



SNAKE EYES: Cowin with an Arizona Mountain King in the Chiricahua Mountains.

JEFF

On camera, he gets attacked by hyenas, drooled

CORWIN'S

on by bears, and tormented by howler monkeys.

WILD

Off camera, things get even weirder. Three days on the road

LIFE

with the world's greatest nature-show host.

BY JOSH DEAN

Before the back hatch is even open, you notice it: a muffled hiss, like someone shaking a coffee can half full of dried corn. "You hear that?" Jeff Corwin asks the valet, a small Latino man handing over the keys to the rented Ford Excursion. Corwin points to three white tubs, each one covered with a fine mesh screen and emitting a differently pitched hiss. "Snakes."

"Malo!" the valet yelps, hopping back a good two steps.

"Rattlesnakes, actually," Corwin says, tipping one of the tubs forward to reveal a curled serpent with black bands. "This little guy is a Mohave — one of the deadliest rattlesnakes on earth." The

valet retreats another few steps, his eyes huge, as Corwin tips the tub even further. "Don't worry, it's locked," he says, the corners of his mouth upturning. "I think."

One of the bellmen at this Los Angeles Hilton, a towering man in a square cap, has been standing to the side, taking things in. "Do you know who this is?" he asks the valet, not bothering to stifle his own laughter. "This is Mr. Jeff Corwin, from Animal Planet. And these are his snakes."

Well, sort of. The rattlers are actually troublemakers, rescued

from backyards around L.A. Corwin will return them to the wild in Palm Springs, using only his "snake stick" — a bent golf club he stashes protectively under the front seat of the Excursion — to keep them at bay. But the real purpose behind this trip is to spend three days in Mammoth Lakes in search of the American black bear. Also along for the ride are four twenty-something California freelancers: Glenn, the cameraman; Dan, the soundman; Judd, the field producer; and Gary, the production assistant. Collectively, they are *The Jeff Corwin Experience*, TV's smartest, quirkiest nature show, an hour-long animal extravaganza named for the skintight-T-shirt-wearing herpetologist who slings pop-culture references like a *SportsCenter* anchor and receives fan mail from gay men and also from decidedly heterosexual women prone to attaching photos of themselves in lacy undergarments.

The tradition of nature shows is long and proud, but the hosts who have historically introduced us to the likes of the rufous-naped tamarin — burly, well-enunciated men like David Attenborough, Boyd Matson, and Marlin



Perkins — have done so from a distance, whispering about the animals from the safe cover of shrubbery. The thirty-three-year-old Corwin, like his fellow reptile-loving iconoclast Steve Irwin (a.k.a. the Crocodile Hunter), has come crashing from the bushes. The two, whose shows air back to back during Animal Planet's Sunday prime time, are brash, no-fear naturalists who not only traverse the globe in search of exotic-wildlife encounters but actually track, chase, and fondle the wild beasts, poisonous reptiles, and gnarly-rooted varmints.

Sure, the Croc Hunter is fun to watch, but his shtick — Aussie slang and alligator wrassling — can be redrawn only so many ways. Corwin, on the other hand, has the range and quick-wittedness of an improv comedian. Any episode of *The Experience* will include at least a half-dozen moments of impromptu zaniness — say, Corwin pretending to be sucked under a murky rice paddy by a reticulated python, or projecting the voice of Ah-nuld Schwarzenegger onto a particularly muscular toad. And then there's the Borneo episode. In it, Corwin (going against his guide's direction) creeps up on a herd of Asian elephants, even as a large bull trumpets and threatens to charge. "It's very important that we hold our ground," he says to the camera,

JOSH DEAN wrote about the world of cyberathletes in the April 2001 issue.

and to his crew, all of whom seem ready to turn and run. "If they sense fear, they'll use it." He then switches to his favorite fake voice, a rebbishy Brooklynese. "What you do in the privacy of your own pants is your business." Suddenly, the elephant is plowing through the bush, and *The Experience* is running for its collective life. Eventually, the bull breaks off his charge and Corwin turns to the camera. Although out of breath, his voice shaky with fear, the nature boy is grinning. "Like I said, whatever you do, don't run."

It's exactly the kind of moment that makes Corwin's show so compelling. He's risked his neck, he's made you laugh, and you have no idea what's going to happen next. Because he doesn't either.

The first rule

of a successful nature show is this: Deliver the animals. As much as it appears that your average nature host just stumbles upon his prey (though, admittedly, this does happen), more often than not, he knows where to look. And this is largely due to the hiring of local experts.

