



8. **Billabong**

Billabongs, creeks and mangroves are cool, calm places amidst the burning desert sands. They are also home to Australia's largest predator, the crocodile. These four stories show how overwhelmingly powerful the crocodile is. There's the story of the glamorous US model, trapped in waist-deep water between a cliff face and an approaching crocodile; the inspiring account of a 60-year-old woman who jumps onto the back of a 4.2 metre croc to save a friend; and there's the story of two young men who spend 22 hours clinging to a tree while the crocodile that took their mate waits patiently below. But first, the young German tourist who lost her life in a billabong, a story that shows how one brief moment is all it takes for a crocodile to strike.

CROCODILE

Crocodiles have been around for about 200 million years, so they are pretty much at home in their environment: the creeks, billabongs and coastal regions of northern Australia. They can walk on land—freshwater crocs can get to up to 17-18 kilometres per hour in a short burst of speed—but they are in their element in the water. In the water they are stealthy, strong and silent. They can float along with only their eyes and nostrils showing, making them extremely difficult to see. In deep water, they dive under, swim towards the surface in an arc and then suddenly strike, grabbing unwary birds, water buffalo and, occasionally, humans from below. They give their victims no time to cry out as they are dragged under and their lungs begin to fill with water. Most human deaths by crocodile are not from having limbs ripped off or being eaten alive. Most deaths by crocodile are from drowning.

THE TOUR GUIDE WHO MADE A FATAL MISTAKE

<i>Name:</i>	Isabel von Jordan
<i>Age:</i>	23 years old
<i>Nationality:</i>	German
<i>Incident:</i>	Crocodile attack
<i>When:</i>	23 October 2002
<i>Where:</i>	Kakadu National Park, Northern Territory
<i>Outcome:</i>	Fatal

This is the story of a highly experienced tour guide, two German sisters and a four-day wilderness adventure in Kakadu. It's the story of how the guide let his group go for a swim in a billabong on a warm balmy evening and how the night was shattered by a sudden vicious crocodile attack. It's the story of trying to piece together how this could possibly happen. Why did the guide give the go-ahead? Why did he let the travellers in his care swim in a waterhole that was home to at least eight large salt water crocodiles? Why did the group ignore the signs clearly warning of the danger?

A dream job

Glenn Robless was not a novice. He had thirteen years' experience in the tourism industry in the Northern Territory. According to a guide who worked with him, he was one of the best tour guides around. And he had a job that left desk-bound workers gasping. He got to take travellers through some of Australia's most awesome landscapes in Kakadu National Park, an area so ancient and extraordinary that it makes you rethink all your dreams. Here he would show visitors Aboriginal rock carvings tens of thousands of years old, beautiful bird life, breathtaking scenery. And every so often there would be bright yellow warning signs. WARNING. ACHTUNG. CROCODILES. Big bold letters in English, German and Japanese.

In October 2002, one such tour started up with eight or nine keen tourists, mainly young overseas backpackers. There was a young Brit from Essex, James Rothwell, who had been travelling around Australia for two-and-a-half months. There was a German woman, Carmen Willie. And there were two German sisters, Valerie and Isabel von Jordan. Valerie was 21 and Isabel was 23. To celebrate Isabel's graduation from an interior design course in Munich, they had set off on a three-month holiday through Thailand, Indonesia and on to Australia. It would be the holiday of a lifetime. But for all the wrong reasons.

Things had started to go wrong in Indonesia. October 2002 was when the island of Bali was rocked by a terrorist attack that left 202 dead including 88 Australians. Isabel and Valerie weren't in the Sari Club that

night but they knew some who were. In the aftermath, Bali was chaotic and they didn't want to stay. So they decided to fly to Darwin, visit their injured friends now in Royal Darwin Hospital and then see the sights. They signed up for a four-day tour to Kakadu led by Glenn Robless.

It was Tuesday evening, the last night of their trip. The group were camping near Sandy Creek Billabong, about 35 kilometres south of Jabiru. There was a full moon over the water, the air was warm, the sky had a million stars. What could be more inviting than a midnight dip? There were at least three signs warning people not to swim because of crocodiles. But sometimes people ignore the signs ...

