



## Bushmaster Dan Eatherley (1992)

**D**an is a British naturalist, writer and wildlife film-maker who read Zoology at Hertford, returning to academia over 2005-6 to read for an MA in Sustainable Development at Exeter University. He has made a variety of natural history TV documentaries for the BBC, National Geographic, and the Discovery Channel, including credits as an assistant producer on two BBC series hosted by Sir David Attenborough: "Life of Mammals" and "Planet Earth". He has filmed on location in swamps, deserts and jungles around the world. He has written over 100 articles on science and environmental issues for the New

Scientist, Scientific American and BBC Wildlife magazines. These days, when not hunting giant vipers, he works from his home in Exeter as a consultant in environmental sustainability.

The following is an extract from his new book, *Bushmaster: Raymond Ditmars and the Hunt for the World's Largest Viper* (Arcade Publishing, 2015), the story of one man's obsession with an enigmatic and deadly reptile. Raymond Ditmars (1876-1942), the first curator of reptiles at New York's world-famous Bronx Zoo, popularized cold-blooded animals as never before. His love for snakes, insects and other misunderstood creatures was conveyed in books, lectures, and pioneering motion pictures. But his expeditions to the South America jungles during the 1930s in search of the legendary bushmaster—the world's



*largest viper—really captured the public imagination. In Bushmaster the author follows in Ditmars's footsteps and attempts to achieve what Ditmars himself failed to do: find a bushmaster in the wild. Eighty years on, will Dan have any more luck? And will a bushmaster find him first?*

"Bushmasters, you say? Well, they're definitely in my *top three*. Up there with boa constrictors and Burmese pythons. They're *monsters!* But at the same time *extremely shy*, not like a fer-de-lance. You can hold a bushmaster in your hands. It's not advisable but I have done it!"

Smiling broadly, Junior Charleau gripped an imaginary bushmaster as if fighting an invisible tug of war. The strange beauty of the legendary giant viper seemed the main appeal for him.

"I'm picturing a freshly shed bushmaster now," he continued, a distant look in his eyes. "It has pearl white scales and gorgeous black diamonds. Beautiful. It's, like, *glowing!*"

I had arrived yesterday in Trinidad, a small island off the coast of Venezuela, on the latest stage of a seemingly deluded quest for a bushmaster. Famed as the world's largest viper—reliable reports have specimens exceeding twelve feet in length—the four recognized species of bushmaster inhabit rainforest from Brazil to southern Nicaragua. While other snakes' venom is more toxic, the volume potentially delivered in a single bushmaster bite makes the reptile extremely dangerous, not least because the fangs, sometimes attaining two inches in length, inject the poison deep into the flesh of victims. In his 1648 natural history of Brazil, the physician Guilherme Piso reported that the bite of the bushmaster quickly causes pain, dizziness, colic, delirium, and fever. Soon after, the blood rapidly corrodes and boils up through the nostrils, ears, and even the hands and feet. Death comes within twenty-four hours. So, why the

heck was I trying to find one?

Well, it was a long story. Here's the short version. Leaving Hertford College in 1995 with a newly-minted zoology degree under my arm I wasn't sure where I would go next. One thing was certain, academia was out: I needed a break from libraries and textbooks (ironic, given that I now love whiling away hours in dusty archives). So, with half-formed thoughts of filming exotic creatures on tropical islands I eventually drifted west to Bristol, the global centre for wildlife television making, the "Green Hollywood" as it was sometimes known.

The BBC's Natural History Unit had been churning out programmes here for decades, including most of

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David Attenborough's highly regarded documentaries. Dozens of smaller independent production companies specializing in wildlife had emerged in recent years, making shows for the BBC or overseas broadcasters such as the Discovery Channel or National Geographic. After stints as a researcher at the Beeb and other companies, I wound up at Zebra Films, a small, now-defunct independent. We had recently made some successful films about snakes for Nat Geo TV and were developing a new programme idea about the bushmaster.

The serpent went by many names. Costa Ricans knew it as the *matabuey* or "the ox-killer"; in Brazil it is the *surucucú-de-fogo*, "the one who strikes repeatedly



at the fire”; while here in Trinidad the bushmaster is called *mapepire z’anana*, “the pineapple snake”, a creole term referencing the roughness of its body that results from curious protuberances on each scale. The bushmaster’s original scientific name, *Lachesis muta*, is just as dramatic. Lachesis was one of the three Fates of classical mythology who determined the length of a person’s life, while “muta” means “silent,” hinting that the bushmaster is a rattlesnake that has lost its noisy appendage. That the snake vibrates the peculiar burr-like tail tip when annoyed just adds to this impression, although in truth other snakes perform similar defensive behaviour and scientists now believe bushmasters are only distantly related to rattlers. A further distinction from rattlesnakes and indeed all other New World vipers is that

bushmasters lay eggs rather than giving birth to live young.

The snake famously appears in *Thrills of a Naturalist’s Quest*, a book of memoirs published in 1932 by Raymond Ditmars, the curator of reptiles and mammals at New York’s Bronx Zoo. Ditmars remembers how, as a kid in late nineteenth-century New York, he started bringing snakes home as pets including venomous ones. After much resistance his parents yielded to their son’s hobby, by the mid-1890s surrendering the entire top floor of their house to the expanding collection.

