

## Dancing with Dinosaurs

**(Warning: the techniques described in this script are absolutely real but should only be attempted by trained professionals with spotters and medical personnel close by.)**

*Setting: Performed in the round, the stage is a sand pit with a pond. The upstage wall is a projection screen, and during the monologue, there will be close-ups of the "wrestling" that will take place, as well as video of wild alligators being caught using the techniques being demonstrated. There is clear plexiglass separating the audience from the action.*

*The lights come up on a medium sized (about 8 feet long) adult alligator basking on the sand to stage left – or stage right – wherever the animal feels like being. As the lights rise further, it's apparent that there are several alligators in the pit. Most are doing their own thing.*

*SOPHIE enters through a gate in the upstage left corner and comes to center. She is carrying a large stick.*

SOPHIE:

Hello, and welcome. I'm Sophie and I'm a member of the Miccosukee tribe, which is part of the Seminole Nation. We're Native Americans who originated here in Florida, and yes, we also originated alligator wrestling, but it's not the sport you see in competitions. Personally, I don't think of what I do as wrestling. I think of it as dancing with dinosaurs.

*SOPHIE walks around the pit among the alligators as she speaks. There is no pattern to her path, some she gets close to, some she stays further away from. Generally, the alligators just chill.*

SOPHIE:

Now, all the alligators you see here in the pit with me are rescued alligators, and as you can see, they're not bothering me. This is for two reasons – one is that alligators are really good at conserving energy. They're ambush predators, and not built for pursuit. You may have heard that if an alligator is chasing you on land, you should run in a zigzag pattern. Totally not necessary. Just run in a straight line. These are heavy animals who are more comfortable in the water. They're also ectothermic – or cold-blooded. One massive explosion of energy is absolutely exhausting for the animal, and if they move too much, too quickly, their joints will be filled with lactic acid, and they'll be essentially unable to move for a couple of hours. I'm not very tall, and I've never had to move faster than a brisk walk to avoid a wild gator.

But the other reason they're not attacking me is that even though alligators are apex predators, they're really not mindlessly aggressive. I don't look like food, and they know I won't harm them. In the wild, the most common thing an alligator will do when it sees a human is to walk or swim away. Sometimes they might hiss at you to back off – I suggest you listen – but they're afraid of humans, and really just want to get away from us.

*As she moves among the alligators, SOPHIE gently uses the stick to nudge a few out of her way. Audience members who are paying attention will notice that she's really herding them to a far corner of the pit and guiding just one to center.*

SOPHIE:

As I said, these gators are all nuisance animals. They were brought here from someone's pond, canal, or swimming pool. They crashed a barbecue and drank all the beer – or more likely, someone's dog or cat. Here in Florida, when a gator is deemed a nuisance – and they have to be at least four feet long for that to happen – you will call the gator hotline – it's 866-FWC-GATOR – and they'll send a trapper. Whether it's a large alligator or a smaller one, whether it's the same cost to you – nothing. The trapper's payment is that they get to keep the animal. They usually keep them until they have ten or twenty, and then they sell them to a processing plant where they get used for leather and meat. Some very lucky gators are trapped by organizations like mine, which bring them to refuges. They can never, never be released back into the wild. You may wonder if we're helping. Sadly, we're only helping a very few animals. We humans are encroaching into their territory and developing their wetland homes into condos and housing developments, and they die. Last year, my rescue saved about fifteen alligators. The state of Florida killed over ten thousand.

*SOPHIE guides her selected alligator to center, hands off her stick to a spotter, and carefully walks over the gator, one foot on either side, until her feet are right behind the animal's front legs. She drops to her knees on top of it, pressing one hand to the top of its head.*

SOPHIE:

Now the wrestling you're going to see isn't like what you see on WWF or other TV wrestling shows. I will not be banging chairs or throwing things at the alligator. I will not hit, kick, punch, or harm the alligator in any way. This one, by the way, is named Spot. I helped catch him last year, and I'm a huge *Star Trek* fan, so I named him after Data's cat.

You may notice a couple of things about Spot. For one, he's black, not green. Every alligator sign, icon, and logo you see has them colored green, but they're not. They're actually brown and tan when they're young, and as they mature their hide turns black. The other thing is that their eyes aren't green or gold – they're brown.

Spot, here, and all his friends, have two ways that they can protect their eyes. The first is that they can retract their eyes into deep sockets in their heads. They do this when diving or death-rolling.

