Raymond Ditmars is an icon of North American herpetology. Ditmars was the first curator of reptiles at the Bronx Zoo, serving from 1899 until his death in 1942. More importantly, he was passionate about sharing his knowledge of and love for reptiles with the public through a series of books, lectures, and pioneering nature documentaries in the new medium of motion pictures. For those of us who grew up in pre-internet times, Ditmars’ Reptiles of the World and Snakes of the World—while long out of date even then—often were the only books about herpetology in local libraries to feed the passions of the next generation of reptile-smitten students. Many herpetologists who followed in Ditmars’ footsteps cite his books as instrumental in fostering their love of herpetology.

Of all the reptiles he worked with, Ditmars was perhaps most obsessed with the bushmaster, Lachesis muta. Of course today three additional species are recognized, L. acrochorda, L. melanocephala and L. stenophrys. Ditmars held a fascination for bushmasters ever since he received his first one in a shipment from Trinidad in 1896. He received a small number of them over his years at the zoo, but unfortunately they rarely survived very long due to rough handling during capture and heavy parasite loads. The arrival of a bushmaster at the zoo or Ditmars’ departure on an adventure in search of them always was big news in local papers. Ditmars made many trips to the American tropics in search of bushmasters, but never saw one himself in the wild. The bushmaster was Ditmars’ white whale. His passion for the species came across in his writings, which, along with his iconic photograph of the head of a bushmaster with open mouth, erect fangs, and slanted, malevolent eyes, sparked interest in the species among Ditmars’ many fans and followers. I’m sure many of you remember that remarkable image. If not, you can see it in Eatherley’s book.

Bushmasters remain the favorite and most sought after prize for many herpetologists, both professional and amateur. Bushmasters are the longest viper in the new world, reaching lengths of 2.5 m (8.25 ft) with a record length of 3.65 m (12 ft). They have peculiar bead- or file-like scales along their dorsum, and a spine-like scale on the tail tip. Bushmasters are the only New World vipers that lay eggs. They are scarce, secretive, and rarely encountered in the wild. When a lucky herper does find a bushmaster, it invariably becomes the highlight of his trip and the thing most bragged about. Even the well-known herpetologist Harry Greene, in his seminal book Snakes: The Evolution of Mystery in Nature, devoted his introduction to the bushmaster. Greene reminisced about being in elementary school and reading Ditmars’ adventure of unpacking that first feisty bushmaster from its shipping crate and struggling to transfer it to a cage in his family’s home. Of all the many experiences in his varied career, Greene came back to Ditmars’ inspiration and his own fulfillment of the quest to work with bushmasters as perhaps his greatest career highlight to illustrate the fascination of snakes.

Dan Eatherley’s new book, Bushmaster: Raymond Ditmars and the Hunt for the World’s Largest Viper, is more a biography of Ditmars than a study of the bushmaster. Eatherley began with a degree in zoology and employment with first the BBC and later an independent production company in the UK as assistant producer of nature documentaries. He produced two films for National Geographic starring Rom Whitaker: Snake Hunter North America and Snake Hunter Costa Rica. During the filming of the latter a bushmaster was briefly shown, and Eatherley was captivated. He began research on a proposed new documentary about bushmasters, which led him directly into Ditmars’ remarkable life and career. Unfortunately, the events of 9/11 changed the focus of networks away from animal documentaries and his project was shelved, but Eatherley was caught in the same spell that so many other budding herpetologists had fallen for: the charisma of Ditmars.

Eatherley uses three tools to tell Ditmars’ story. First, he employs historical fiction, in which he writes a scene from Ditmars’ life like a novel, with detailed descriptions of locations, persons, and events, including dialogue. Each story is based on an actual event, but the novelization approach genuinely brings the story to life, allowing the reader to become immersed in the event and imagine what it might have been like to be there.

The second writing tool Eatherley uses is simple description of facts and events in Ditmars’ life, as might be done in any biography. For instance, the original reptile house at the Bronx Zoo was the world’s largest at 146 feet long and 100 feet wide, and construction cost was $50,000, a considerable sum in 1899. Ditmar’s initial salary as assistant reptile curator was $75 per month plus $10 room allowance. The reptile food bill for 1901 included “389 mice, 1,410 rats, 1,273 English sparrows, 366 rabbits, 531 pigeons, 232 chickens, 812 toads, 408 frogs, 26,900 live fish, 55 lbs. earthworms, 18,000 mealworms, 122 large pumpkins, 2,266 lbs green vegetables.” But more than just data, Eatherley relates stories about the zoo and also Ditmars’ travels. Because specialized veterinary care was unavailable, Ditmars was forced to do his own doctoring, relying on initiative, common sense, and a knowledge of normal behavior and anatomy. He kept a supply of medical equipment in his office, and medi-
Ditmars had a remarkable career. He recognized that people viewed reptiles in general and snakes in particular with both awe and revulsion, and thus strove to educate and identify positives about his favorite animals. To that end Ditmars was a master of promotion, both of herpetology and himself. He was a popular author of nature adventure books and much in demand as a lecturer. He was a master of generating news headlines in both local and national publications, concerning new animals and exhibits at the zoo as well as proposed travels and acquisitions. Even before his first significant motion picture was completed in 1914, he was described as “the father of kinematographic zoology.” One of his many documentaries was titled Evolution and utilized a rhinoceros iguana with miniature backgrounds to depict a dinosaur. The film was re-released in 1925 to capitalize on the publicity of the Scopes “Monkey Trial” in which a high school teacher was prosecuted for teaching evolution in Tennessee. Ditmars also was deeply involved in the development of an effective treatment for snakebite in spite of never having been bitten himself. He collaborated with researchers in the United States, Brazil, and Panama who were working to develop an effective antivenin, and milked venomous snakes from the zoo to provide raw material for its production. Ditmars also publicized and condemned ineffective folk treatments for snakebite. In addition to serving as curator of reptiles, he was awarded a dual appointment as curator of mammals, and at the end of his career he initiated a public exhibit of invertebrates. Perhaps most importantly, he inspired generations of herpetologists who followed in his footsteps.

Bushmasters are perhaps as remarkable as members of the snake family as Ditmars is to the herpetology family. The two are forever linked, and their story is both interesting and entertaining. Eatherley does a good job of sharing that story and bringing it to life, and I recommend this book.

Literature Cited


