

Jay Young wrestles Darth Gator at his family's Colorado Gators Reptile Park near Mosca, a haven for abandoned reptiles. In addition to its gator-wrestling classes, the park educates visitors about the dangers of choosing certain reptiles as pets.

San Luis

VALLEY GATORS

Colorado family's fish farm is overrun with reptiles

STORY BY MATT MASICH PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOSHUA HARDIN



Floating calmly in their ponds, the alligators at Colorado Gators seem pretty easygoing, but they spring into action when caretakers try to move them. Students in Jay Young’s gator-wrestling class might be thrill-seekers, but by wrestling the reptiles, they’re also helping move the animals so they can be treated for illness or injuries.

JAY YOUNG LIVES on a farm in the San Luis Valley with his wife, two daughters and 300 alligators. Young has spent two decades caring for the alligators, and they show their gratitude by trying to eat him. It’s nothing personal – it’s just what gators do.

At the Colorado Gators Reptile Park, 17 miles north of Alamosa near the small town of Mosca, the Young family operates a tropical, swampy oasis in a high mountain valley with a clear view of the jagged peaks of the Sangre de Cristo range. While Colorado Gators’ setting is not what most people would imagine when they think of alligator habitat, Young looks exactly like a man who owns hundreds of alligators should look – a wild-man glint in his eye and a brimmed, leather hat decorated with alligator teeth on his head.

Being an alligator owner means Young is an alligator wrestler, too, as he must grapple with gators to move them from one pond to another or check them for illness and injuries. He’s the first to admit that jumping into a murky, alligator-infested pond might not seem like the best idea. “Alligator wrestling is not a thinking man’s sport,” Young often says, and while it sounds like self-deprecation, it’s actually a pretty good encapsulation of a successful alligator wrestler’s mindset. When you’ve got an alligator by the tail, there’s no time to think – you just have to react.

Young’s first rule of alligator wrestling? “Don’t hesitate.” The second rule applies after you’ve grabbed hold of the gator: “Don’t let go.” Breaking either rule gets you bitten, he tells people who attend the park’s gator-wrestling classes. For \$100, Young and his fellow instructors will show anyone 18 or older how to jump on a gator’s back and grab it by the head, which always sounds simple until it’s time to actually try it.

Somehow, Young said, a lot of people have gotten the idea that alligators’ jaws have a lot of closing strength but little opening strength, allowing intrepid wrestlers to easily clamp the reptiles’ jaws shut with their hands. “Don’t listen to those people – they’ve never done it,” Young said. “Their jaws have a lot of opening strength, and their twisting strength is tremendous.” And he has the scars to prove it.

THE EXISTENCE OF Colorado Gators seems outlandish, but it has its own weird logic. It began with Young’s parents, Erwin and Lynne, who started the operation as a tilapia farm where Young and his three siblings grew up. The fish thrived thanks to a geothermal well that pumps in water at a constant 87 degrees, and the family made money selling tilapia to restaurants in Denver and other places.

To deal with an excess of dead fish, the family bought 100 baby alligators to serve as garbage disposals. Within a few years, the alligators had gotten pretty big, and people began showing up at the tilapia farm to see them. By 1990, the family started marketing the gators. Not long after that, Young left the family homestead for college. He had no plans to enter his parents’ business – he was going to become an engineer.

As Young neared the end of his college studies, two things happened. First, he realized he hated sitting down and couldn’t bear the thought of a desk job. Second, his dad hurt his back and needed help running the gator farm. Young returned to the alligators and has been there ever since. As word spread about the gator wranglers in the San Luis Valley, people began dropping alligators off on their doorstep



Most of the 300 alligators at Colorado Gators arrived as pets whose owners gave them up after realizing they were too dangerous. The park rescues all types of reptiles, including the leopard gecko that employee Amber Czarnetski is handling.

– it seems a lot of misguided souls buy alligators as pets without fully realizing the cute babies quickly become monsters. Today, most of the alligators at the park started out as someone’s pet.

It wasn’t just unwanted pet alligators that showed up at Colorado Gators. People brought giant monitor lizards, pythons and other reptiles, and Young never turned any of them away. A woman who was in the process of separating from her husband brought in her longtime pet rattlesnake, preemptively getting rid of the venomous snake in case her spurned spouse had any ideas about putting it in her bed while she slept. Colorado Gators added indoor habitats and new gator ponds to deal with the influx.