*SOPHIE presses her free hand on SPOT's head, near his eyes, and they both retract, then pop back up again when her hand is gone.*

SOPHIE:

And like all alligators, Spot's eyes also have nictitating membranes. These are a special inner eyelid that goes side to side across their eyes when they feel threatened or are in the water. It can make their eyes look blue.

But you want the good stuff, so let's get to it.

Alligator Wrestling was originally a trapping technique that my people used in order to capture and contain alligators when hunting them for food. This was before motorboats or trucks, and before refrigeration, so gators had to be brought home alive, because otherwise the meat would rot in the Florida sun before it was brought back to camp.

Obviously, the first thing you'd want to do is secure its jaw, because gator bites are almost always lethal. And all the power in an alligator's bite is when its jaw shuts. See these big rolls on either side of Spot's neck? Those are his jaw muscles, and an alligator his size has about two thousand pounds of crushing force when those jaws close.

Now, in order to tie a gator's mouth shut, you really need two hands, so the Miccosukee Seminoles came up with something called "bulldogging." This is when you tuck the alligator's head under your chin and keep it closed. Then you reach between your body and your chin to secure rope around the alligator's mouth.

I know you're all going to want pictures, but this is very dangerous, so I'm going to ask that you be very quiet and wait to take photos until both my hands are out to the sides... or until I'm screaming, and blood is spewing all over the place.

*SOPHIE carefully stretches her head over the alligator's muzzle, which she is holding closed with two hands. Her chin comes to rest on the underside of the animal's jaw, where the flesh is soft. Slowly, she extends one arm and then the other out to her sides perpendicular to the ground - like a child pretending to be an airplane.*

SOPHIE:

Be swift with the picture taking please? (She releases Spot, keeping one hand wrapped around the side of his mouth.) Hmm, you don't seem very impressed. That's okay, we have more tricks, but first let's talk a little more about alligator anatomy. We've discussed the eyes – and yes, they do have normal eyelids like you as me as well – these flaps here – *(she lifts a tiny triangular flap on each side of Spot's head, just behind his eyes)* - are his ears. They look tiny, but Spot can hear as well as you or me. Maybe even better.

Between the ears, behind the eyes, inside the skull, is the brain. Now, an alligator's brain is about the size of my thumb, and yet these animals can be trained to come when they're called, station for feeding, and can find home even if they're released miles away from it. But remember I said they're *trained* not *tamed*. Spot here is still a wild animal and if I were to fall or make a mistake handling him, he'd bite my arm off and eat it with no issues whatsoever.

And no, feeding them isn't a way to keep them calm. Most alligators in captivity are actually overfed – they don't really *need* to eat more than once a month and can easily go half a year or more between meals. However, they're also opportunistic. If given the chance, a gator will eat until he can't, then spit it all up, and start again.

*SOPHIE changes her position so that one leg is over the gator's back but raised, as if she's on one knee to propose. It's so the audience can see the length of the animal's body.*

SOPHIE:

If you look along Spot's back, you'll see these bony protrusions. Those aren't scales. They're called osteoderms, and they're actually bone growths that act as protective armor. Legend also says that if you flip an alligator onto its back and press those osteoderms into the ground, it will bring rain. Let's not test that theory though.

Spot's osteoderms also act as solar panels. Remember, he's a cold-blooded animal. When he's lying in the sun, his black skin helps collect warmth, but his osteoderms are also covered with tiny blood vessels, which help bring the warmth of the sun to his entire body, giving him energy.

Now, the thing that separates alligator *trapping*, which my people used to have to do for food and leather, from alligator *wrestling* is that in wrestling we do stupid stunts. That's why I have my spotters. Chris and Paul, come wave at the audience.

*Two large, muscular men step out from the sidelines and wave to the audience, then step back.*

SOPHIE:

Thanks guys. Look, what I'm about to do is dangerous. If I make a mistake I could lose a hand... or a head... so if for some reason Spot clamps down on any part of me, Chris and Paul will jump on him to a) make sure he doesn't do a deathroll, and b) help get his mouth open to release me. (deep breath) Okay, so the first thing we like to do is have Spot show off his beautiful smile, by getting him to open his mouth for us.