Glenn knew there were crocodiles in the billabong. It was local knowledge that it was home to at least eight large saltwater crocs or 'salties'. He had taken groups there to wash, but he had never taken anyone swimming until that night. The thing that swayed him was a pile of mussel shells on the beach. His conclusion was that Aboriginal women had been in the water earlier to collect them, meaning the billabong must be safe. He shone his torch across the water, looking for 'eyeshine', the reflection of a croc's eyes in the beam of light.

Later, a traditional Aboriginal owner, Jessie Alderson, would tell the Coroner's court that 'eyeshine' is not a good test in a place like Sandy Billabong because it is so big.

The decision to swim

Glenn didn't see any sign of crocodiles. One rightly cautious backpacker asked him three times if it was safe to swim. Glenn replied that he was sure it was safe, but he had just wanted to check with a torch anyway. And with that, he jumped in.

Glenn seemed safety-conscious and sensible to the group; they trusted his judgement. A group of nine young people went for a swim. They splashed around, having a great time and dunking each other. One of the group, Andrew Waters from Britain, sat on the beach, trying to master the harder-than-it-looks art of playing the didgeridoo. After a while, Glenn



got out of the water and went back to camp to invite another tour group to join in the fun.

Glenn was on his way back with some more campers when it happened out of the blue. A couple of swimmers felt something bump into them. But with all the energetic splashing, they didn't take much notice. James Rothwell thought one of his friends was playing a prank. Later he realised it was a crocodile that had bumped his leg.

'We were about 10 metres out from the shore, all within sight and arm's length of each other,' he recalled. 'I felt a bang on my leg and seconds later heard a girl scream and the girl went under the water. First of all I thought it was people mucking around ...'

From the edge of the water, Andrew with his didgeridoo heard the screams. He too thought it was someone playing a bad joke. But then there was more yelling to get out of the water and a frenzied scramble to shore. The small group stood on the sand, dripping and scared. And when they counted everyone, they realised that one of them was missing.

'We got to the shore,' James said, 'shone torches on the water and we saw with the torches two red eyes going away from where the girl had just gone under and we saw the outline of a crocodile sort of swimming along the surface of the water.' The crocodile had struck without warning from below, clamping its jaws around Isabel von Jordan and dragging her under.

Hunt

One of the swimmers grabbed a satellite phone and rang for help. Police from Jabiru arrived on the scene. In no fit state to help, the tour group went back to their campsite and spent a dark night wondering why. Kakadu National Park rangers launched a massive hunt for the saltwater crocodile. They worked through the night—for seven long hours—searching the billabong for any trace of Isabel's body. They found the eight crocs known to inhabit the billabong but it was daybreak before they found what they were looking for.



6.15am. Rangers, torches in hand, were in a small boat in a tributary of the South Alligator River, about two kilometres from where Isabel had gone missing. It was still dark when their torchlight caught the form of a large saltwater crocodile. As the sun rose, everyone's worst fears were realised.

'We travelled towards it,' said Ranger Greg Ryan, 'and I noticed, as we came within metres of that crocodile ... (that it) had what appeared to me to be a child.' It was the slightly built figure of Isabel von Jordan. The crocodile swam under the boat with the victim's body in its mouth.

It was a giant crocodile, 4.6 metres long and weighing about 500 kilograms. They harpooned it and it let go of the body. But an even larger croc then took up a defensive stance near the body, making it difficult to retrieve. The body was finally retrieved under about three metres of water by rangers using ropes and a hook, all the time being menaced by the second crocodile. Soon after, the German diplomatic representative in Darwin escorted Valerie von Jordan to Darwin airport where she caught a plane home to Munich.

Criminal charges?

Police considered charging Glenn Robless with manslaughter but this was later changed to the lesser charge of committing a dangerous act causing death. In 2003, he pleaded guilty to 'a dangerous omission causing death'. The Supreme Court found that the fault lay in 'the unforeseeable actions of an otherwise well-qualified tour guide, who made a horrible error of judgement'. He was given a three-year suspended jail sentence.

An inquest into the death of Isabel von Jordan in September 2004 found that the injuries she sustained from the crocodile bite—cutting her left lung and fracturing her ribs—were not life-threatening; it was found she had died from drowning.



