



The Kratt brothers, Chris Kratt, left, and Martin Kratt, will bring their PBS Kids show "Wild Kratts" to life Saturday with two performances at the Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre. Photo provided

'Wild' at heart

Chris and Martin Kratt bring their PBS Kids show to life

By JEREMY D. BONFIGLIO
HP Features Writer

BENTON HARBOR — When the Komodo dragon started running toward Chris Kratt, he knew he had made a mistake.

"We were getting really amazing footage of one walking," he says of the trip to the Indonesian island. "I had the camera and was walking alongside it, and I guess I put the camera just a little too close because he turned and ran towards me."

As Kratt turned to run, he slipped. Suddenly, the Komodo dragon was climbing on top of him.

"I put my foot up against his chest to keep him away as best I could and was then able to skitter out from under him," he says. "After that I backed off enough where he turned and walked away."

So where was his brother during this lizard assault?

"I remember looking over at Martin and he just stood there with his jaw on the ground watching all this," Kratt says, laughing. "I was like, well, thanks for the help, brother!"

Chris, 45, and his brother Martin, 49, have been studying and filming animals around the world for more than 25 years. Their shared passion for animals have not only led to the occasional

Komodo dragon wrestling match, but to three live-action TV shows on both PBS and the National Geographic Channel. Since 2011, however, the brothers are best known for their PBS Kids' TV show "Wild Kratts." Now in its fourth season, the popular series opens with a live-action segment and transitions into an animated adventure that brings elementary school children into the secret lives of some extraordinary creatures. On Saturday, the Kratt brothers hold two performances of their stage adaptation, "Wild Kratts Live!" at Lake Michigan College's Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre.

"We love filming wild animals," Chris Kratt says. "Capturing animal behaviors on film is one of the most exciting things for us. But one of the things we couldn't help but notice is that there are so many amazing animal behaviors that are impossible to catch on film."

Kratt cites the example of sperm whales and giant squid battling miles below the surface of the ocean, which he remembers from a display at the American Museum of Natural History, a place he visited as a child on school field trips.

"We thought, if we did an



animated show, we can show any cool animal behavior we want to," he adds. "Also with animation, if we could show any animal ability we could focus the series on creature powers and the amazing abilities animals have. That's really exciting to kids."

Some episodes are about animal

characters, such as a baby polar bear who gets separated from his mother. Others include villains such as the recurring character of Zach Varmitech, an inventor that uses animals for various purposes, but mainly to get even with the

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Kratt brothers.

Characters also include the team of Koki, Jimmy Z., and Aviva, the young female scientist who invented the creature power suits that allow the brothers to mimic wildlife behavior.

In the stage show, the Kratt brothers will show animal footage, and use those suits to activate some of those creature powers. As the adventure unfolds, Zach Varmitech shows up, and the brothers will need help from those animal abilities to defeat him.

Using those suits to explore creature powers, Chris Kratt says, is at the heart of "Wild Kratts."

"It's really resonating with kids because we look at animals in terms of the special abilities that they have," he says. "Kids like to imagine what it would be like to run as fast as a cheetah or to fly through the air and dive bomb like a peregrine falcon or climb up a wall like a gecko. 'Wild Kratts' uses that to look at these creature powers and the science concepts and natural history related to them."

The Kratts' interest in animals can be traced to their childhood home in Warren Township, N.J., about 30 miles outside of Manhattan, where they lived with their parents, William and Linda, and twin sisters, Christine and Susan.

"It always surprises people to hear that we grew up in the wilds of suburban New Jersey," Kratt says. "One thing we always tell kids is no matter where you live there are always creatures to go on adventures with. Even in our backyard, we loved to find box turtles and opossums and frogs."

IF YOU GO

What: Wild Kratts Live!

When: 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. Saturday

Where: Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre, 2755 E. Napier Ave., Benton Harbor

How much: \$20-\$32

Contact info: 927-1221 or www.lmcmainstage.org

Artist info: www.krattbrothers.com; pbskids.org/wildkratts

The Kratt brothers will host a ticketed meet and greet following the 2 p.m. show from 3:45 p.m.-5:15 p.m. open exclusively to attendees of either performance. Tickets are \$75 and limited to 150 people who must also be ticket holders for one of Saturday's performances.

That curiosity also was fueled by summers spent camping in the Vermont woods, and Saturday nights watching "Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom."

Martin Kratt went on to Duke University to study zoology while Chris Kratt majored in biology at Minnesota's Carleton College. Shortly after Martin graduated, he and Chris grabbed a video camera and embarked on a six-month trip through

Costa Rica, where Martin was working as a research assistant.

"Martin was thinking about becoming a vet, I was looking at conservation and ecological research," Chris Kratt says. "Then we realized it would be cool to just go out and film animals and make wildlife videos. So we got a little camcorder and started filming."

They shot short videos of sea turtles, and sloths and howler monkeys. After editing sessions on the family VCR, they showed their videos at school assemblies and eventually to PBS, which gave the greenlight to "Kratts' Creatures," the first daily wildlife TV show made specifically for kids, which first aired in 1996.

"We got a lot of rejections from broadcasters because it was a host-driven thing that no one was doing at the time, but when we brought it into schools and did assemblies, kids really liked our videos so we were encouraged to keep going," Kratt says. "We just kept trying to up the production values and make the videos better and better, and finally after five years we were able to land our first series on PBS."

The Emmy Award-winning "Zoboomafoo," followed in 1999, with "Be The Creature" premiering in 2003 on the National Geographic Channel, and finally "Wild Kratts."

The brothers are now based in the Canadian capital, Ottawa, where they opened their own animation studio where they oversee every episode.

They also both have children of their own – Chris has two boys, ages 12 and 5, with wife Tania; and Martin, two boys ages 13 and 11 with wife Laura – who are just as interested in animals as they are.

"I think kids like animals more than anybody," Chris Kratt says. "Every now and then it works out that we can take them on a shoot with us for a show and see some of the animals."

Luckily for Chris Kratt, not all shoots end up with a Komodo dragon on top of him. In fact, there are some moments in nature he'd rather not forget.

"I remember one time we went out to find a pod of spotted dolphins," he says. "As soon as we saw them we stopped the boat and got in the water and tried to swim as actively as possible because the more active you swim the more curious they get. They would come up and just swim around us. If you did a roll or a spin they would copy the move next to you. We could never keep up with a dolphin swimming, so it's really up to them to come up to us and want to interact with us. Just knowing that is really an amazing feeling."

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SOCIAL SECURITY
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