In Mammoth Lakes, Steve Searles, master of all things ursine, is slumped in a chair in the lobby of the Juniper Springs Lodge, waiting for *The Experience* to arrive. It would be impossible to overstate the verisimilitude of Searles's mountain-man look: wild eyes, scraggly beard, salt-and-pepper ponytail poking out from under a Humane Society hat. He wears a denim Bear Affairs button-down — Bear Affairs is the name of his bear-encounter consulting business and the clothing line that accompanies it — and a brass bear-claw belt buckle. Steve Searles smokes cigarillos, and he's pretty sure he can take us to a bear. He's scouted out the area's bear-dens-in-progress, and he checks them daily, "just like a paper route." One, in a culvert on a golf course just a mile or so away, is currently occupied. This will be our first stop.

The course is tucked smack against the Sierras, its tree lines indistinguishable from those that stretch over the mountains into Nevada. As *The Experience* takes in the scenery, a twosome meanders by in a golf cart, oblivious to what may be sleeping under their fairway. Corwin pokes his head into one of three side-by-side-by-side drainage pipes. Empty. Then another. *Rrrrrrrggggghh* — the pipe reverberates with a guttural growl. Judd flinches, Dan hops back, and Glenn nearly drops his camera. Corwin chuckles. The growl was, of course, his. "Sorry," he says. "Nothing." Steve peeks into the third pipe and motions for a flashlight. There, seventy-five feet into the culvert, is a dark lump with two yellow eyes, which quickly vanish out the back side when blasted by a flashlight.

In hot pursuit, *The Experience* hurries across the fairway, passing a set of very fresh, very distinct bear tracks in an otherwise perfectly groomed sand trap, and then a pile of very fresh, very distinct bear poop under a tree. Corwin stops and hovers over it, then begins to poke at it with a stick. "Hey, Judd," he says, utterly serious. "Let's remember to shoot the shit tomorrow."

And then, from nowhere, Steve is galloping our way, gesturing wildly down a trail. "Holy fuck," he's saying (*fuck* being Steve's favorite word). "He's in the tree." And so he is — four hundred pounds of American black bear, thirty feet up a ponderosa pine. Excitement ripples through the crew; these moments, after all, are few and far between. To paraphrase a favorite expression of pilots, filming nature shows is a lot like flying: moments of sheer adrenaline punctuating many tedious hours of traipsing through beautiful, if empty, landscapes. Bounding forward, Corwin begins his ad-libbed monologue. "Now you know," he says to the camera, "if you're running from a bear, never climb a tree. Oh, my gosh. Look at this!"

"Look at this" is the closest thing to a catchphrase that Corwin has, and he unloads it often, with the kind of pitch you'd hear from a child who's discovered Santa Claus in a box of Keebler's. Typically, Corwin follows "Look at this" with words like "beautiful" — as in "Look at this! Look at this beautiful creature, this gorgeous green eyelash viper!" If possible, and especially if the specimen in question is a snake, Corwin will pick it up and tell its story, dispensing a litany of scientific minutiae that materialize unrehearsed.

Obviously, picking up the bear is out of the question. Especially this particular bear, which is still climbing. It settles in, its chin overhanging a branch. Drool drips from its mouth as it snarls and swipes at the air with a paw. The host wipes his coil. "That's really cool. I have bear drool on my head!" He grins and continues his lesson. "The black bear has an amazing sense of smell. This beautiful creature could detect the presence of bird's eggs in this tree from the ground."

The bear huffs and climbs higher still.

"Although he is technically a carnivore, the American black bear is actually more of an omnivore. . . . Ninety percent of what he eats is vegetation. . . . Four hundred pounds is average weight for a well-fed male bear. . . . This boar [male bear] can fold into a thirty-mile-per-hour sprint. . . . In North America, he's second in size only to the grizzly."

Corwin stops and puts his hands on his knees; he gets so wound up sometimes that he needs to pause for breath. Leaning into the lens, he gestures toward the branches at the bear's crotch. "He's definitely a boar." Pause for smirk. "And he should be mighty proud."

It didn't immediately occur to Jeff Corwin, who grew up the son of a Boston cop, that showbiz was his calling. He liked snakes, this he knew, so after four years at Bridgewater State College, he headed south to Belize — biology and anthropology degrees in tow — to work at a research station in the rainforest. In 1994, fate struck. An educational-documentary crew rolled into camp and hired Corwin to be an expedition naturalist, to track down wildlife. Corwin ended up on camera, and he liked it so much that he moved home and waited tables for four years until the Disney Channel bought his pitch for a humorous animal show for kids called *Going Wild with Jeff Corwin*.

