



A snake-keeping pioneer

Dan Eatherley is the author of *Bushmaster: Raymond Ditmars and the Hunt for the World's Largest Viper* (Arcade, £16.26), and here, in the first of two exclusive articles, he explains Ditmars' fascination with snakes, and the bushmaster in particular.

Whether it be stamp-collecting, train-spotting or fishing, the degree of enthusiasm for a particular hobby can vary enormously. At one end of the spectrum are the dabblers, the fair-weather practitioners, those with a fleeting interest. At the other are the fully committed - the dedicated devotees.

Reptile keeping is, of course, no different. Most readers of this magazine will be happy with a turtle, a few geckos, or a small python possibly. Others will seek quantity as well as quality, filling their homes and perhaps trying the patience of their family.

The deadly bushmaster

Then there will be a few diehards who gravitate towards the 'hot' species - venomous reptiles such as rattlesnakes, cobras and gila monsters for which special permits are required and years of experience recommended. And when it comes to hot herps, they don't come much hotter than the four species of South American bushmaster (*Lachesis*), which are the world's largest vipers.

Not only are they huge - a specimen killed in Trinidad is reliably put at 12ft (3.65m)

in length - but they pack a considerable punch. These snakes are able to deliver massive volumes of venom potentially in just a single bite, courtesy of fangs that are 5cm (2in) long.

One 17th century explorer described a bushmaster bite as quickly causing pain, dizziness, colic, delirium, and fever. Soon after, he maintained, the blood rapidly corrodes and boils up through the nostrils, ears, and even the hands and feet. Death comes within twenty-four hours.

For the majority of people, you'd have to be crazy to want to go anywhere near a bushmaster, let alone keep one. Yet as my new book *Bushmaster* makes clear, this deadly snake was the object of fascination for a very special but now largely forgotten pioneer of reptile keeping.

Speaking up for reptiles

Born during 1876 in Newark, New Jersey, Raymond Lee Ditmars would enjoy a varied early career, including working as an assistant at the entomology department of the American Museum of Natural History, and reporting for the *New York Times*. But ultimately, he rose to prominence as the first curator of reptiles and mammals at the New York Zoological Park - which is better known these days as the Bronx Zoo.

Ditmars eventually produced seventeen books and a wealth of articles on natural history, with his influence and interests extending far beyond the world of snakes, lizards, crocodiles, and turtles. He also delivered countless public lectures and was a pioneering natural history filmmaker.

In the beginning

Ditmars's interest in reptiles started early. As a child, he had started bringing home harmless garter snakes and water snakes as pets. Venomous species living near the city, including rattlesnakes and copperheads, were later added to his collection. The city's waterfront also offered rich



▲ Ditmars was in charge of both the reptiles and mammals at the New York Zoological Park - now the Bronx Zoo.

pickings, as boas and other tropical snakes often slithered out from fruit shipments that were being unloaded from steamboats. He persuaded stevedores to save any snakes they saw for him, rather than killing them.

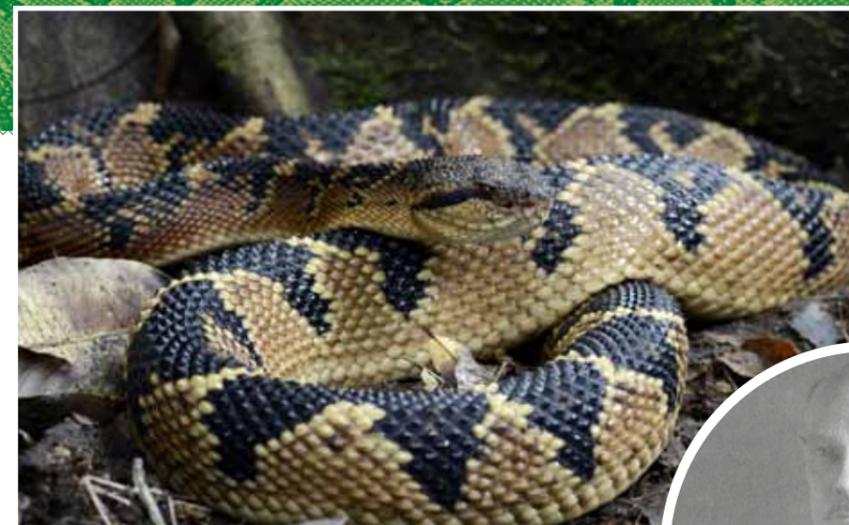
Resistant at first, his parents yielded to their son's hobby, eventually surrendering the entire top floor of their large brownstone house in the Bronx to the burgeoning reptilian menagerie.

Ditmars also began extracting venom from rattlesnakes and other deadly species, manipulating them with all the skill and precision of a surgeon twice his age. This was passed to scientists seeking cures for snakebite.

Fellow snake enthusiasts

Interestingly, the young enthusiast growing up in late nineteenth century New York was far from alone in his fascination with cold-blooded creatures. During his stint on the *New York Times*, Ditmars was asked to write "around-town stuff" for a Sunday pictorial magazine supplement which had been recently introduced as a way of boosting the paper's circulation.

Stories that were decidedly serpentine in subject



Above: The bushmaster proved very lively after being released from its travelling crate. Right: Raymond Ditmars was a newspaper journalist and early film producer too. Source PD.

matter began gracing the pages of the city's finest publication, as Ditmars brought to wider attention his fellow snake hobbyists. These included Charles H. Higby, an eccentric artist specialising in the design of theatre programmes, for whom snakes served as inspiration for his "peculiar work, elaborate in decorative effect", as Ditmars described it.

