

Poms fight back

For four weeks during late May and into June, a band of fearless British pest controllers featured in a series on *Dave* entitled *Deadliest Pest Down Under*. **Pest** editor, Frances McKim, watched all eight episodes. So how did these Poms rise to the challenge?

Billed by the programme producers, PopKorn, in the pre-screening publicity as 'Nine Brits spent three months in Australia working alongside local pest professionals', this series promised much. Maybe alarm bells should have been ringing though, as it was to be shown on the *Dave* channel, and yes, this series was certainly no documentary. And, to call it 'pest control' definitely stretched a point.

But readers must realise – TV is designed to be entertainment. And entertain it did – that is if you enjoyed seeing our brave bunch of Brits being scared witless. The series title of *Deadliest Pest Down Under* lived up to its description. The TV producer's aim must have been to match our fellow pesties against the largest, scariest and most formidable 'pests' they could find – these were mainly crocodiles, snakes and spiders. In one episode wild boar were the target, but the less said about the culling techniques the better. Rats and cockroaches made a passing appearance, but where they did, these were filmed in conditions designed to 'thrill' – namely a very gruesome abattoir.

In short, the series bore little resemblance to pest control as we know it and few of the skills our intrepid UK bunch possessed had the chance to rise to the top. Checking with Phil Ridley, editor of *Professional Pest Manager*, the leading professional pest control title in Australia, the 'pests' the gang had to face were far from typical. Professional pest controllers in Australia encounter very similar pests and challenges to UK professionals, except for the addition of termites as a key pest. Problem snakes are

handled by specialised companies and battling crocs on a crocodile farm is hardly pest control – but it does make good TV.

The scarier the better

So, having dismissed this as any sort of serious pest control programme, what was it? In short it was a series of situations, the scarier and more horrible the better, which the participants (I nearly said contestants) had to face. One felt that at any moment Ant & Dec might jump out to say which 'contestant' was due for elimination!

What was fantastic though was how well our UK pest controllers acquitted themselves. None of them let the side down. If anything, the female competitors, who you felt had probably been selected to come over as 'airheads', really shone and showed considerable inner-steel. For example, Amber Zakrzewski, a horse trainer and former Miss Essex, had no knowledge of pest control, having been selected most likely for her good looks, rather than her skills, showed she was no 'Essex girl'.

In episode one, Norwich-based Louise Chapman, who trades as the Lady Mole



19 year old Kasey Sims visibly grew in confidence as the series progressed

Catcher, was obviously totally terrified by the gigantic crocodile which seemed to be eyeing her up for a quick snack. Louise rose to the challenge, did what she was instructed and lived to tell the tale. Having been scared witless, Louise said: "That evening I was in a trance like state, almost as if I'd been drugged, but the sense of achievement was verging on life changing."

The final female cast member, Kasey Sims, who at only 19 years of age was the youngest taking part, visibly grew in confidence and character when she realised



Colin Sims (left) with Mark Bower, both safely back in the UK



Louise Chapman, centre, was terrified of the giant crocodiles, but rose to the challenge



Craig Freeman proved a natural on TV

what she actually could do, rather than what she couldn't. "I wanted to prove girls can handle things as well as men," she said. This she certainly did when faced with catching and then transporting a crocodile, as well as a highly poisonous snake. With Kasey in Australia was her Dad, Colin, who runs the family-based pest control business, K&O Pest Control based in South London. It was quite a commitment for them both to decamp to Australia for ten weeks. As one of the most experienced on the trip, Colin didn't feature very much as maybe he was too sensible. But he did show his softer side, being almost in tears, when he had to hold a delightful wallaby he had caught on a main road in Sydney, as it was euthanised due to its injuries.

Rat Pack revisited

Those of us who watched the TV series, the *Rat Pack* back in 2009 will have recognised Jimmy Clarke from Environ Pest Control in Fulham, London (see article in **Pest** issue 5: September & October 2009). Jimmy just happened to already be in Australia on his own 'walk-about' when he received the call inviting him to join the series. After his *Rat Pack* experiences, seasoned TV performer, Jimmy said: "This series was entertainment – not pest control. I've no complaints though as I got to experience a multitude of things I simply couldn't organise for myself. It was real Oz. In addition, there was lots of free time, so I had the chance to go skydiving and swimming on the Great Barrier reef, amongst other things."

Also one to appreciate the opportunities was Mark Bower a wildlife management expert from Birmingham who works for Hereford-based Positive Environmental. He too swam on the Great Barrier reef and spent New Year's Eve watching the fireworks on the Sydney harbour bridge. Like several of the others, he faced the terrors of coming face-to-face with snakes which had got themselves into domestic premises. He summed-up the series as: "Aiming to put Pommies into challenging situations."

A TV natural

Also from Birmingham was 'chirpy chappie' Craig Freeman from Stop That Pest. The crew having realised Craig was terrified of spiders, went out of their way to face him with the deadliest, or the largest, they could find. "Everything in Oz is just downright dangerous!" he exclaimed. But Craig must have been a producer's dream as he 'freaked-out', on several occasions. What the TV people may not have realised was that Craig was up for it. Talking to him since his return he said: "I just loved it. The moment the camera was on me, I changed and developed this larger than life personality." Away from the cameras there is certainly a much more measured and professional side to Craig, as he had to consider



Former Miss Essex, Amber Zakrzewski was no 'airhead'!



Seasoned TV performer, Jimmy Clarke enjoyed the experience

seriously the benefits to his two-man business before embarking on this adventure. "My original aim was to make people more aware of what pest control involved and to channel more work to our business." On this the jury is still out.

Whether viewers really believed this to be real-life Oz pest control – who knows? But without a shadow of a doubt, what the series has done is to change irreversibly the lives of those who took part. Each and every one regarded it as a one-off adventure and they have come home with a more relaxed and 'can do' approach to life. Well done!



Mark Bower took the opportunity to see the New Year's Eve fireworks in Sydney