The show shut down after two seasons, a respectable run for cable, but Corwin wasn't done. When Carole Tomko, vice-president of development at Animal Planet, saw a tape of funny outtakes from *Going Wild*, she decided to give him his own series. "The thing about Jeff," Tomko says, "is that he's an expert in natural history, but he also has this wicked sense of humor, and a remarkable ability to consistently reach back and pull out one-liners — on anything from *The Brady Bunch* to an old show tune. He's just a natural, with great timing, who can flow right into a joke and then right back out into facts about the venom of a snake."

Now Corwin spends nine months per year traveling to such far-flung locales as Madagascar and Guyana in search of enough varmints to fill thirteen episodes — leaving his wife, Tasha, a sassy Russian-born blonde five years his junior, home to work on her Ph.D. in literature. The distance is trouble enough, but Tasha's biggest challenge may be this: She's left on a twenty-two-acre Massachusetts island to tend to Corwin's ever-expanding brood — at last count, three cats, an alligator snapping turtle, one of the largest toads in captivity, a big-eared African fennac fox, and, of course, eight snakes. Unlike her husband, Tasha is not a huge fan of snakes.

There is also the fact that, being all male and being mostly young, The

Experience likes to have a good time. Touring the world with no women, and no real authority figure unless you count the host, The Experience behaves like a wildlife-worshipping rock band — in the wilds by day, in bars by night. Which is why, with the black-bear money shot nailed, it has descended upon La Sierra's, a weird Mexican/Italian restaurant/dance club/dive bar that is a Mammoth off-season hot spot. Dinner is over, and with it three or four rounds of top-shelf margaritas (Corwin's favorite: Hornitos tequila and Grand Mamier), wine, and one froufrou cocktail that shall not be discussed publicly. And now, in the midst of the Mammoth locals, a goateed fellow in a ski cap is eyeing Corwin rather conspicuously. You can see him sussing out the situation, mustering courage, and then — *will he? yes, he will!* — he approaches. The closer he gets, the more apparent it becomes that the kid is stoned out of his mind; his eyes are blood-red and glassy.

"Duuuude," he says to Corwin. "Did anyone ever tell you you look like that guy from Animal Planet?"

"I get that sometimes."

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Corwin, famous by only the most liberal of definitions, is still not hard to spot. He's handsome, for sure, but what makes him memorable is a look that Tomko calls "his uniform" and that begins with a short-sleeved shirt. This shirt is tight, it is iridescent, it is either blue or yellow, and it is invariably tucked into a pair of small pleated shorts or, on cold days like this one, into a pair of snug blue jeans. Completed with low-top hikers and a braided belt, and topped off with short brown hair sculpted into a prefab cowlick, Corwin is perma-trapped in the no man's land between geeky and cool.

The stoner turns back to his girl. "Dude, he looks just like that guy." She whispers something and he nods. "Yeah, right. Jeff Corwin." He whirls. "Dude, you are him! Lemme ask you something, man," he says, addressing the subject that is now unavoidable. "How do I get rid of these red eyes?"

"Witch hazel," Corwin answers. The stoner thanks him effusively, oblivious that this is horrifically bad advice and that witch hazel will burn like mad if he ever chooses to put it in his eyes. This isn't exactly textbook public relations, but if you spend any time at all with Corwin, you will quickly see that it isn't only animals he likes to have fun with. Last September, while taping in Florida, The Experience was at an Ocala honky-tonk when Corwin was asked to be the guest judge of an amateur bodybuilding contest (which Glenn, the cameraman, entered, stripping to his boxers, performing half-naked karate, and placing third). "If I hadn't been drinking," Corwin says, recalling

the blurry eve, "I might have realized it was a little odd to be the only man judging an all-male bodybuilding competition alongside Miss Cracker Barrel." And that's only the second-best story of the night. On the way to the bar, The Experience's rented SUV pushing forty on a two-lane highway, Corwin climbed out a back window, across the roof, and back in the other side. "Judd was totally freaking out," Glenn told me, reveling in the memory. "He was the only one who didn't find it funny."

