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# Dan treads carefully in the steps of master of the vipers

BY MARTIN FREEMAN

Dan Eatherley was on a mission in the jungle: to find the largest viper in the world – before the largest viper in the world found him.

“The last thing I wanted to do was to put my foot on one,” says the man who has spent much of the last decade thinking and writing about and pursuing the bushmaster.

His – careful – footsteps on a Caribbean island were following those of a man who helped create one of the world's greatest zoos and who is credited with inspiring generations of herpetologists.

Now Dan, who lives in Exeter, has combined his quest with a biography of that scientist for his first book, *Bushmaster: Raymond Ditmars and the Hunt for the World's Largest Viper*.

Ditmars (1876-1942) rose from an assistant conservationist to honorary creator as Bronx Zoo, New York, became a world-class centre.

He was the David Attenborough of his day, making more than 80 natural history documentaries.

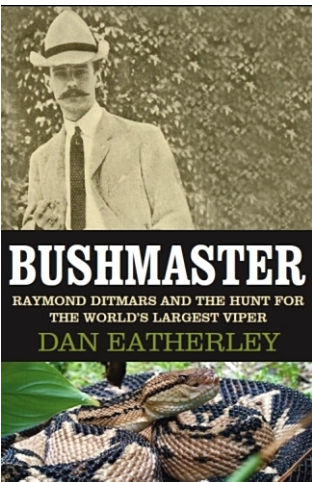
Dan has trod a career in a similar field, working with the British naturalist on two landmark BBC series, *Life of Mammals* and *Planet Earth*, as an assistant producer.

His work also for National Geographic and the Discovery Channel took him all over the world, seeking out creatures in swamps, deserts and jungles.

That put him in some bizarre situations – and in danger.

The most perilous was while filming a volcano off the coast of Indonesia, linked to one of the most devastating eruptions in history: Krakatoa.

“Anak is the ‘daughter’ of Krakatoa,” says Dan. “It has emerged from the caldera that Krakatoa created (in 1883). It was erupting, then stopped, so



we got closer in a boat and it started erupting again.

“Rocks were being blown into the air and landing in the sea near the boat.”

For one documentary he provided “moral support” to mandarin ducklings emerging from a nest 40 feet up a tree – the newborns fled a climbing snake.

The scene was set up as the crew encouraged the serpent to climb.

Such interference with nature is not unique, says Dan. Attenborough's big-budget *Frozen Planet* series in 2011 was criticised for filming polar bear cubs in a German zoological park and cutting the image into sequences shot in the wild, without revealing the trickery to viewers.

“Many natural history programmes are disingenuous, especially low-budget ones,” says Dan.

“They will film as much as they can and use pick-up (archive) shots to fill in.

“I once had to massage a dead salmon to ‘spawn’ in a fish tank in a studio under the M5, making it look like it was happening in the wild. It wasn't even the right species of salmon, and the wrong colour. They had to change the colour

in the production process.”

But there was nothing fake about his pursuit of the bushmaster.

*Lachesis muta*, the species of bushmaster Dan set out to find in Trinidad, is the largest viper in the world, reaching up to 12 feet.

Vipers have long, hinged

‘He ‘milked’ thousands of snakes to get the venom, but was never bitten’

Dan Eatherley on Raymond Ditmars

fangs allowing the snake to bite deeply into the victim, injecting a large amount of venom.

A single bushmaster bite can be deadly and they are capable of several.

“Ditmars was fascinated by them,” says Dan. “He had one posted over to his home from Trinidad. He wrote how the bushmaster chased him all around his bedroom.

“I had worked on a couple of films about snakes, one of them about bushmasters, when I read about Ditmars. He was an amazing man.

“Herpetologists today know him because of his books.

“He pioneered the distribution of anti-venom across the United States.

“He ‘milked’ thousands of snakes to get the venom, but was never bitten.

“In his day he was household name. One of his films ran for 37 weeks.”

Dan graduated with a first-class zoology degree from Oxford University in 1995 before the TV work. He has written more than 100 articles for *New Scientist*, *Scientific American* and *BBC Wildlife* magazines.

His move into consultancy came after he completed a master's degree in sustainability development at Exeter University in 2006.

Dan, who is married with two young daughters, says domestic life is a lot easier now he is living in Heavitree and not jetting all over the world.

He is also happier avoiding serpents.

“I am not a snake man,” he says. “I wouldn't ever keep a snake and or even want to hold one.” ■ *Bushmaster: Raymond Ditmars and the Hunt for the World's Largest Viper* will be published in June



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## Cider press is saved by shock £100k donation

Centuries of Cornish cider-making history have been lovingly preserved following an unexpected £100,000 donation.

The cider press at Godolphin House, near Helston, is the oldest agricultural building on the 700-year-old National Trust-owned estate.

Due to its dilapidated condition, the trust has kept the small stone house covered up with scaffolding until it could find funds to restore it.

But the charity has been lucky enough to secure £100,000 to undertake a full renovation. The money was a legacy from local art teacher Margery Hall, who had desired that it be used to fund a project within Cornwall.

Her executors, Geoff Nankivell and Shirley Lavis,

‘This building has been saved for future generations’

Clare North

decided to donate the money to Godolphin because of Miss Hall's various links with the estate. The fund has been used to employ stonemasons and carpenters with specialist skills to restore the roof. They have used traditional methods to make sure any alterations are as close to the original building as possible.

The trust has also insulated and heated the cider press using cutting-edge conservation techniques, in order to make it “a viable space for many years to come”.

Claire North, Godolphin's head of visitor services, said the improvements have provided the estate with a new space which can be used to a number of different uses.

“Miss Hall's work with art and young people will not be forgotten here,” she added.

“This building has been saved for future generations, as place for them to come and connect with their heritage.”



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