Snakes alive!

How an amateur's attic reptile collection became a cornerstone of the Bronx Zoo

by DAN EATHERLEY

The Bronx Zoo's World of Reptiles is among the city's favorite attractions. Two million visitors visit the zoo each year, and most make a beeline to gawk at deadly Egyptian cobras and diamondback rattlesnakes, Cuban crocodiles and green tree monitor lizards, river turtles and colorful poison frogs.

Few linger at an illustrated information board near the reptile house entrance, and even fewer recognize the balding middle-aged man depicted in one of its sepia-toned images.

Yet the man in the photo — smartly attired in a white three-piece suit and posing with a live python — arguably did more than anyone else in the 20th century to bring snakes, lizards, turtles and crocodiles to public attention, if not affection.

Born in 1876, Raymond Lee Ditmars, the first curator of reptiles at the Bronx Zoo, showed an early affinity for the cold-blooded. Legend has it that as a toddler he taught 10 toads to dance in the family parlor, the amphibians believing the green carpet to be grass.

He would spend days in Central Park gathering harmless chicken snakes and garter snakes. After much resistance, his parents yielded to their son's hobby, surrendering the top floor of their large brownstone house on Bathgate Avenue in The Bronx to the reptilian menagerie.

Soon venomous species living near the city, including rattlesnakes and copperheads, were added to the collection. More exotic specimens were procured from the city's waterfront, where boas and other tropical snakes often slithered out as fruit shipments were being unloaded. Ditmars exchanged specimens with fellow snake collectors the world over.

Leaving school at 16 with few qualifications, he joined the insect department of the American Museum of Natural History, worked briefly as a court reporter for the New York Times, then landed his dream job at the zoo months before its grand opening in November 1899. To the enormous relief of his long-suffering parents, Ditmars took his own snakes with him. The attic collection then amounted to 45 animals, representing 15 species, and it would form the nucleus of the reptile house exhibit.

Ditmars's natural talent for breeding and caring for snakes, lizards, crocodiles and turtles was equalled only by his flair for publicity. During his 43 years at the Bronx Zoo, not a month seemed to pass without mention in the papers of the curator's exploits, be it delicate surgery on the eye of a cobra, force-feeding an anaconda on hunger strike or testing the effect of music on wolves.

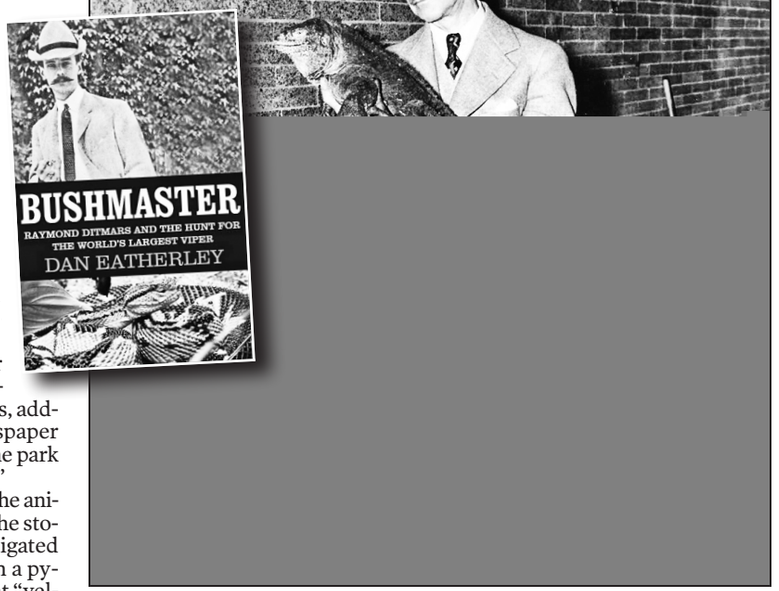
"I had acquired a nose for news," he once wrote, referring to his stint on The Times, adding that "a small clan of newspaper men came to depend upon the park for 'special stuff,' and got it."

Ditmars's fascination with the animal mind underlay many of the stories. The curator once investigated the effect of colored flags on a python's mood, concluding that "yellow produces contentment, while vanity is obtained by purple."

He was also convinced of our close kinship with the great apes, training them "with kindness" to ride tricycles or eat with cutlery. His star pupil, an orangutan called Rajah, learned to roller skate, enjoyed the run of Ditmars's office and once threatened children with an old-fashioned Colt revolver: thankfully unloaded.

The country was gripped by expeditions Ditmars made to South America in the 1930s in search of the world's largest viper: the bushmaster, which can grow more than 11 feet in length.