Higby was the proud owner of Yao, said at the time to be New York's only albino boa constrictor - 2.4m (8ft) of bright yellow snake. Then there was Frank Speck of Hackensack, New Jersey, who possessed "a complete collection of the reptiles of the State". They included "two lively black racers, which constantly dance up and down the glass front of their cage to the consternation of nervous callers."

His influences

Another notable snake collector of this period, and a great influence on Ditmars, was Dr C. Slover Allen. Although expert in ear, nose, and throat maladies, natural history was the genial medical doctor's true calling. Early publications focused on birds but the physician switched his attentions to an enduring problem: finding a snakebite cure.

He never did arrive at a solution but Allen gathered valuable data on water moccasins and rattlesnakes, which were trapped during holidays in Florida. Allen demonstrated his reptiles at meetings of New York City's Linnaean Society, the leading naturalists' club of the day, of which Ditmars was an

enthusiastic member.

However, Ditmars reserved perhaps his greatest admiration for a certain George R. O'Reilly, an itinerant newspaper editor and school professor of Irish origin who had "been in nearly every temperate and tropical country in the world in his search and study of serpent life."

Having spent several years collecting in Trinidad, Venezuela and British Guiana (now Guyana), O'Reilly moved to New Jersey. He brought with him some five hundred snakes as housemates, a good proportion of which he had bred himself.

Ditmars described O'Reilly as being "among the most enthusiastic collectors of ophidians," whose room "of ordinary dimensions" was crammed with "about forty cages, ranging in size from a packing case down to a soap box. In these cases, snakes of all colours and sizes writhe and twist, and glare ominously at the visitor." He also noted that the collection would be "positively alarming" to the uninitiated and wherever O'Reilly "took up his abode", the entire district became "immediately uncomfortable."

O'Reilly reputedly forbade the papers from printing his address for fear that his neighbours might "present a petition to the landlord requesting that the serpent expert be ignominiously bounced." Like Ditmars, O'Reilly invariably had a serpent or two about his person, carrying them in his pockets while riding streetcars and railroad trains. Once, on a crowded Fifth Avenue sidewalk, he was prevented from greeting a lady because he had a snake under his hat!

A formative moment

But back to the Bronx, and the Ditmars household,



where matters were coming to a head. Not satisfied with local snakes or those turning up at the docks, the young Raymond - still living with his parents - was now exchanging specimens with reptile-keepers all over the world.

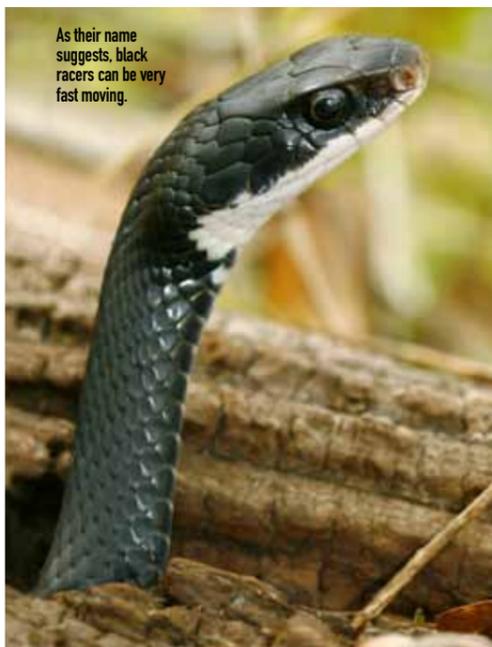
One day he took delivery of a large crate of snakes from Trinidad. (Customs rules were laxer in those days!). He subsequently described excitedly prizing open the wooden box dispatched from the West Indian island by a fellow serpent aficionado. Among the tropical boas, rat snakes, coral snakes, and fer-de-lances in this exotic consignment was the star of the show: a 2.4m (8ft) long bushmaster in good condition, which, the delivery note stated, Ditmars should "be extremely careful with liberating."

On its release, and clearly displeased for being cooped up for several weeks, the viper supposedly chased the young snake devotee about the room, with the rest of the family downstairs being totally oblivious to his plight. Finally, with the help of a broom, Ditmars persuaded the bushmaster to slither into a cage and he lived to tell the tale. "I figured it had received one of the surprises of its life," he later wrote, "and it had certainly given me the worst jolt of mine."

The hair-raising encounter with the giant viper was a formative moment for the young herpetologist. As my book *Bushmaster* reveals, thirty years later, the incident kindled in Ditmars an obsession to catch a wild bushmaster for himself. The middle-aged zoo curator would make repeated snake-hunting expeditions to Central and South America, a quest that for a period during the 1930s made national newspaper headlines. The remarkable Raymond Ditmars was clearly at the extreme end of the reptile-keeping spectrum! ✦

Next issue: Discover more about Raymond Ditmars' quest to find a bushmaster.

* Dan Eatherley is a British naturalist, writer and wildlife film-maker with a first class zoology degree from Oxford University. Dan has made a variety of natural history TV documentaries for the BBC, *National Geographic*, and the *Discovery Channel*, including working as an assistant producer with Sir David Attenborough. These days, when not hunting giant vipers, he works from his home in southwest England as a consultant in environmental sustainability. His website can be found at www.daneatherley.com



As their name suggests, black racers can be very fast moving.

Win a signed copy!

We have two signed copies of Dan's book, in which he follows in Ditmars's footsteps after 80 years, with the aim of finding a bushmaster in the wild.

To enter, simply send your name and address to: Bushmaster Competition, *Practical Reptile Keeping*, Kelsey Media, Cudham Tithe Barn, Berry's Hill, Cudham, Kent TN16 3AG. The closing date for entries is Friday, August 20th, and the first two entries drawn will be the winners. The judges' decision is final, and no correspondence can be entered into.

