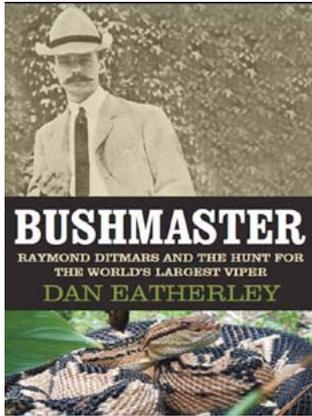


# Bushmaster: Raymond Ditmars and the Hunt for the World's Largest Viper

Dan Eatherley

USA Arcade Publishing, USA, 2015, 303 pp. ISBN 978-1-62872-511-7. (Hardback)



I found this book easy to read, interesting, informative and enjoyable: part quest, history, biography and natural history. The main title could refer to both the snake (*Lachesis muta*; *Lachesis* after one of the Fates of mythology and *muta* meaning silent) and to the hunter, the redoubtable Ray Ditmars, curator of reptiles (and latterly also mammals and insects) at the New York

Zoological Gardens, often known as the Bronx Zoo, for most of his working life. The book should be for anyone with an interest in reptiles, zoos, wildlife in general.

Dan Eatherley became interested in bushmasters and then Ditmars while researching a never-made natural history TV film on dangerous snakes. Several of the older herpetologists he worked with claimed Ditmars' books as formative influences, and Eatherley was surprised never to have heard of him. The book recounts Ditmars' life, intercut with Eatherley's quest to find more about him by visiting places he had worked and speaking to people with some connection. He found remarkably little surviving archive material: Ditmars' widow destroyed his papers, photographs and films and the Zoo had a big document clear-out in the 1950's, so the occasional letters and archive material Eatherley found were precious.

Ditmars (1876-1942) grew up in New York, first near Central Park, then quite wild in places, and later in the Bronx, semi-rural at the time. From an early age he was passionate about wildlife, especially snakes, catching them and keeping them at home (not to his parents' delight, but they were generally tolerant). He taught himself reptile husbandry, founded the Harlem Zoological Society at 16, and at 18 was attending meetings of the New York Linnean Society. At just 17, he left school and took what we would now call an internship at the American Museum of Natural History working under Professor Beutenmuller; the job, to curate and catalogue a donated collection of more than a quarter million specimens of insects, mainly lepidoptera. Ditmars spent his free time collecting, looking after and photographing reptiles, and corresponding with enthusiasts at home and abroad, particularly R. R. Mole in Trinidad, who sent a consignment of snakes, including a bushmaster, possibly not realising that Ditmars was only 21!

The meagre museum salary was inadequate to support Ditmars' reptile hobby, so he moved to journalism at the New York Times in 1898. Around this time, the New

York Zoological Society (now the Wildlife Conservation Society) had chosen a site for their new zoo in the Bronx, where the Ditmars family now lived. Ditmars, with no academic qualifications but plenty of hands-on experience, got the job of keeper of reptiles. He moved his personal collection to the zoo as it opened in 1899, and remained in the job till his death in 1942.

Ditmars was part showman, part innovator. He realised the zoo needed customers and kept its profile high through popular illustrated lectures and stories in the press about exotic and dangerous animals. The stream of accessible books he wrote were about animals, mainly reptiles, and his own experiences with them. He was among the first to realise the potential of moving pictures for educating and entertaining about wildlife; his first major film, 'The book of nature' (1914) ran for 37 consecutive weeks at the Strand Theatre on Broadway, and his 1922 film 'Evolution' was re-released in 1925 to coincide with the notorious Scopes trial in Tennessee where a schoolteacher was indicted for the 'crime' of teaching about human evolution. Ditmars even appeared on television (1939).

All Ditmars' early animal collecting was done in the USA, though the zoo exchanged and bought specimens from many countries. In the late 1920's, Ditmars' tropical fieldwork began, usually accompanied by his wife and two daughters, and later by his assistant Arthur Greenhall. In Honduras, he assisted with the United Fruit Company's efforts to prevent so many workers from dying from snake bites; in Panama, he captured and brought to the zoo the first vampire bat to be exhibited. His interest in the bushmaster became something of an obsession: his supply from Mole in Trinidad (who died in 1926) had dried up, and none of the snakes survived long in captivity. Ditmars' next tropical visits were to Trinidad in 1934-8, with a principal aim of collecting bushmasters. Did he ever find one, or did Dan Eatherley 80 years later? I won't spoil the suspense by revealing that, but the Trinidad trips were generally productive: Ditmars returned to his early interests in insects, collecting leaf cutter ant colonies for the zoo; amphibians too – I first came across Ditmars' name when researching an article on the giant tadpoles of the paradoxical frog, *Pseudis paradoxa*, which Ditmars had captured in Trinidad in 1936.

Summing up, Ditmars is well worth remembering for his efforts to educate the public about snakes, and the collaborations he had with scientists interested in finding antidotes to snake-bites (remarkably, Ditmars was never bitten himself). Because his writings were mainly for a popular audience, they have dated and he did not publish significant research himself, unlike his close contemporary William Beebe, keeper of birds at the Bronx Zoo, but still

known for his discovery of new species around the tropical world. The book is also fascinating for its picture of zoo practice at the time: things have definitely changed for the better.

Some grumbles: the book has an adequate index, but no bibliography or notes on sources; the central section of 16 pages of photographs is not referred to in the text; the Trinidadian coriander-like herb is *chadon beni*, not chado benny; and the history of Simla, the research station founded by Beebe in Trinidad's Northern Range is somewhat mis-represented.

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*Accepted: 15 December 2015*