Did you know?

Why did the crocodile brush past James Rothwell? We'll never know. But a Kakadu ranger who had been involved in the crocodile search had an interesting slant on the subject. Garry Lindner suggested that the crocodile had attacked Isabel von Jordan because she was small and female. He said that he had once seen a crocodile threaten a boatload of women and completely ignore a nearby boat of men. 'With due respect to the women in court,' he explained during the inquest, 'I have always wondered whether the menstrual cycle—or something like that—had something to do with the crocodile's behaviour.'

THE GLAMOROUS MODEL AND THE CROCODILE

Name:	Ginger Meadows
Age:	24 years old
Nationality:	American
Incident:	Crocodile attack
When:	29 March 1987
Where:	Prince Regent River, Western Australia
Outcome:	Fatal

This story is an instant attention-grabber because it involves a beautiful young American model/actress. It doesn't matter that no-one seems to know exactly what acting or modelling she ever did, what matters is the image of a young starlet ending her life in the jaws of a crocodile. There are many references to Ginger Faye Meadows. She is consistently recorded in 'On This Day' chronologies for 29 March in Australian newspapers and



is regularly referred to in books about crocodile attacks in Australia.

Those familiar with the story will know that Ginger Meadows jumped into a tidal pool and tried to outswim a crocodile. Which seems an incredible thing to do. But Ginger's actions that morning weren't as foolhardy as they first appear. In fact, on reading her story, you may come round to thinking that you might have done exactly the same thing.

Crocodile country

Ginger Meadows, from Snowmass Village, Colorado, was holidaying in Australia to get away from it all, especially a marriage that had gone sour. The ex-model was keen to see crocodile country in the north of Australia after having laughed her way through *Crocodile Dundee*, the blockbuster Oz movie of 1986.

She landed in Fremantle on the coast of Western Australia in late 1987, right in the middle of America's Cup fever. The fever pitch was pretty frenetic because Australia was defending the Cup for the first time ever, after *Australia II*'s illustrious 1983 victory. Ginger enjoyed the atmosphere of the yacht-crazy port city and then continued on her way.

She took a ride on the Lady G, a 33-metre luxury cruiser heading north from Perth to Darwin. On board was the Captain, Bruce Fitzpatrick; the chef, Jane Burchett; engineer Steve Hilton and Madeleine Janes, the stewardess. It was a Sunday when they anchored near the mouth of Prince Regent River on the north coast of the Kimberley, about 250 kilometres NE of Derby. This river is known for two things: a magnificent freshwater waterfall and a large population of saltwater crocodiles.

They all went up-river in a smaller boat—known as a tender—to explore the region. They found the waterfall, the majestic Kings Cascade. Kings Cascade is a photographer's dream: a spectacular multi-tiered series of falls with water cascading down like icing on a massive wedding cake. Completing the picture was an idyllic tidal pool renewed by refreshing spring water all year round. The perfect place for a swim. Bruce Fitzpatrick brought the boat right up to the falls and the four



aboard all climbed out onto the ledge and started to explore. Then Bruce took the boat up-river where he stayed and took some photos, looking back at the group against the cliff. He then came back, tied the boat up at the base of the waterfall and began to climb the 30 metre cliff face.

Ginger Meadows and Jane Burchett had just started to climb the cliff when Ginger realised she'd forgotten her camera, so they went back to the boat to get it. Bruce recalls seeing them in the boat when he was about halfway up the cliff. Having retrieved the camera, the two women swam back across the pool towards the rock ledge. Looking down from the cliff top, Bruce saw them in the water. He also saw a three-four metre crocodile swimming towards them.

Trapped

He shouted a warning and yelled out for Steve to get the boat and get the women out. Screaming, they scurried out of the water up onto the ledge under the waterfall. There they stood in waist-deep water. It was a nightmare scenario. A crocodile coming towards them and a sheer rock face behind. And they were not even on dry land, but in water where the crocodile is in its element. The two terrified women were trapped.

The crocodile was less than five metres away now. Jane tried to scare it off by throwing a shoe at it. The shoe hit the crocodile on the head which made it stop. Chillingly, it looked at them. And then it submerged.

