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## BOOK REVIEW

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### **Bushmaster: Raymond Ditmars and the Hunt for the World's Largest Viper. Dan Eatherley. Arcade Publishing, New York. xivv, 303 pp.**

The 1935 book, *Snake-Hunters Holiday* is a combination travelogue, adventure and scientific quest, co-authored by Raymond Ditmars, a New York Zoological Society reptile curator and William Bridges, a reporter for the *New York Sun*. It tells the story of a working summer vacation to Trinidad to collect reptiles in the summer of 1934. While Ditmars is listed as the senior author, he had little to do with the actual text written by Bridges; but, the book was commissioned by Ditmars. The major focus of the trip, capturing the giant pit viper, *Lachesis muta* - also known as the bushmaster or on Trinidad as mapepire z'annana. *Snake-Hunter's Holiday* is also significant because of its recognition of the TTFNC, which is still thriving more than 80 years later. Now, Dan Eatherley has written a biographical volume on Raymond Ditmars and his obsession with finding a bushmaster in the wild.

Eatherley's *Bushmaster: Raymond Ditmars and the Hunt for the World's Largest Viper* will be an interesting and rewarding book for anyone familiar with Ditmars, interested in Trinidad's natural history, or passionate about snakes. And, for those who are not, it will open a window to early 20th century herpetology and the exploration of the natural world. Eatherley follows Ditmars' career, visiting locations where Ditmars lived, worked, and collected snakes. Ditmars sphere of influence extended well beyond herpetology into public education and conservation. He had the attention of President Theodore Roosevelt and undoubtedly contributed to Roosevelt's enthusiasm for all of nature. Ditmars' books lead the way forward for reptile conservation as he investigated the decline in snake dens, learned to maintain reptiles in captivity and generate widespread interest in a group of animals badly in need of a publicist.

Eatherley's blending of humour, memoir and natural history stimulates our appreciation for Ditmars quest by illustrating his ingenuity in making his way through life and his unwavering determination to study snakes. The anecdotal stories of Ditmars amassing a snake collection as a teenager reveal his lifelong fascination with snakes, which launched a zoo career, academic research, and a public education campaign that added herpetology to the average American's vocabulary.

Readers with a phobia of snakes may cringe at the story of Ditmars' extensive snake collection housed in

his parents' home, and how he once manoeuvred a bushmaster, loose in the room into a cage. True, natural history adventure stories like this one may be just what is needed to expand interest in younger generations often consumed by technology and oblivious to the natural world.

Throughout the book are many side trips in topics, time and geography: the founding of the New York Zoological Society and the National Parks in the USA, Ditmars' time as a newspaper reporter, and his transition to Curator of Reptiles at the New York Zoological Society (AKA the Bronx Zoo); the problems associated with the CroFab antivenom; and discussions of vampire bats and rabies.

Ditmars, Trinidad and the bushmaster all came together because of Richard R. Mole, a Trinidad newspaper editor and snake enthusiast. In his teenage years Ditmars corresponded with people from all over the planet. Mole sent 19-year-old Ditmars an eight foot bushmaster as part of a trade for some North American snakes. This is the story that initiates Eatherley's book. The bushmaster captured Ditmars' attention and increased his fervour to find one in nature. But, the sight of a bushmaster in the wild eluded Ditmars. Trips to Central America and the 1934 trip to Trinidad that resulted in *Snake-Hunter's Holiday* did not satisfy Ditmars' quest. I will leave the results of Eatherley's parallel quest to discover a bushmaster in the field to the reader.

Bushmasters are an iconic reminder that nature is both dangerous and our life support system. Much remains to be learned about bushmasters, their relationships with the large rodent, *Cuniculus paca* and the bizarre and ancient pentastomid parasites than infect their respiratory system. Pentastomids are thought to be most closely related to barnacles. Because bushmasters are the only Neotropical pit vipers documented to lay eggs, they may also provide some interesting clues to the evolution of reproductive modes in snakes. Bushmaster... is a good introduction to the snake and herpetological history and will hopefully stimulate some readers to become more interested in both.

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