Remarkably, while still a teenager living with his parents, he had been sent a live specimen in the mail which, on being freed, promptly chased him around the room. The bushmaster died in captivity, but that hair-raising encounter kindled in him an obsession with the species. He failed to catch one, but in 1934 he was given a bushmaster as a gift on the island of Trinidad. The specimen, named "Lecky," was a New York sensation.



Snake hunter Raymond Ditmars, the subject of a new book by Dan Eatherley, checks out the iguanas at the Bronx Zoo in 1936.

There was a serious side to Ditmars as well. He was all too aware of the destructive power of snake venom, and throughout his career extracted the stuff from his snakes, manipulating them with a surgeon's precision. The venom collected helped scientists develop a cure to snakebite: a contribution which surely saved countless lives.

If that wasn't legacy enough, Ditmars wrote 17 popular books on natural history topics and pioneered wildlife film-making. His first masterpiece "The Book of Nature" — featuring spiders, frogs, skunks and snakes filmed in a home-made studio using ground-breaking photographic techniques — ran in 1914 for a record-breaking 37 weeks in a Broadway theater.

At the time of his death in 1942, Raymond Ditmars was a household name. The year before he had been immortalized in "The Lady Eve." The romcom opens in the Amazon jungle where a stout, bearded professor passes Henry Fonda a rare snake called Emma in a box to be delivered to "Dr. Marsdit." "Keep her warm as you get farther north," says the scientist, "and sometimes let her out of her box to play a little."

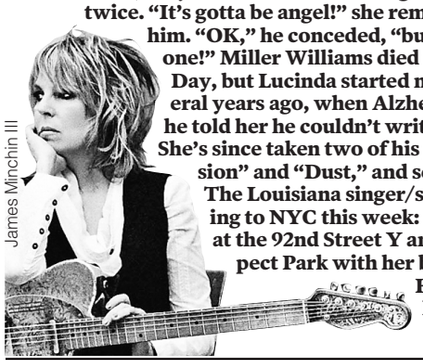
Dan Eatherley is the author of "Bushmaster: Raymond Ditmars and the Hunt for the World's Largest Viper" (Arcade Publishing), out now.

IN MY LIBRARY

Lucinda Williams

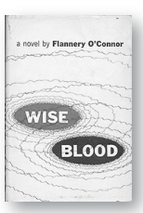
When your dad's a professor and a poet, it's hard to get away with much, lyric-wise. Or so Lucinda Williams found out when she ran some of her new songs past her father, only to be scolded for using the word "angel" twice. "It's gotta be angel!" she remembers telling him. "OK," he conceded, "but this is the last one!" Miller Williams died this New Year's Day, but Lucinda started mourning him several years ago, when Alzheimer's set in, and he told her he couldn't write poetry anymore. She's since taken two of his poems, "Compassion" and "Dust," and set them to music. The Louisiana singer/songwriter's coming to NYC this week: Catch her June 23 at the 92nd Street Y and June 25 at Prospect Park with her band, Buick Six. Here's what's in her library.

—Barbara Hoffman



James Minchin III

Wise Blood
by Flannery O'Connor



I first read this when I was 16, and ended up reading everything O'Connor wrote — I completely related to her scenes of Southern life. Here, preacher Hazel Motes struggles with his doubts regarding salvation after he comes back from WW II, an avowed atheist. It's very dark, but there's a lot of bright humor in it, too.

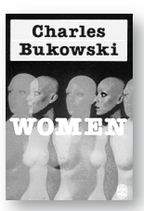
Some Jazz Awhile
by Miller Williams

This is a collection of some of my dad's best poems. Like O'Connor's characters, he also struggled with faith: His father was a Methodist minister and he was an agnostic. He wrote about day-to-day things, observations on a wreck on the highway, or a cat asleep on a windowsill. I think I learned that from him. He once told me, "Don't ever censor yourself."

Dancing With Demons: The Authorized Biography of Dusty Springfield
by Penny Valentine/Vicki Wickham

I fell in love with her music after "Dusty in Memphis." She was a middle-class British white girl singing black music, and she struggled with her sexual identity and cut herself on purpose. I put her in Etta James and Aretha Franklin's league, and was surprised to read about how fragile she was.

Women
by Charles Bukowski



It's like reading someone's diary: It's funny, somewhat pornographic and honest. He talks about giving a poetry reading and going to the professor's house afterward, seeing a beautiful woman and telling her she has beautiful legs. Next thing, they're in the guest bedroom getting it on. When I read it, I thought. OMG. That was at my dad's house!