Ginger panicked. Or miscalculated. Or both. She dived into the water, trying to reach the bank 25 metres away. She only made it a couple of metres. The crocodile lunged at her, grabbing her by the hips and dragging her down below the surface. It brought her up to the surface three times. The final time, she was lifeless.

Finding the body

Searching for the remains of a crocodile victim is complex and time-consuming. The search was called off late on Monday because of 10-metre tides and generator problems with the Lady G. It resumed at first light on Tuesday. Ginger's mutilated body was found that day on some tidal flats about one kilometre from where she was taken. Her remains were put in a body bag and transported back up the river in a smallish seven-metre boat. The boat had travelled about 15 kilometres up-river when a 3.5-metre crocodile leapt more than a metre out of the water, snapped at the body bag and ripped it open. The animal was frightened off by a gunshot.

Ginger's estranged husband, Duane McCaulley, from Aspen, Colorado spoke briefly with her parents before taking off for Australia. He arrived the day her body was found. He was unable to ID the body because of the state it was in. In cases like this, police rely on dental records and so Broome police contacted the US Consulate to arrange for her dental records to be made available. But her husband didn't think she had a single filling, such is the curse of perfect teeth.

Duane McCaulley accompanied the body to Perth for the post-mortem. Apparently, he was so distressed that the flight attendant and her boyfriend let him stay at their place for a few days afterwards to recover. Then he flew home to the US with the remains of his estranged wife.

In the weeks that followed, cruise organisations received a number of enquiries from overseas tourists who wanted to go to the Kimberley—even though they had no idea where it was—to see the spot where the crocodile attack had taken place. Today, tourist information for the region sometimes refers to the 'infamous' Kings Cascade, mentioning the scene of the attack as some kind of strange tourist attraction. Some of the information makes no reference to the incident at all.

Ginger Meadows would have celebrated her twenty-fifth birthday on 30 March, the day after she died.



Did you know?

In the late 1980s, crocodiles were not as common as they are now. That's because croc populations were in the process of recovering from years of crocodile hunting. Killing crocs was banned in 1971 in Western Australia, a year later in the Northern Territory and in 1974 in Queensland. Ginger Meadows was the second crocodile victim in the Top End that month. Kerry McLaughlin, a 40-year-old storeman from Jabiru, was killed by a 5.1-metre crocodile on 17 March while wading across Cahills Crossing, East Alligator River, at Kakadu.

THE GRANDMA WHO JUMPED ON A CROCODILE

Name:	Alicia Sorohan
Age:	60 years old
Nationality:	Australian
Incident:	Crocodile attack
When:	11 October 2004
Where:	Cape York Peninsula, Queensland
Outcome:	Non-fatal

What is bravery? Sometimes it's planning something courageous and carrying out your plan. Other times it's jumping in and doing something without really thinking at all. And that's what this story is about. Instinctive reaction. Leaping before you look. Putting the lives of others before your own because it seems like a good idea at the time. This is the story of a very brave lady who jumps on the back of a giant crocodile to save a family friend, nearly gets her arm ripped off and then has to endure the agony of a seemingly never-ending five hour drive to get medical help. And even then, this amazing woman continues to claim that anyone would have done the same under the circumstances ...

Camping holiday

Bill and Alicia Sorohan loved getting away from it all and heading off to some of Queensland's most beautiful and remote places. They'd been having camping adventure holidays for more than 20 years and for the last five years had chosen Bathurst Bay, a popular fishing spot 250 kilometres north of Cooktown on the Cape York Peninsula.

This year was no different. A contingent of five four-wheel drives took off loaded up with supplies, tents, petrol, two dinghies and trail bikes. There was Bill and Alicia, their son Jason, their daughter Melinda and her husband, Wayne, along with their friends Andrew and Diane Kerr. There were also some little children in tow: Bill and Alicia's two granddaughters Kaitlyn, 6, and Rhiannan, 3; and Andrew and Diane's little baby boy, Kelly. The group was looking forward to a relaxing three-week break, fishing, bushwalking and trail biking by the waters of Bathurst Bay.