One day, the young Raymond received a crate of snakes from Trinidad; among the tropical boas, rat snakes, coralsnakes, and fer-de-lances was an eight-foot-long bushmaster in good condition, which, the delivery note stated, the recipient should “be extremely careful with liberating.” On its release the viper supposedly chased the young snake devotee around the room, the rest of the family downstairs oblivious.

The incident kindled in Ditmars an obsession to catch a bushmaster specimen for himself from the wild. The curator studied, wrote about, and filmed all manner of animals, but the viper continued to fixate him. In several of his books he reproduced the same ghastly photograph of a bushmaster. Despite its evil cat-eye stare, the snake in the picture was dead, its maw fixed open in a half grin, half sneer, the tusk-like fangs straining indecently at their fleshy sheaths, desiccated tongue forks tickling the chin. In later life, Ditmars’s vacations were spent hacking through the forests of Panama, Brazil and Trinidad in fruitless search of a wild, living specimen. These quests caught the public imagination, making national newspaper headlines during the 1930s.

Six decades on, Ditmars’s adventures caught my imagination too and, although the bushmaster film never got made, a few years later I resolved to follow in his footsteps, heading down to Trinidad to



Raymond Ditmars with a deadly green mamba (*Dendroaspis sp.*) in the reptile house of the Bronx Zoo, New York City, in 1932 (photo: Mike Dee)



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bushmaster, my  
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try my own luck at finding a bushmaster. How difficult and dangerous could it be? After all, bushmasters were responsible for only 0.01% of reported snake bites in Latin America. I tried to ignore the nagging possibility that because accidents occurred far from civilization, bushmaster bites were underrepresented in the figures, and that if I was bitten, the outlook wasn't great. The locals seemingly knew this. During the filming in Peru of Werner Herzog's 1972 movie, *Aguirre, the Wrath of God*, a lumber man was struck twice in the leg by a bushmaster. Legend has it that, without missing a beat, he lopped off the limb.

And now here I was in Trinidad with a crazy plan to find one of these monsters! My flight from London had been surprisingly full given that the Caribbean island's spiralling murder rate and recent imposition of a curfew did little to recommend it as a tourist destination. However, the plane half-emptied during a stopover in St. Lucia and for the final short hop to Port of Spain I could switch to a window seat. From this altitude the waves below looked frozen. At a pinch, the steel-blue pattern had the texture of reptilian skin. Was this a good omen? Trinidad's Northern Range came into view, crowned in pristine green forest, rusty shacks dotting the lower elevations. Was my bushmaster, my *mapepire z'anana*, waiting for me down there somewhere? The following afternoon I had headed to the outskirts of Port of Spain and the Emperor Valley Zoo, Trinidad's main animal collection. A swift



South American bushmaster (*Lachesis muta muta*) photographed in the Peruvian rainforest (© Maik Dobjey 2015)



“Obtaining a healthy animal was critical to its survival in captivity”

tour of the small series of uninspiring reptile enclosures had established that no bushmasters were on display.

At closing time I'd got to talking with the reptile keeper, Junior Charleau—real name Delbert Charleau Jr. We were sitting on a green bench outside the zoo's main entrance. The evening was humid but pleasant. Parrots chattered boisterously in the canopy of a nearby tree. Handsome and now in his early forties, Charleau had greying hair and a precise goatee beard. He continued to effuse over the splendour of the z'anana: "In the sunlight, the scales look like beads, like crystals on a well-made carpet—"

"But when did you last have one here?" I hated to interrupt the reverie but was anxious to press on with my inquiries. He now stroked the goatee.

"Let's see. I think we've had three bushmasters over the last six years. One survived for four years! It went fantastic! But the conditions have to be right. The bushmaster love dark, humid but not too hot. It loves a cool environment. If too hot and dry there is trouble. The bushmaster, it will regurgitate food."

Obtaining a healthy animal was critical to its survival in captivity and sure enough Charleau's record-breaking snake had been parasite-free when captured. It nevertheless failed to shed and died.

"If I wanted to find another one," I asked, "where should I look?"

"Well, farmers in Christophine Valley see them, and a German lady got bitten by one near Asa Wright. She didn't die."

As I bid Charleau good bye, I felt exhilarated. Located high in the Northern Range, the Asa Wright Nature Centre was the country's premier bird-watching

reserve, and "christophine" was not the name of a valley but a gourd-like fruit cultivated on trellises in the same hills. Perhaps the snakes liked ambushing prey in the tangled vines associated with this crop? It certainly sounded like the Northern Range was the place to go.

But my mounting excitement at the prospect of actually finding my bushmaster was quenched by a paradoxical fear: what if a bushmaster found me first?

See more at [www.daneatherley.com](http://www.daneatherley.com).

Bushmaster: Raymond Ditmars and the Hunt for the World's Largest Viper has been praised by Desmond Morris as "a fascinating book about a fascinating man". It was excerpted in the Guardian newspaper in July 2015 and can be purchased from good bookshops or online.

