

NEW YORK POST TV PLUS

Cable's wild man is the scariest guy on TV

Don't touch that 'dile!

By MICHAEL GILTZ

EVERY season produces one unforgettable TV figure — the kind of personality who makes you wonder how they ever have ended up on the box.

Australian Steve Irwin is the host of the nature show "The Crocodile Hunter," but you won't find him looking for a kill.

He's more likely to shout out "She's a beauty!" to a croc that looks close enough to snap him between its jaws. Or Steve will pat it on the behind and say, "This one's got a cute butt, just like my wife."

Like the Two Fat Ladies, the British cook show hosts on the Food Channel, or weatherman Lloyd Lindsay Young before him — when Steve Irwin is on TV, it's impossible to tear your eyes away.

Steve and his wife Terri have been filming wildlife documentaries since 1992 and his brash enthusiasm — coupled with danger-defying stunts — have spread "The Crocodile Hunter" to 122 countries.

Each episode, Steve and his wife search out snake dens and then pull the hissing fellows out for a chat.

Or they float down rivers in a dinghy small enough to be chomped in two by a good-sized "freshie" (a freshwater crocodile to the uninitiated).

When he's finally found enough reptiles to his liking, Steve dives right in among them. Often, he'll wrestle a croc into the boat so Terri can hold its mouth shut while he extolls the creature's beauty or tries to cut away a net it's become tangled in.

Their humor and obliviousness to danger is the type of television that makes you pick up the phone, call a friend and tell him, "You've gotta watch this."

Future episodes will find Steve swimming with sharks, rolling on the ground in front of African bull elephants and generally risking his life to get an up-close gander at some of the fiercest creatures on the planet.

Here in the U.S., it's the top-rated show on the cable channel Animal Planet. And no wonder.

When Steve gleefully describes a snake's bite as "more potent than a Mike Tyson punch" or clambers around the Outback sporting khakis and a boyish grin, it's clear he's the latest in a long line of TV eccentrics.

Siskel and Ebert attract viewers who haven't been to the movies since "The Graduate" came out — but love watching the two critics bicker and fight.

Likewise, Steve's appeal reaches far beyond animal



TV's answer to Crocodile Dundee, Steve Irwin, does the wild thing with his wife Terri (inset with crawling friend). Marathons of their show "Crocodile Hunter" will run on the Animal Planet cable channel on New Year's Eve and on the Discovery Channel on New Year's Day.

lovers. And the media knows a star-in-the-making when it sees one. NBC's "Dateline" flew to Australia to catch him in action. "The Tonight Show with Jay Leno" had him on as a guest, and "The Late Show with David Letterman" deemed him ripe for satire.

(Those new to Irwin's charms can catch up when "Crocodile Hunter" marathons run on Animal Planet this New Year's Eve and on the Discovery Channel on New Year's Day.)

Watching a quarterback get sacked isn't nearly as exciting as seeing Steve crouch down in front of a hissing Western Diamondback snake and say pleasantly, "She's a bit grumpy," while you and your friends place bets as to when it will strike.

In fact, he's never been seriously hurt, though Irwin did recently have reconstructive surgery on his shoulder after

what Terri describes as "years of abuse from catching pigs, wrestling crocs, and falling out of trees." (Seems he's a greatest danger to himself than any wild animal.)

The couple — imagine Marlon Perkins of "Wild Kingdom" with a sense of humor and a smart, beautiful wife — chat amiably from Australia Zoo, their privately owned preserve in Beerwah, Queensland, Australia.

"Mate, I've just come back from Africa," says Steve, who spent about a month there filming new shows and spreading his conservation message.

Terri couldn't be on that trip because she'd just given birth to their first child, a girl called Bindi Sue — named, naturally, after one of their favorite crocodiles, Bindi, and Steve's dog, Sui. (Bindi is also the aboriginal word for "little girl.")

Terri chose this life, but Steve,

36, was born into it. His father, Bob, started the preserve Steve now runs and had him working with crocodiles from the age of 9.

Both of them share an innate ability to work with animals in the wild — to "become at one with them," as Steve puts it — and instinctively know when to crouch down in front of a snake or roll on the ground towards some buffalo because walking on two feet might unnerve them.

"It's a matter of eye contact, watching body posture, and understanding threats," explains Steve.

Besides, Steve knows better than to let himself make a silly mistake and get hurt by an animal. "My dad's been bitten by venomous snakes and had his life flash in front of him and he made this little rule up: If you ever get bitten by a venomous snake, you're gonna hope you die from it because I'm gonna kick your bottom until your nose bleeds. So I live in fear of my dad more than snakes."