It was the middle of the night. All was quiet. About 20 metres from the water's edge, five tents housed seven adults and three children blissfully dead to the world. But in the hours of pre-dawn, not every creature was asleep. At about 4am, a massive 4.2-metre crocodile emerged from the water and made a beeline for one particular tent.

Strangely, it ignored the tent with all the food. Instead, it lumbered up the bank and went straight for one of the furthest tents from the water. Inside the tent was Andrew Kerr, his wife Diane and their 3-month-old baby boy, Kelly.

Diane woke up suddenly. She heard a heavy thud outside the tent. Through the netting, she was shocked to find a crocodile staring at her with gleaming yellow eyes. 'There's a croc, Andrew!' was all she managed to say. At that, the crocodile burst through the tent flaps, ripping them effortlessly. It lunged at Andrew, sank its teeth into his leg and began to drag him out of the tent.

Andrew screamed. 'Get the baby!' he yelled as the crocodile pulled him outside. Diane grabbed Kelly with one hand. With the other, she desperately tried to keep hold of her husband. And she screamed her heart out.

Bill and Alicia were in the nearest tent. They grabbed a torch and ran towards the commotion. Alicia's first thought was that something was wrong with the baby; Bill thought it must be a dingo. They ran around the tent in different directions and Alicia got there first. The baby was OK, Diane gushed, but the crocodile had Andrew.

Alicia saves the day

Without hesitation, Alicia jumped onto the back of the 300 kilogram crocodile. It instantly released Andrew, threw its head back and smashed into Alicia's nose with its jaws. With the impact, she lost balance and toppled off its back onto the sand. Her son-in-law, Wayne, saw the whole thing. 'I couldn't believe it,' he later said, 'Jason's mother was on top of this crocodile. It flung her off and then grabbed her arm.'

The crocodile struck again, sinking its teeth into Alicia's right arm and thrashing about wildly. Alicia was screaming, 'It's got my arm!' Struggling on the ground, face to face with the enormous creature, Alicia thought her days were numbered. 'I was lying in the sand looking at him eye to eye, and I thought this was it.'

Jason Sorohan came to the rescue with a high-calibre pistol. His only thought was to save his mother. Bill was there too, with an axe, ready to smash the croc's skull if the gun misfired. Jason jumped on the croc, dug his knees into its scaly back and fired two shots into the back of its head.

Alicia heard the gun go off but she didn't register what it was. All she knew was that the croc's grip on her arm suddenly loosened and she felt the life go out of her much stronger opponent. She couldn't recall later how she got her arm out of the croc's mouth, but she knew it wasn't a pretty sight. At least the menace was gone. The croc was dead.

Injuries

Alicia's injuries were grotesque. 'Her arm was just shocking. You could put your fist in it, that was the size of the hole,' said Bill. Her arm was hanging by a few centimetres of skin and there were fears that she would lose it. Andrew too was in terrible shape with a badly broken leg, a broken arm and cuts all over his body. They needed to get medical help but Andrew couldn't be moved; his injuries were too severe.

They bandaged Alicia's arm. The only thing to do was hop into one of the four-wheel drives and drive to the nearest ranger's station at Lakefield, five hours away. It was a rough and very uncomfortable journey of 120 kilometres. But despite the difficulties, Alicia was awake the whole time, talking, worrying about everyone but herself. And she did not complain once.

Meanwhile back at the campsite, the family found someone further up the beach with an emergency beacon and radio. The Royal Flying Doctor Service picked up the distress call and arranged to pick up both Andrew and Alicia who were flown to Cairns Base Hospital.

They both recovered, slowly. Alicia spent ten days in hospital as well as many more months in and out of physiotherapy. Fears that she might lose her arm were unfounded; when she came out of surgery, she quipped that she was surprised to see she still had it. She now has two permanent plates and twelve screws in her arm and is unable to turn her hand properly but it could have been a lot worse. And son-in-law Wayne summed it up nicely when he said, 'She deserves an award of some kind.'

Alicia did receive acknowledgement of her selfless act. On 26 August 2005, she was awarded the Star of Courage, which recognises Australian citizens for acts of outstanding bravery. And who should present the award but the Crocodile Hunter himself, Steve Irwin.

Did you know?

