



Thrashing tail of terror

LEANING over the side of the boat, Josh used a boat hook to grab the float of the last of his four crab pots he had set the day before. It was safer to use a hook rather than his hand – it reduced the risk of a croc attack.

The salties weren't common around this reach of the river but occasionally one or two could be spotted basking on the banks. Using a fast, smooth action, Josh fed the rope attached to the crab pot into the boat as he hauled it to the surface, hoping to find a decent size muddie in the trap. Catch rates were usually pretty good at this time of year. During the wet season, large volumes of fresh water flowed down the river flushing the crabs out of the protective roots of the mangroves, making them quite active. Josh had already pulled in three decent sized males and had returned a couple of females. As the pot broke the surface, Josh could see two sets of large claws snapping furiously, letting him know that their owners were not happy to be in this situation. After landing the pot, Josh carefully removed the first of the crabs. Holding the crab from the rear, Josh put it on the floor of the boat and placed his foot gently on it to stop it from turning or scurrying away. He grabbed his caliper and measured the widest part of its carapace to make sure

it was a legal size. He then turned it over to check its underside, to find out if it was a buck or a jenny. The pointed shape of the flap on its belly told Josh he had another good sized male that he could keep. The other crab, however, was tossed back. The fresh sharp teeth on its pincers were a dead giveaway that it was a 'rattler' – only half full of meat, due to a recent moult. Josh had been taught it was best to return these, as it gave the crab a chance to eat more and in a few weeks would fill with meat, making for tastier eating. With all his pots stacked in the front of the tinnie and four muddies battling it out in a large bucket of water, a satisfied Josh signalled to his mate to move on out.

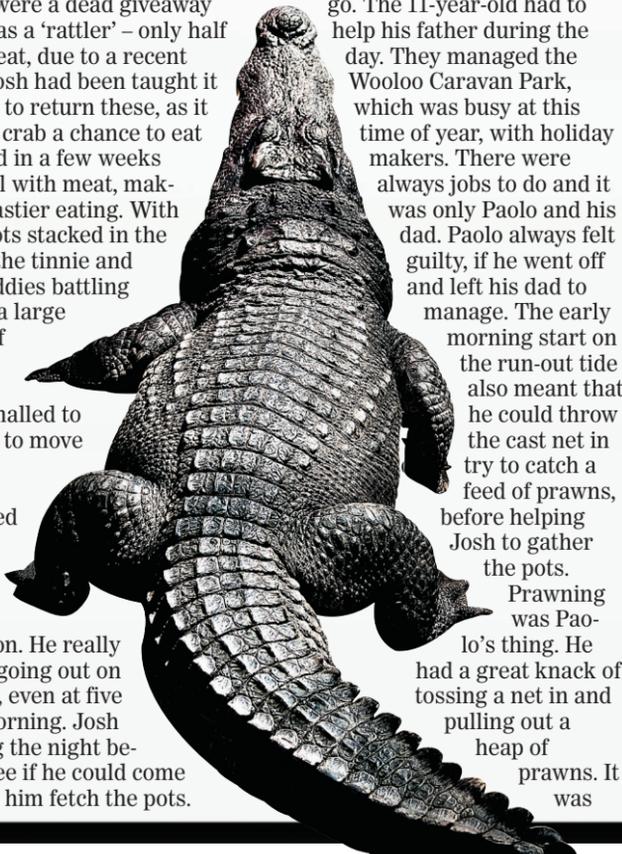
Paolo had joined Josh on the early morning expedition. He really enjoyed going out on the river, even at five in the morning. Josh had rung the night before to see if he could come and help him fetch the pots.

Josh's dad had a strict rule about going out alone – Mr Bodman wouldn't allow anyone to go out by themselves. He said it was far too dangerous. Joanne had flatly refused to join her brother at that time of morning. It suited Paolo, though, because it was often the only chance for him to go. The 11-year-old had to help his father during the day. They managed the Wooloo Caravan Park, which was busy at this time of year, with holiday makers. There were always jobs to do and it was only Paolo and his dad. Paolo always felt guilty, if he went off and left his dad to manage. The early morning start on the run-out tide also meant that he could throw the cast net in try to catch a feed of prawns, before helping Josh to gather the pots.

Prawning was Paolo's thing. He had a great knack of tossing a net in and pulling out a heap of prawns. It was

best done at night – but Paolo would give it a go any time for practice. This morning's attempt was another example of Paolo's flukiness. He'd dragged in about half a kilo of the shellfish. A couple of hours later, both he and Josh were happy with their efforts and headed back.

Coming around a bend in the river, something caught Josh's eye. He pointed to the bank and gestured to Paolo to manoeuvre the boat over to what he had spotted. An object was partly submerged in the water. As Paolo moved the dinghy alongside, Josh realised it was a crab-pot float that had become snagged on a mangrove root. He grabbed it with the hook to try and disentangle it from the grasp of the plant's tendrils. He was about to pull the pot in, when Paolo shouted his name. He looked up to see something move. The distinctive slide marks on the muddy bank were a sign of a crocodile. Josh knew all too well the danger that this presented. Tugging the rope of the crab pot had alerted the croc. It slid quietly into the water to investigate, in hope of catching a meal. Josh didn't want to become its victim, so he quickly moved back from the edge just as the croc exploded from the water with a thrash of its powerful tail and sank the razor sharp teeth of its powerful jaw into the float Josh had just handled.



BLOWN AWAY by the facts

CROCS

THE largest of all living reptiles, the saltwater or estuarine crocodile can be found in estuaries, rivers, waterholes and swamps of the northern Australian tropics. This large headed species has a heavy set of jaws and powerful tail. The 'saltie' females can grow up to four metres in length; males can reach seven metres and weigh more than 1000kg. They are excellent swimmers and are capable of eating very large prey. (www.derm.qld.gov.au)

CRABS

IN QUEENSLAND there are guidelines to responsible crabbing:

- A person must not use more than four crab pots or dillies.
- Crab pots or dillies must be marked by an identifying tag with the owner's surname and address.
- The pots and dillies must be attached by a rope to a float or fixed object.
- Female or under-sized crabs must be removed from the trap and returned to the water.

TOMORROW: Upside Down chapter three – Do the boys survive the croc attack?