The park’s most famous rescue is Morris, the Hollywood gator, who has starred in a number of feature films – you might recognize him as the alligator who bit off the hand of Chubbs, the golfing mentor of the title character in *Happy Gilmore*. Morris is big, at 10 ½ feet and 500 pounds, but the biggest gator there is Elvis, one of the original tilapia eaters, who comes in at 11 ½ feet and 600 pounds.

Young had been around reptiles since he was a boy (he got his first bite from his mom’s pet caiman when he was 5) but his entry into

full-time gator wrangling brought its share of gator chomps. His first serious bite came when he was moving a 9-foot alligator from one pen to another. Young had jumped on the front end and another employee was on the tail. As Young attempted to hold the gator’s

mouth shut, the employee sitting on its tail sat up too soon, allowing it to shake loose. The gator clamped down on Young’s left thumb and thrashed violently. Fighting his instinct to pull his hand free, which would have cost him his thumb, Young followed along with the gator’s wild movements until he was able to bop it on its snout, causing it to open its mouth just enough to get his right hand inside to pry the jaws open and extract his thumb.

A visitor witnessed the scene and ran to tell Young’s mom, who was working the gift shop.

“Your son just got bitten by a big alligator,” the terrified visitor said.

“Serves him right,” his mother deadpanned.



YOUNG RECKONS HE gets serious alligator bites about once a year. The gators are dangerous, but the deadliest animals at Colorado Gators are probably the pythons. Once, while feeding rabbits to a 14-foot Burmese python, the massive constrictor

tor mistook Young for a rabbit. It sprung on his arm, clamped down with its barblike teeth and started coiling around him. Fortunately, Young never goes into the snake habitat without someone stationed nearby to save him. “Larry, I could use a hand,” Young called to his assistant. As Larry uncoiled the python, Young got it to stop biting him by counterintuitively jamming his forearm further into the snake’s mouth, causing it to gag and release him.

There’s a trick to dealing with situations like this, Young said. “I never really panic about anything,” he said. “It never helps.”

The python isn’t the only snake that nearly got the better of Young – he’s also been bitten by a rattlesnake. He was cleaning the snake’s cage and thought he was out of striking range. He wasn’t. The snake bit him, but Young hoped it had been a “dry bite,” one in which the snake doesn’t inject venom. It wasn’t. His hand swelled so much he could barely make out his fingers. He got a dose of antivenom, spent two nights in the hospital and went home. But that wasn’t the end of the story.

Before the rattlesnake bite, Young had suffered for four years from the effects of the West Nile virus. He had gotten a particularly bad case that damaged his nervous system so badly that he could no longer sweat, which caused him to regularly run temperatures of 104 degrees. He was fatigued all the time and had to walk around with ice packs inside his hat.

As he was recovering from the snake bite, he realized he was doing something he hadn’t done in four years – he was sweating!

The venom had cured his West Nile symptoms, at least temporarily. When the symptoms came back five months later, he milked venom from the rattlesnake, injected himself with a small amount and was back to normal again. For years afterward, Young injected himself with venom every few days, though now he’s down to injecting every few weeks.

ADVENTURE RUNS IN Young’s family. His dad wrestled gators until he was 70. His oldest brother spent years as a search-and-rescue helicopter pilot and his other brother is an expert at diving in dark, water-filled caves. Young’s two daughters, Samantha, 14, and Lily, 3, each have pet alligators, and the elder daughter regularly wrestles midsize gators.