Paired with his apparent disregard for ferocious animals, these alcohol-sodden tales might lead you to believe that Jeff Corwin has little regard for his body. This is not the case. Jeff Corwin, whose pecs fairly bulge from under his T-shirts, is a health nut, a reformed "fat kid" who runs forty miles a week and subsists on rabbit food, steamed veggies, and turkey and chicken dishes ordered "dry." He carries a bottle of Wish-Bone Fat Free Italian Dressing and a squeeze tube of French's mustard. He asks for fat-free meals on airlines and requests that restaurants cook his food without oil or butter. "When I eat on the road," he explains one day between bites of a mayo-free turkey sandwich, "I'm basically just eating to stay alive." Then, swallowing his mouthful of dry bread, "And yes, I know we drink two days' worth of calories at night."

Somehow hangover-free, The Experience is bright-eyed if not bushy-tailed as it revisits the sand trap and the pile of bear dung that, at 8 A.M., is no longer steaming. As Corwin pokes at it, Glenn, free of sarcasm, says, "I'm having a lot of trouble getting you and the poop in the shot. Could you get your head a little closer to the poop?"

There's a bigger problem: The lighting. Eight A.M. looks nothing like 6 P.M. (when the dung was originally discovered), what with the bright morning sun, long shadows, and lack of orangey sunset tones. But The Experience is resilient; it sees an opportunity. What if the chance black-bear encounter were crafted into a narrative? What if Jeff Corwin is seeking out the elusive *Ursus americanus* and this pile of poo is the first clue on the trail? (When you see the show, the bear will come last, after what appears to be a long, difficult search; in truth, they found it immediately, within two hours of hitting town. Granted, this is taking a bit of creative license, but this is reality-based entertainment as much as it's scientific hoo-ha, and what's a little edge-blurring in the name of viewer enjoyment?)

So the "search" then proceeds to a bear trail, a tree with bear scratches, a bear's "daybed" (exactly what it suggests), a second tree gutted by a bear in search of grubs, and finally to an abandoned ski cottage. The cottage is ramshackle, with holes in the roof, broken windows, and no front door. And under it, an empty bear den that Steve thinks is being prepared for the oncoming winter.

"Why don't you shoot me like we just came upon this abandoned house?" Corwin suggests, wielding his creative license.

He spits out an intro but isn't happy with it; it requires three takes and includes a slightly lame *Friday the 13th* reference ("Hello, Mrs. Voorhees? I'm selling cookies to benefit Camp Crystal Lake!"), but the ad-libbing is impressive. There is no script, and yet time and again, he nails just the right TV-ready phrase. This time: "Although it has no value to humans, to a bear this is prime real estate."

Inside, a bear has de-upholstered a couch that's been left behind,

**"I DON'T CARE IF IT'S A
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ripped away the cushions and foam to use as bedding underneath the house. Corwin explains the carnage but finds himself struggling to connect it to the empty den he wants to show off.

"And, so, let's head down below," he says, apropos of nothing.

"Do you know why you're doing that?" Judd asks, in good producer form. "It's cooler if we know *why* you're going down there. Here's what I think: I think you come in, you see the couch, and you understand what it means because you're Jeff Corwin."

Being Jeff Corwin means knowing about all the animals and having the answers to the many fauna-related questions that pop up along the way. But that's not all it means. Sometimes, Corwin must fulfill the first rule of a successful nature show — Deliver the animals — himself. He recalls building an entire *Going Wild* episode around giant leatherback turtles coming ashore to lay eggs in Costa Rica. Turtles that have shown up every year, eon upon eon, in droves. "It was during El Niño and just a single turtle came up," he says. "She saw me and went right back in the water. That was it. That was the feature animal for the show." Trouble is, failure isn't an option. *The Jeff Corwin Experience* is a cable program, and cable programs are not in the business of writing off month-long jaunts to Guyana or Borneo or Costa Rica. "We have to deliver an entertaining show," Corwin says. "And I don't care if it's a freaking earthworm. I will make it exciting if I have to."

Another of the unwritten rules of nature shows is this: The host shall be frequently imperiled by wildlife. And like any host worth his pleated safari shorts, Corwin has seen his share of scratches, scrapes, and near-maulings. There has been, in no particular order of severity, a case of the bends, a shoulder bite from a young tiger in Thailand, a lion that tried to swallow his head, a bear bite on his wrist, a striped hyena that got a mouthful of his ass in South Africa, and, of course, the snakebites. Getting "nailed," as Corwin says, by a snake that can shut down your central nervous system is a snake man's greatest danger. (A bite from a venomous krait killed famed herpetologist J.B. Slowinski in Myanmar during the writing of this story.) "But I never used to have any fear of it," Corwin says. "If I was jogging and found a venomous snake, I'd catch him and finish my run, carrying him back so I could photograph him and take notes." Now a married man and well aware of his mortality, Corwin is more pragmatic. "I get nailed by nonvenomous snakes a lot. But when I grab one that's venomous, all I can think is, 'Don't get bitten.'"