When Bill and Alicia Sorohan set off on their annual holiday, they had no idea that, within days, Alicia's story would be beamed around the world. And different takes on her story were truly memorable in a cringe-worthy kind of way. There were awful pun headlines like 'Crocodile Gran-dee' and 'Crocodile Mum-dee' (groan!). You could also take your pick of 'Fearless Granny', 'Croc-wrestling Granny' or even, to really pack a punch, 'Fearless Croc-wrestling Granny'. But don't they say things always sound more exotic in French? The citizens of Paris woke up that mid-October morning to read a gripping Oz tale entitled 'Une mamie contre un croco'!

TWO MATES STUCK UP A TREE

Name:	Brett Mann
Age:	22 years old
Nationality:	Australian
Incident:	Crocodile attack
When:	21 December 2003
Where:	Finniss River, Northern Territory
Outcome:	Fatal

The bonds of mateship are strong. Young blokes forge friendships by doing things together and sharing adventures. The three friends in this story are just like that. Born and bred Territorians with a great love for the freedom, beauty and wildness of the land. This is their story. It's a story of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. And it's the story of how in an instant your whole world can come crashing down. A family is left bereft, friends must come to grips with losing their best mate and a young man is gone forever. Who could have known that on that very ordinary Sunday, three mates would go out but only two would come back?

Three mates

Quad bikes grab the imagination of the young and adventurous. Known as ATVs, or All Terrain Vehicles, the name says it all. They go over all kinds of surfaces with a roar: water, dirt trails, muddy river banks. They're like a cross between a motorbike and a small car. Or a motocross bike with four wheels. Even for the complete beginner, the controls are pretty easy to master. And they are a real adrenalin-pumping way to spend an afternoon. That's just what three mates were doing the Sunday before Christmas, 2003. Quad biking along the Finniss River, 80 kilometres SW of Darwin in the Northern Territory. Shaun Blowers and Ashley McGough were both 19 years old. Brett Mann was a 22-year-old diesel mechanic from Howard Springs. He'd been the Northern Territory's third-year 'Apprentice of the Year' the year before. The three were great mates. In fact, Shaun's father Greg jokingly called Brett his adopted son because he was round at their place so often.

That Sunday afternoon everything got covered in mud. Brett, Shaun and Ashley went down to the riverbank to wash themselves. They were mucking around the way they usually did, spraying each other and splashing the water over their clothes, boots and faces. Suddenly, part of the bank gave way. Brett lost his footing, tumbled into the water and was swept away by the strong current.

Quick as a flash, Shaun and Ashley jumped in. They swam along, pushed by the fast-flowing water, unaware of another presence in the river. A silent saltwater crocodile.

They managed to get to Brett and grabbed hold of him. They were helping him back to the safety of the bank when the crocodile came into view. It had been hiding behind the rushes. Shaun waded past without seeing it. But Ashley saw it. And as he watched, the crocodile suddenly lunged at Brett, seized him by the shoulder and dragged him under.

Ashley screamed, 'Croc, croc!' and he and Shaun swam wildly to the closest thing that could get them out of the water. It was a tree, standing in the middle of the river, about 50 metres from the bank. They shimmied up it and then, clinging to the branches, shaking and in shock, they



looked down. Frantically, they searched the surface of the water, looking for Brett, for some sign that he was still there. The top of his head, his hand, some bubbles, anything. But there was nothing. Not even the sound of splashing or a cry piercing the stillness.

The crocodile was nowhere in sight. And Brett had vanished. But less than two minutes later, the croc resurfaced holding Brett's body in its jaws. It swam up to the tree. It almost seemed to be showing off its prized catch. And then it swam away. But moments later something stirred. The crocodile turned around and began to swim back.

Late that afternoon, the young men's families and friends began to wonder where the three had got to. Some of their mates reckoned they might have been stranded by floodwaters. After all, it was the wet season and the river was pretty swollen. When they hadn't returned by 7pm, a group went out searching. They knew where the three boys usually went quad bike riding, so they were pretty sure they'd find them. They searched all night, almost until dawn, but found nothing.

At 4am they all went home, failure weighing heavily on their minds and bodies. It was too early to raise the alarm, so they had a couple of hours of sleep and then told the boys' parents they'd had no luck. Doubts began to surface. Perhaps they weren't trapped by rising waters, perhaps something worse had happened. The boys' parents rang the police.