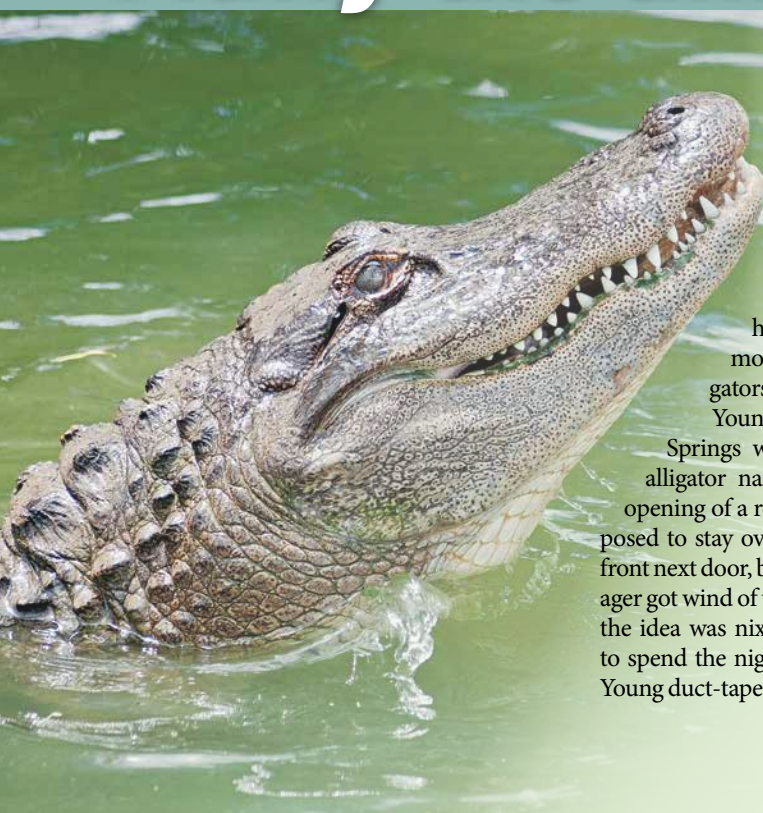
Young’s wife, Erin, knew what she was getting into when she met him. They were at a bar in Creede for a mutual friend’s birthday party when she saw him carving an alligator into the bar top. He took her gator wrestling on their third date – if she wasn’t willing to at least give it a try, he figured they didn’t have much of a future. Erin passed the bravery test with flying colors, and these days, she’s every bit the alligator wrestler her husband is. The first time she got bitten, she was back wrestling within a few minutes. The bite in her arm wasn’t so bad – only three teeth hit bone.

Erin has no qualms about raising a family in the company of gators. “There’s never a dull moment,” she said. “You just have to be ready for anything at any time.”



Part of the course work for these gator-wrestling students involved moving the fearsome Darth Gator into a new pen.

Fluffy the alligator escapes



WHEN POLICE OR animal control officers come across a large, dangerous reptile in Colorado, they know Jay Young is the man to call for help. He found out just how rare his expertise is early one morning when one of his own gators escaped.

Young had traveled to Colorado Springs with a 600-pound, 12-foot alligator named Fluffy for the grand opening of a reptile store. Fluffy was supposed to stay overnight in an empty storefront next door, but when the property manager got wind of the proposed gator lodging, the idea was nixed. That meant Fluffy had to spend the night inside Young’s minivan. Young duct-taped the animal’s jaws shut and

rolled it up in a big carpet to keep warm – sort of like a gator burrito.

One of Young’s fellow gator keepers checked on Fluffy throughout the night. At 3:30 a.m., the gator was sleeping soundly. At 5 a.m., there was a knock on the door of the house where the gator folk were staying. Three police officers were there, asking if anyone knew anything about the giant reptile wandering the neighborhood. Fluffy had broken through the van’s windows and was exploring the neighbor’s yard.

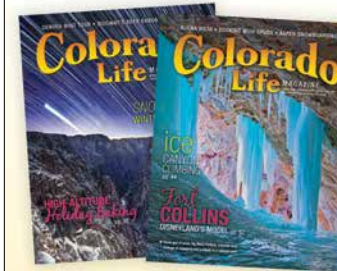
Young came out and corralled the gator, while the lead officer made a big commotion about whether he had the proper permits for having the animal in the city. Young had contacted the city of Colorado Springs, he said, but he was told he needed no permits if the gator wasn’t a permanent resident. The officer was furious and wanted to confiscate the gator.

“You want the alligator, he’s yours,” Young said. “But the duct tape on his mouth is mine.”

The police called the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo to take Fluffy, but the zoo demurred, saying it didn’t have the right facilities. “Better call Jay at Colorado Gators,” the zoo staff said. The exasperated officers explained that wouldn’t work, because that was the guy they were trying to seize the alligator from. The police called the Division of Wildlife and got the same answer – “call Colorado Gators.”

With no other recourse, the police released Fluffy into Young’s custody, as long as he promised to remove the gator from the city immediately. Young did, but not quite immediately. He first took Fluffy to the grand opening event as originally planned – after all, he already knew that no one was going to confiscate his gator. 🐊

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