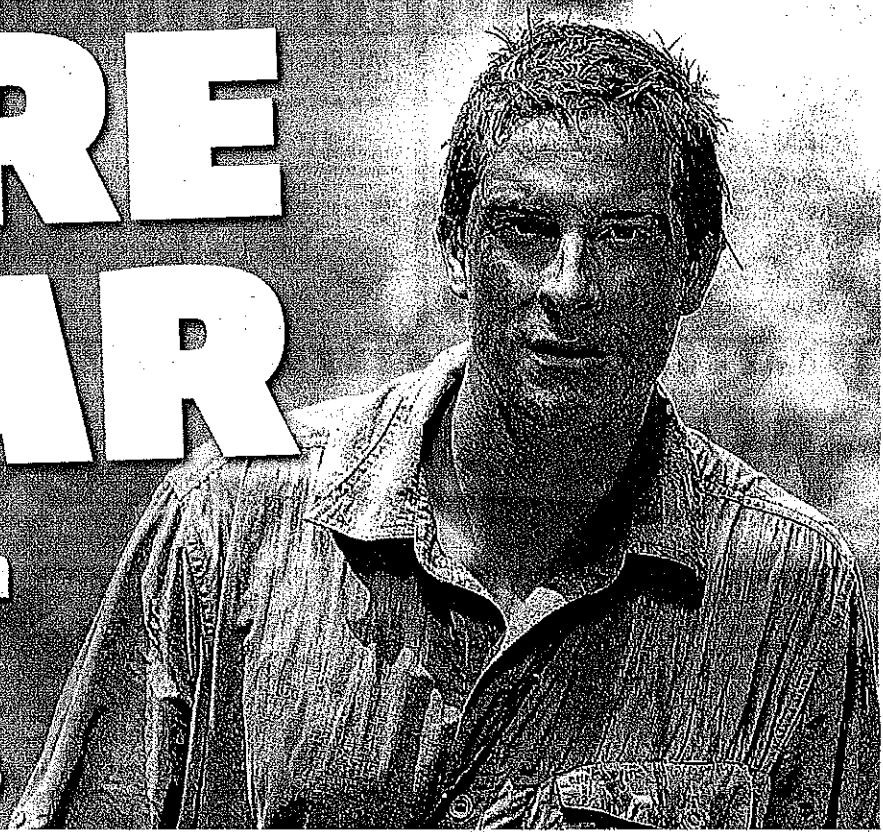


DARE BEAR

How this man takes on the wild and wins



Bear Grylls is a force of nature who pits himself against the forces of nature. Hollywood has come knocking, but Grylls is more at home neck-deep in a swamp or hanging under the ledge of a cliff, writes **John Flint** ahead of the daredevil's visit to Perth next month

THE zone is Bear Grylls' home away from home. It's a place in his head, a state of mind that has kept him alert and alive in situations where death has been a whisker or misplaced foothold away.

The zone is also a word the 37-year-old Englishman uses quite a lot in conversation.

He may never appear scared on TV, but Grylls feels and exploits his own fear before each hair-raising new adventure.

"Does it get easier? Not really," he said. "I still get really nervous beforehand."

His healthy respect for nature and its extremes is borne of tragedies that have killed friends, themselves skilled and cautious adventurers who have been taken out by avalanches and other random events.

Grylls' nerves set in just a few hours before he flings himself – most often out of a plane or helicopter – into the harshest environments on the planet for *Man vs. Wild*.

"I'm pretty relaxed as a person and I try not to get too nervous too far ahead of things," he said. "Those couple of hours before, I get pretty focused then. I'm with the crew, we're prepping kit and checking ropes, and then I'm into that zone where the heart rate is up a little more and you're firing a little bit more, and then you're into it."

"And the whole time you're on the ground you're in that zone, you know. I like that zone, but it's then about getting out of there."