Two in a tree

Afterwards no-one was able to explain why the crocodile came back. Having taken Brett Mann, it surely had no need for further prey. But the two mates had the distinct feeling that they were being stalked, and who could blame them? So Shaun and Ashley did the only thing they could. They stayed put all night, high up in the branches, about 50 metres from shore in the middle of the river. And underneath them, the crocodile lurked all night long.

Away from the street lights, there was nothing comforting about the

bush. Just coldness and fear and darkness so thick that even though they were within an arm's reach of one another, they couldn't see each other. They knew all they had to do was keep awake. If they fell asleep, they would fall into the water, perhaps into the jaws of the very patient crocodile below. Shaun held onto Ashley's foot through the night; and they kept a constant check on each other to make sure neither of them nodded off.

Monday morning dawned. The crocodile played a cruel game of cat and mouse. It would glide out of view and the two boys would consider coming down. But then it would loom into view again. Taunting them. Daring them. They stayed put. Clinging to that tree, holding on for their very lives in strong winds and driving rain.

Emergency teams, including the Northern Territory Tactical Response Group, spent the day looking for the young men in a rescue helicopter. Finally at 3pm they were spotted in the tree. Two personnel and a life raft were winched down into the river, slightly upstream from the trapped pair. The rescue workers paddled downstream towards the tree, using branches and swim fins for oars. That was the easy bit. Then they had to talk the two young men into coming down. Not surprisingly, they weren't all that keen. In fact, one of the rescuers remembers the first thing they said was, 'You guys are bloody mad!'

Eventually, the pair were coaxed down from the tree and the four of them successfully made their way in the life raft to the riverbank. Shaun and Ashley were safe and on dry land after having spent an incredible 22 hours clinging to a tree. From there, the two young men were winched into the helicopter and flown to Royal Darwin Hospital, where they were treated for shock and hypothermia.

Shaun's father Greg, who joined the search, was overwhelmed with gratitude when his son was found safe: 'I think I'm going to appreciate him a hell of a lot more than I used to,' he said.



Killing the croc

Meanwhile, National Parks and Wildlife rangers and police with high-powered semi-automatics went out searching for Brett Mann's body, with orders to shoot the croc if they found it. Bad weather and fading light forced them to abandon the hunt but they resumed the next day.

About a week later, the search for the elusive croc continued. A 3.8-metre crocodile was shot by a ranger just 20 metres from where Brett had been attacked. The body sank in the muddy water, but officials were hopeful that when it resurfaced it would prove to be the crocodile. Chances were good: crocs were territorial and two large creatures in the same vicinity was unlikely.

While it may seem futile or even tasteless to keep on hunting for a crocodile, it did make sense. The aim of the search was to try and locate Brett's body so that his family could have some kind of closure. But his body was not found and may never be found. The search was officially closed nearly a year later when searchers returned to the area but found no trace of Brett Mann or the crocodile.

One week after the search ended was the painful first anniversary of Brett's death. His mother, Chris, said that the only positive thing to come out of the loss was how his mates, Shaun and Ashley, had come to terms with the tragedy. Before he died, Brett had spent much of his spare time working on a mud racer. His mates saw to it that they got it up and running.

'The mud racer was Brett's dream,' she said, 'and they've built on it, which means a lot to us. They are very special to me and I'm very proud of them for keeping Brett's memory alive.'

Lee Kernaghan and the muster

It's now spring. A time of renewal and hope. Ashley's mum, Kay, writes to Brett's hero, country singer Lee Kernaghan, wondering if he would dedicate a song to Brett at the Darwin City Muster in September.

Lee Kernaghan doesn't just devote a song to Brett. He dedicates his



whole performance to Brett, celebrating his life and acknowledging the bonds of those who have grown up in the bush. How important it is to stand together, be proud of where you come from and remember that we are all part of the same humanity.

It is a fitting gesture to one of Lee Kernaghan's greatest fans. You see, Brett shook Lee's hand at a muster the year before and didn't wash it for a whole week. And that's how it is: the dirt, the mud, the bonds forever forged, the quad bikes and the Territory.

