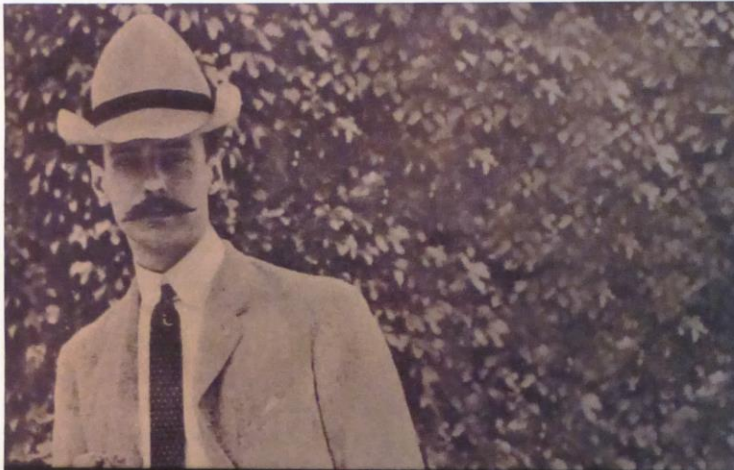


book reviews

BY TIM BROWN

Books are now so easily and readily available from a variety of sources and at a variety of prices that we no longer see the need to print ISBN numbers. We have returned to giving an approximate price because this may well affect the extent to which a member would want to own a book.



BUSHMASTER

RAYMOND DITMARS AND THE HUNT FOR
THE WORLD'S LARGEST VIPER

DAN EATHERLEY



BUSHMASTER: RAYMOND DITMARS AND THE HUNT FOR THE
WORLD'S LARGEST VIPER [D. Eatherley]
ARCADE

£16

In the spring 2012 edition of *Zoo Grapevine*, our occasional 'From the Archives' feature examined Raymond Ditmars's 1909 buying trip to Europe on behalf of the New York Zoological Society (Bronx Zoo).

Ditmars was just one of a host of famous names to emerge from that important organisation: names such as Crandall, Conway, Beebe and Hornaday. In 2013, the last of those names was the subject of a welcome, but flawed, volume looking at Hornaday's central role in the preservation of the American Bison. Now it is the turn of the Curator of Reptiles (and later of Mammals), Raymond Lee Ditmars (1876-1942), to have his story intertwined with that of a particular taxon – in his case, the Bushmaster. The present book hangs its hat on the desire of Ditmars to exhibit this snake (the longest venomous reptile in the Americas) at the Bronx Zoo; although the book serves in effect as a biography of Ditmars.

The story of this near-legendary American zoo-man is approached chronologically – really, life-stories are difficult to recount in any other way – but the tale is intermingled with the author's own journey around his subject's old haunts and places of importance. This culminates in an ultimately-futile attempt to find the Bushmaster in Trinidad; an island which housed the William Beebe Tropical Research Station back in the day (it's still there, but more of a vestige than a scientific enterprise). Ditmars actually did succeed in securing a Bushmaster – more than one, in fact, nor were these specimens the first ones at the Bronx Zoo. Previous ones had

arrived as occasional donations or purchases, but as was generally the case at that time with captive Bushmasters, none survived at the zoo for very long. The author, British naturalist and environmental consultant Dan Eatherley, offers up – via various expert opinions – reasons as to why this was. One possible factor was the often-violent nature of their capture: many specimens ultimately succumbed to stress-related problems (including an increased susceptibility to their natural parasite-load), whilst reluctance to feed was another common obstacle to captive husbandry. Personally I remember a cooler micro-climate than the usual ambient Reptile House temperature being advocated as a positive factor in bushmaster maintenance. It's all rather different nowadays, of course – not only in terms of captive welfare, but also in taxonomic treatment. Whereas all bushmasters tended to be viewed as belonging to a single species (*Lachesis muta*), today 4 species are recognised; with the Black-headed Bushmaster (*L. melanocephalus*) being formally described as recently as 1986. A couple of these species are now bred with some regularity in captivity: a circumstance pioneered by the Dallas Zoo in the 1980s. In fact, Eatherley also makes a visit to the Cape Fear Serpentarium in Wilmington, North Carolina, where owner Dean Ripa apparently owns over 60 bushmasters(!). How times change...but then again, that short statement is surely the major thread within the history of zoological facilities, without which there would be little conservation.

Although the bushmaster dominates this book, it is by no means the whole story. We learn of the young Ditmars's constant collecting habit in the field; of the Reptile House at the Bronx Zoo (one of the very first completed buildings at this turn-of-the-

19th/20th-century establishment); of what might be termed 'ex situ' exhibitions in New York (some of them surprisingly 'showy'); of Ditmars's significant contribution to zoological cinematography (much of it now lost); of his high profile with the media (which actually became a concern to zoo director Hornaday). Raymond Ditmars was famous as an author, particularly for *Reptiles of the World* (1910) and *Snakes of the World* (1931), but I was unaware that he wrote at least 11 other books: two with William Bridges, the New York Zoological Society's Curator of Publications. I certainly intend to try and track them all down.

One cannot fault Dan Eatherley's research procedures and attention to detail. He scoured zoo and museum libraries, film archives, and locations in several countries in his quest to bring Ditmars 'back to life' for the modern reader. This diligence even resulted in Eatherley tracking down one living conduit to Raymond Ditmars in the shape of his sole grandchild, Gloria (whose surname is not given). A small chapter is devoted to the author's meeting with her, and it weaves a gossamer thread of magic at the end of the book's story.

This volume is not over-endowed with imagery but what exists is valuable indeed, with many of the photographs being previously unknown to me. I particularly like one page which shows Ditmars peering at a colony of Spectral Bats (also known as Linnaeus's False Vampire, *Vampyrum spectrum*) collected in Trinidad, and below it a shot of Ditmars handling a consignment of land iguanas from the Galápagos Islands (Ah, those were the days! – and yes, I know I'm politically-incorrect). There is frequently a difficulty in writing a book on a zoological theme that can appeal to both the specialist and the general reader at the

same time. I can offer no greater compliment to the author than to report that he has succeeded in doing so. No zoological gaffes were apparent to this reviewer – and I cannot say that about recent works concerning Jumbo, William Hornaday, the exhibiting of animals in 19th century Britain, and others. Of course, I would have preferred the book to be of greater length, to have examined the Bronx Zoo of the early 20th century in more detail, but it is unrealistic (alas!) to expect the person-in-the-street to thrill to accounts of Pacaranas and Sunbeam Snakes. As it is, the book is pacy and vibrant, with the juxtaposing of then and now adding a rarely-encountered dimension to works concerning zoo history. It is heart-warming to see subjects such as Raymond Ditmars emerging from the shadows of history, and my fervent hope is that this seam of literary gold will continue to be mined by conscientious and talented writers like Dan Eatherley.

**INTERNATIONAL ZOO
YEARBOOK VOLUME 49
F.A. Fiskén [Managing Editor]
WILEY £148**

It's that time of year again, and for the 49th time in 55 years we are presented with the Zoological Society of London's 'international forum for the exchange of information on the role of zoos in the conservation of biodiversity, species and habitats' (to use the yearbook's own words). Rather surprisingly, Sir Solly Zuckerman [secretary of the ZSL, 1955–1977] starts his introduction to the very first volume (1960) with the use of the word 'conservation'. Peter Chalmers Mitchell [ZSL secretary, 1903–1935] as long ago as 1912 urged zoos to support the creation of reserves and the preservation of wild places. So perhaps the zoo as a conservational vessel is not as new an idea as some like to