Man vs. Wild is compelling viewing. Though only those with iron stomachs and no gag reflex don't look away from time to time as Grylls cooks up tarantulas and chows down on raw rats' brains, goat testicles, yak eyeballs and bear paw, washed down with his own urine.

Incredulous viewers, transported to frozen tundras, deserts, swamps and jungles from the comfort of their lounge rooms, see several days of fast-paced, gritty survival neatly compacted into an hour's TV.

And there's an ants' nest of close shaves, scrapes and war stories that don't make it on to the screen but do feature in his live show.

Grylls' fans can't get enough of him – evident in the *Man vs. Wild* ratings and



A FEW THINGS GRYLLS HAS DONE

- As an SAS soldier, broke his back in a freefall skydiving accident in Kenya
- Was the youngest Briton to climb Mt Everest at 23
- Led the first team to circumnavigate the UK on a jet ski
- Rowed naked for 35km along the Thames in a home-made bathtub to raise funds for a friend who lost his legs in a climbing accident
- Completed the first unassisted crossing of the North Atlantic Arctic Ocean in an inflatable boat
- Led the first team to paramotor over Angel Falls in Venezuela, the world's highest waterfall
- Flew a powered paraglider above Mt Everest, coping with temperatures of -60C
- Set a Guinness world record in 2006 for the longest continuous indoor freefall
- Led a team taking an ice-breaking rigid-inflatable boat through 4000km of the ice-strewn Northwest Passage
- All his exploits have raised big sums of money for charities, such as Global Angels

the take-up of tickets for his forthcoming live shows in Perth, Sydney and Melbourne.

"What's nice about the (live) show is that it gives people a chance to hear some of the behind-the-scenes stories," Grylls said.

"The audience hear about past expeditions, some of the scraps from my military days – just get to know me better. It's also a chance for me to interact with the fans a bit and I'm really excited."

Before our interview, Grylls has just been told that his autobiography *Mud, Sweat and Tears* has topped the British bestseller list for the seventh straight week. But the former British SAS soldier's popularity reaches far beyond the white cliffs of Dover.

Man vs. Wild, which debuted in 2006, is the No.1 cable show in the US and reaches a global audience of more than 1.2 billion viewers from 170 countries.

He is about to launch a new series *Worst Case Scenario* and his awe-inspiring resume of heroic, death-defying accomplishments, prior to his TV career, is too long to list here.

Suffice to say that breaking his back in three places in a freefall parachuting accident in Kenya in 1996 was the spur for him to embark on an amazing bucket list of expeditions, starting with Mt Everest, which he conquered just 18 months later.

The world is Grylls' adventure playground and he's not run out of places to test himself.

"I find the more places we go, the more there are to do," he said. "The producers have this incredible ability to find some of these real hidden hell holes. They take great delight in trying to find the worst."

"I'm desperate to do a lot more in Australia. Australia is always tough. I think you host some of the great wildernesses on the planet. They are very unforgiving places.

"I am really proud of the shows we've done here. I am especially proud of that Arnhem Land one. There are more saltwater crocodiles than there are people up there and there are more mosquitoes than there should ever be in one place.

"I'm also proud of the one we did (on an island) in the Torres Strait.

"It looked idyllic from the air, but when you get down on it you realise why no one ever lives there. There's no fresh water, it's covered in snakes, lots of huge spiders and surrounded by sharks – the ultimate natural prison. They were really tough shows to do.

"Part of me was nervous coming to Australia because I was following big footsteps with all Steve Irwin's stuff.

"He had been such a big hero of mine. I want my (Australian) shows to be a tribute to him.

"I'd love to get to WA properly. It is in the plans, but I get a little pressure sometimes not to do too many shows in one country because there are a lot of difficult places in a lot of countries around and we try to keep the balance there."

Grylls said the true heroes of *Man vs. Wild* were his crew – a cameraman, sound engineer and director – all ultra-fit guys, who accompany him, carrying heavy kit.