Which brings us to the near-death story. Back [continued on page 88]

including a big corporation" — a big corporation, it's worth noting, that five years after Carlos's death helped engineer a brutal CIA-backed coup against the Guatemalan government, whose land-reform efforts had peeved Guatemala's largest landowner, United Fruit. Would a company that had finagled a coup that installed a bloody regime to guard its financial stakes have even blinked at knocking off an American dropout to save a little face? Carlos Kayum is unequivocal: Of course not.

I followed all paths, seeking our leads — rumors that Carlos had been killed by a Lacandón over a woman. Or that he was actually shot in the head. Or that he and Gomez drowned in the Lacanjá, crossing some nasty rapids while Morales (who's since dropped from sight and, like Healey, is probably dead) filmed them from shore. I hunted missing reels of film, missing journal pages, reports from autopsies never performed. Much as I regret it, I even asked Carlos Kayum if we could dig up his mother's coffin to get at his father's skull. (He was receptive, but Mexican law, he said, forbade it.)

Finally, with the aid of a river guide and two young Lacandónes, I paddled up and down the Lacanjá, thinking the answer might be somewhere along its green turns. The Lacanjá — still undammed and, in many places, precisely the same as it was in 1949 — is a mostly calm, cloudy river studded at intervals with cascades ranging from mere ripples to Class III rapids, with an occasional waterfall as high as several yards. But to drown on the Lacanjá would require a freakish accident; we capsized ourselves, to little effect, and while we experimented with the river — sending our unmanned boat into rapids to gauge their strengths — we found no glaring hazards, nor answers, only more watery questions. Back in the riverside village of Lacanjá Chansayab, I asked an old Lacandón woman if she remembered anyone else having drowned in the river. "No one," she replied, and smiled a gaptoothed smile. "The Lacanjá," she told me, "is very easy." That night, camped beside the river, I listened to the wet static of a tributary pouring into the Lacanjá and to a jungle overwhelmed with insect chant — a jungle far smaller now than when Carlos zigzagged through it, and so feverishly logged and burned that scientists predict it will vanish altogether within fifteen years, just three years after the Mayan calendar is set to expire. Did the Lacanjá swallow Carlos Frey, or was he fed to it? No one can say. There is blood on this continent that can sometimes take a thousand years to expose. **①**

JEFF CORWIN *continued from page 66*

when Corwin was just a working-stiff biologist at the research station in Belize, long before he was semifamous and on TV, he was out in the jungles studying snakes. And one evening, after a long day of research, he decided to take a hike — alone, in sandals — and came upon a coral snake. Being a snake guy, young and unafraid, Corwin approached, and before he could react — bam! — one of the deadliest snakes on earth had nailed him on the toe. Know that when a coral snake bites a normal, healthy man, he has about four hours to get antivenin. And know that Jeff Corwin, freshly bitten and extremely pissed off at his own carelessness, was a good two hours from anything, and so he set off through the brush, unsure of whether he'd get to a phone, let alone antivenin, in time to save himself. Doing his best not to panic (increased heart rate only pumps the poison faster through the body), he came upon a British school, which had no serum but did have a phone. The school called the British embassy, and it was hastily decided through appropriate diplomatic channels that rescue could be arranged. A chopper was dispatched and so Corwin made it. Barely.

"My wife was back home in Boston, and the U.S. ambassador called to tell her that I was bitten and that there was a chance I wouldn't survive," he recalls. You would expect a wife to be alarmed, or terrified, or maybe to collapse in prayer or a paroxysm of Hail Marys. This is what Tasha Corwin said to the kindhearted ambassador: "Is my husband conscious?"

He is.

"Could you please give him a message?"

Naturally.

"Tell him: 'I want you to know before you die that I'm going to cut off the heads of all your fucking snakes.'"

Corwin tells this story, appropriately enough, as the rattlers hiss to life in the back of the Excursion, en route to Palm Springs. The snakes rattle every time the truck's doors are opened or closed, and especially when it hits a pothole. "I guess I could've been upset," he suggests, rightfully, considering that your average husband might not appreciate dark humor with his life hanging in the balance. Corwin smirks as he tears at a strip of fresh jerky, his favorite high-protein, low-fat snack. "But I just said, 'Yep, that's my honey.'" **①**

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