*SOPHIE puts one hand on top of Spot's muzzle and grabs the soft fold of flesh under his mouth with the other. Carefully, she tugs his mouth open, so the audience can see all the way down his throat.*

SOPHIE:

What a nice smile Spot has! Look at all those teeth! Alligators have eighty teeth, forty on top and forty on the bottom, and, like a shark, their teeth are continuously replaced, though unlike a shark, a new one has to actually grow in. The alligator teeth you see many of us wearing as necklaces or bracelets all come from shed teeth. We don't harvest them.

If you'll notice, when an alligator's mouth is closed, you can only see the top row of teeth. That's because their bottom teeth fit into these sockets along their upper jaw. That's one of the differences between alligators and crocodiles. Another is that gators have a broader, u-shaped snout, while crocodile snouts are narrower and pointier, more like a v.

*She holds SPOT's mouth open and turns his head - gently -so all can see down his throat.*

SOPHIE:

Spot has a big throat, but if you look, you can see that it seems to stop. That's because he has an enlarged palatal covering – or glottis – that can completely cover the opening to his throat. When he's in the water, and goes after prey, this allows him to open his mouth to bite and hold without ingesting too much water or drowning. If only we swimmers could do that with our noses when we dive – right? He would normally surface to actually swallow food.

*SOPHIE releases her bottom hand and SPOT's jaws close with a loud, deep SNAP.*

SOPHIE:

I have two more tricks and they're both pretty dangerous so I'm going to have Paul and Chris come closer (*Beat while the guys move in*) The first thing I'm going to do is hold Spot's open mouth with my chin and pass my hands between his jaws. The method to this trick is that you have to be careful not

to touch the roof of his mouth to trigger it to close. I had my hair loose once when I was practicing, and a gust of wind blew it into his mouth and tickled him. I almost lost my hand that day. I'd prefer that not to happen.

*SOPHIE does the move she described, holding SPOT's upper muzzle with her chin while his lower jaw is relaxed. She passes one hand at a time through his open mouth, then performs the stunt again with both hands at once. Then she re-captures his jaws, keeping one hand on the fleshy part under his throat.*

SOPHIE:

That went well. Spot's pretty relaxed so we're going to do one more stunt for you before I send Spot back to the sunlight to bask with his friends. One of my mentors, Paul Bedard – not this Paul (gestures to her spotter) - jokes during his shows that while alligators have a really small brain compared to their body mass, there's one creature with an even lower brain to body ratio, and that's alligator *wrestlers*. (Beat while the joke sinks in.) Today might prove him right.

*SOPHIE carefully pulls SPOT's mouth open and peeks over his top jaw. There are a couple of false starts as his jaws snap air, and she tickles his nose to get him to open again.*

SOPHIE:

I think I forgot to mention that alligators have sensors along their jaws. They use these for passive hunting. In the water, if a fish is nearby, the ripple from its swimming will be perceived by these sensors and the gator will open his mouth and snap at whatever it thinks its there. While an animal Spot's size could easily take down a racoon, a bird, a turtle, or even a small deer, we find that a lot of alligators just don't want to work that hard, and they end up eating a lot of fish and snails.

*Sophie takes a couple of cleansing breaths and re-focuses. She repositions her body so she's approaching Spot from the side, while still mostly straddling him. Then she pulls his mouth open super wide, and slowly bows her head so that it's between both rows of his teeth. She pulls her head back after barely a second, and SPOT's mouth closes with a loud CHOMP!*

SOPHIE:

Well, I hope you all got some great photos. (*She stands up and moves away from SPOT who slowly crawls toward the water. He's chill.*) See, this is why they tell you to run in a zigzag. Otherwise, they'd never catch you! (*Beat*) Well, you've all been an awesome audience. What would be even more awesome is if, when Paul and Chris bring baskets through the audience you throw in some cash. Some wrestlers are offended by change – I'm not – but all the money goes to saving more of these beautiful animals.

At the beginning of my show, I said my work was more like dancing with dinosaurs, but while alligators and other crocodilians are very, very old species, they're actually not really dinosaurs. What's interesting, though, is that they're more closely related to birds than they are to other reptiles.

I'm going to go out front now, where, if you want, we can take a picture together and you can hold a baby alligator – all our babies go to zoos – so don't worry about their safety.

Oh, and remember, one more way to tell the difference between a crocodile and an alligator is that the croc will see you after a while and the gator will see you later.

I hope to see all of *you* later.

Thanks for coming.

*Blackout.*