"They have their own supplies, but it's not comfy for them," he said.

"They're on army rations, they're working to their max, I'm working to my max and we look after each other along the way and that's part of the magic of it."

People are always fascinated by Grylls' ability to eat anything and his lack of hesitation in tucking in.

"Survival food is never going to be pretty, but you need energy, you have to eat it," he said. "Does it get any easier? The answer is no. It still tastes pretty gross, but you're in that zone and you need to get on and do it. I think

that's a frame of mind thing as much as anything. I have learnt from a lot of stories that when people are up against it and they have a big motivator to get out of there, whether it's to see their kids again or stay alive, you dig deep.

"And I think that's what the show is about, showing you that if you have to dig deep, this is what you can do and this is what can save your life.

"A big part of the success of it is people often wonder, 'Could I actually do it myself?'"

Grylls said the action – and eating – was every bit as spontaneous as the show suggested.

"Yes, it is and the annoying thing is sometimes the (crew) miss it and you go 'oh God,'" he said.

Grylls' motivator is getting home to his wife Shara and three young boys Jesse, Marmaduke and Huckleberry.

"We try to take the school holidays out, the rest of the time is pretty relentless," he said.

"The hardest part of my job is being away from home so much.

"(Winding-down afterwards) for me it's just about being back with the boys and Shara and hanging out.

"We don't talk a lot about what I have been up to, we're just back into life.

"We have a great little escape, a little island we own up in North Wales. That is a real hideaway for us and we spend a lot of time up there.

"People always say, 'You must be a nightmare to go on holiday with.' I'm not. I love doing not very much. I have enough drama and excitement at work, so for me holidays is being with the family and chilling out. That's heaven."

Grylls, who knocked back an approach by Warner Bros to appear alongside Sam Worthington in *Clash of the Titans*, is getting ready to lead an expedition to the Congo "kayaking some of these unkyaked massive rapids and rivers".

"I've always tried to follow-my

dreams and look after my friends along the way," he said. "That was kind of the mantra my dad always used to talk about. The more I do, the more I realise I need 10 lifetimes to scratch the surface. There are great places I would like to go back to and explore better and climb or whatever.

"I think you just have to live with goals and follow those dreams a bit and at the same time love and look after your family, and that's a balancing act always.

"It's not about topping things, it's about following your heart with it. It's not always going to work out, but that's where the adventure is.

"I grew up reading some of the great adventure stories and about the great explorers. It's the stuff that really flicks my switch in life.

"I don't tire of those stories. We have just done an episode in Utah, in the Canyonlands there. And I told that Aron Ralston story, the guy who cut off his arm (with a knife to free himself from a boulder). It's all about encouraging people to realise that the human spirit is strong."

One thing Grylls won't be doing any time soon is writing a tell-all book of his SAS exploits.

"I think you join a brotherhood there and a family, and you are bound by a strong contract not to divulge sensitive details. I think it's really important to live by that," he said.

"In my writing, I kept it to what it was like going through selection.

"The stuff I did afterwards, I kept pretty off-limits. It was really important to me that I ran it through the (UK) Ministry of Defence and got it properly cleared and I think there have been a lot of guys who have written books without any clearance. It is dangerous and it does jeopardise serving soldiers, and I think it's a shame people do that.

"But it's difficult to comment on other people and their circumstances. For me, it was really important to honour that and do it properly."

Grylls retains huge admiration for the SAS.

"There are some incredibly brilliant and effective other special forces units around the world. It's all about sharing knowledge and mutual respect," he said.

"We have a global joint enemy in the guise of terrorism and I think everyone needs to work together for that. It's not about who is better. But I think the SAS has always shone the way."

See STE today for a chance to win tickets to see Bear Grylls live at Challenge Stadium on September 14. Plus, don't miss next weekend's *The Sunday Times* to see how you could meet Bear thanks to 92.9 and *The Sunday Times*.