight people, I'm feelin' it! Cameras have been in there, so do you wanna talk elephants? You wanna talk elephants with me, man? I've just come back from elephantsville! The Sumatran elephant is a subspecies of the Asiatic elephant, yeah? They're smaller, they've got more pink pigmentation on their head and ears, and so that is the elephant I'm gonna do. But what I'm gonna do, the Australia Zoo strategy, is I'm going to find out some way that I can help secure a piece of habitat that we can rejuvenate back to its natural state in Indonesia, in Sumatra, and then we'll take on the Indonesian elephant.

JL: Sounds great. We are seeing a lot more overseas topics on the show now. Is this going to continue? Are you going to come back to Australia? What do you want the future of the show to be?

SI: You know, Jeff, unfortunately I can't give you a direct answer to that because... Well, let me put it to you this way. I've got 15 brand new shows ready to go right now. They'll be seen in the next 12 months. Then I've already started work on a half-dozen more. I can't tell you where I'm gonna go, I can't tell you where I'm gonna be. Here I am at the moment with a big chunk out of my shoulder (from shoulder surgery), but I guarantee you that if big great whites (sharks) start mobbin' around our humpback whales, I'm gonna stick a chunk of Goretex in this thing and I'll be divin' with great white sharks tomorrow! Let's say the gaboon vipers start movin' in Cameroon-you'll see me in Africa next week. If there's wildlife happenin' somewhere and my heart takes me there, we're there. If you see our docos (documentaries), you'll see that we go when it's happenin', and it must drive people nuts! There's no rhyme or reason-it's because we're wildlife people, and the only way to do wildlife is when it's happenin'.

JL: So with all the traveling, you're working on animals you've never worked with. How difficult is it trying to handle animals you've never even seen in the wild before? For instance, the rattlesnakes-they're completely different from what you've ever worked with.

SI: I don't know, man, I just seem to take it all in stride. I'm really lucky that I've got a gift to go from an emu, to an orangutan, to an Indonesian elephant. Then "Bang!" over to Irian Jaya to do cus-cus and tree kangaroos, then "Whamo!" over to Africa to do mambas and crocodiles. Don't know, mate, just take it in my stride. But one thing that I do ensure is before I touch ground on the next adventure that I'm goin' on, I have literally read and researched every little thing that I can cram in during awake hours-I've gotta sleep sometime, unfortunately.

I'm also able to tap into people such as yourself and access hardcore factual information about what I'm up against before I get there. The rest is easy because I'm at one with most animals. I'm just lucky, you know, because before I could walk and talk I was in the same pouch as joey kangaroos. My mum had 12 joey kangaroos the same time I was born! But we've got some good research centers, as well, in other zoological facilities, the net, and I've got three libraries.

JL: I'm throwing this question in because I've been asked it so many times. As you know, Americans are really into Australian herps. Do you have any plans to do as many shows in Australia as you do everywhere else?

SI: Yep! Recently I haven't been spending a lot of time in Australia. I am Australian. I am the proudest Australian you are ever gonna run into-guaranteed. And I can't promise you anything except one thing: When I travel Australia, what I see you'll see. If it's a pygmy python or a tawny frogmouth and I see it and we can get our cameras out quick enough, you'll see it. My encounters are yours.

JL: Finally, what's your favorite herp?

SI: Favorite herp? Salties (saltwater crocodile). Well, do you want my favorite herp, because it's probably not fair to say a saltie is my absolute favorite. I kind of have a favorite in each category.

I'll rattle off my favorites. Salties are my No. 1. I'm pretty passionate about salties. In the venomous category, I have got a real soft spot for fierce snakes (inland taipan). I love them dearly, they are beautiful animals. In nonvenomous snakes, green pythons, Morelia viridis. Of course, out of any lizard, perenties.

JL: Yes, well done. Okay, let's get one for everybody: favorite gecko?

SI: Nephurus asper (rough knob-tailed gecko).

JL: Favorite frog?

SI: *Caerulea* (White's tree frog). Mainly because I've got so many of these little beauties right here around the park. I've got one that lives in my yard. It's like "Ruh, ruh, ruh," really nice to try and go to sleep.

JL: Any favorite colubrids?

SI: Yeah, corn snakes. Man I love corn snakes. But for the record, I'm pretty funny with Gilas, too. We found one in Gila Bend (Arizona) in March. It was cold and we were looking for snakes. He was in a rocky outcrop.

JL: Will we see this soon?

SI: Yeah, you'll see it.

JL: Excellent. Well, do you have anything else to add?

SI: Yeah, herps rule!

JL: Oh, so now it's changed from "Croc's Rule!" to "Herps Rule!"

SI: Yeah, well, you know, they're just a big herp. The biggest herp goin'!

But seriously, good luck to everyone and thank you very much (for the interview). It brings me great pride to do an interview with Reptiles Magazine. I've always been a subscriber. I've got the new issue sittin' on my table right now-eyelash vipers!

Hey, mate! I'm not givin' up on those sidewinders-I reckon third time lucky. I'm keen if you are!

JL: No problem. I'm in.

The author would like to thank Steve and Terri Irwin, Wes Mannion and the staff of Australia Zoo for their time, comments and incredible hospitality.