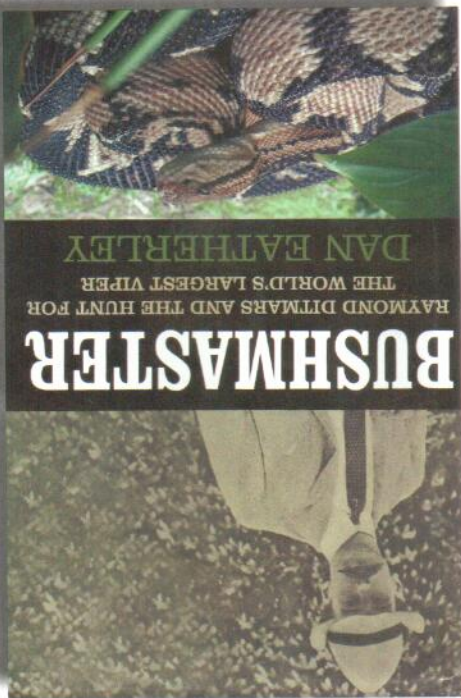


# BOOK REVIEW: Bushmaster: Raymond Ditmars and the Hunt for the World's Largest Viper

Review by Robert W. Mendyk,<sup>1</sup> Supervisor of Herpetology  
 Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens, Jacksonville, FL 32218 USA  
<sup>2</sup>Smithsonian Research Associate, Department of Herpetology  
 Smithsonian National Zoological Park  
 Washington D.C., 20001 USA

Bushmaster: Raymond Ditmars and the  
 Hunt for the World's Largest Viper  
 Dan Eatherley, 2015.  
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 303 pages



Among the many North American zoological institutions that have helped shape the field of zoo biology, few have played as great a contributing role as the New York Zoological Society (NYZS), known today as the Wildlife Conservation Society. A wealth of books and other historical accounts have chronicled the fascinating history of the society and its various facilities including the Bronx Zoo, as well as the careers and contributions of its early staff members to the fields of zoology and conservation biology. In particular, several important works have celebrated the Bronx Zoo's original two animal curators – William Beebe (1877-1962), curator and founder of the NYZS's Department of Tropical Research, and Raymond Ditmars (1876-1942), curator of reptiles. These two men were responsible for many pioneering advancements in their respective fields, hundreds of scientific publications and popular articles on their charges at the zoo and natural history, and dozens of popular books which introduced readers of all ages to the joys and wonders of nature. Raymond Ditmars is often revered as one of the most important and influential zoo biologists and naturalists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and a key figure in shaping North American herpetology.

As the latest contribution to the large body of work focusing on the Bronx Zoo and its staff, Dan Eatherley's 2015 book entitled *Bushmaster: Raymond Ditmars and the Hunt for the World's Largest Viper* takes readers on an epic journey through the past and present as he recalls the life, career and travels of Raymond Ditmars and his unwavering fascination with the bushmaster (genus *Lachesis*), the largest venomous snake of the Americas. Drawing largely from previous biographical and autobiographical accounts, the author invokes an interesting narrative, jumping back and forth between Ditmars' own adventures and personal experiences and those of the author, as he attempts to reconstruct and retrace many of Ditmars' footsteps in New York City, the northeastern US, and the neotropics. With this information, the author embarks on his ultimate goal of succeeding where Ditmars did not - finding a bushmaster himself in the forests of Trinidad.

Readers will be fascinated to learn about the many pioneering techniques and advancements that Ditmars was responsible for, including the domestic production and procurement of snake antivenoms, as well as the filming and production of some of the world's first wildlife motion pictures during the 1910s and 1920s. The author also highlights Ditmars' childhood growing up in the New York City area and his attraction to snakes and other aspects of natural history from an early age, as well as the trajectory of his career from a budding teen reptile enthusiast keeping a menagerie of snakes in the attic of his parents' house, to studying insects at the American Museum of Natural History, to working as a reporter for the New York Times, and finally to his curatorial position with the zoo and adventures collecting reptiles and mammals abroad. In New York, Ditmars was hailed as a celebrity by the press, and often featured in articles chronicling his travels and zoological pursuits, personal life, and failures – such as his return from a heavily-publicized bushmaster collecting trip empty-handed.

Despite the bulk of Ditmars' personal library, memoranda, and correspondence letters apparently being lost or discarded following his death, Eatherley has done a superb job of piecing together and recalling the life and times and exploits of this important zoo figure in a manner that is inviting to all fanciers of zoo history, zoo biology and natural history – not just the herpetologically-inclined. Beyond portraying an important bygone era in zoo keeping that will be of much interest to anyone who has ever worked in a zoo, it also represents a further contribution detailing historical aspects of the Bronx Zoo and its staff, and ranks among other must-read titles on the zoo's history such as William Bridge's *Gathering of Animals* and Peter Brazaitis' *You Belong in a Zoo*. Individuals with a specialized interest in herpetology and its history will be pleased to find this book highly entertaining and deserving of a place on their bookshelves next to Ditmars' classic books as well as the works of other celebrated zoo herpetologists such as Carl Kautzfeld, Roger Conant, and James Murphy.