

# The Bushmaster

## Silent Fate of the American Tropics

**The natural history of the largest,  
most dangerous viper in the world**

*“An intriguing inquiry into the life habits of one of the most fascinating of all snakes . . . The infamous bushmaster is made accessible without detracting anything from its mysterious allure . . . This book constitutes the single greatest reservoir of facts and interpretations that have yet been offered on this poorly known reptile. It is certain to become the standard work.”*

– Charles M. Fugler

*“A bushmaster opus, thoroughly investigated . . . I am impressed by Dean Ripa’s incredible experiences with these snakes. . . A labor of love.”*

– Jonathan Campbell, coauthor of *Venomous Reptiles of Latin America*

*“The definitive natural history of the bushmaster, and likely to remain so.”*

– Frank Shaw

The first published monograph on the New World’s deadliest snake takes the reader through every aspect of its morphology, evolution, distribution, life habits, and venom.

The largest viper in the world, reaching a length of 12 ft (3.6 m), the bushmaster has long inspired excitement and dread among travelers to the jungles of Central and South America. Implicated in unprovoked, chasing attacks, and packing a bite that is almost always fatal (80 percent in one Costa Rican study) the bushmaster has earned a nearly legendary status in popular writings. For all that it remains a somewhat obscure character in herpetology. Rarely seen in the wild, bushmasters are so thinly populated, so secretive, and live in such remote forests, that even many dedicated field scientists have never actually encountered a living specimen in their native haunts. The bushmaster’s large size and evident danger belies an unusual sensitivity making them difficult to keep alive in captivity. This has also made them difficult to study. Thus to date, no scientific book has been published on the bushmaster’s life habits.

This collection of Dean Ripa’s papers from the years 1994 - 2007 comprise first published monograph on the bushmaster’s natural history. Survivor of seven bushmaster bites - literally, the most bushmaster bitten man of all time - the author has the rare qualifications necessary to tell the story of these rare, fascinating and frightening snakes. Refuting both popular and scientific myths, this book reveals the truly unique characteristics of bushmasters, from their evolutionary forms to their behavior. What are the actual sizes of bushmasters in the wild? Do bushmasters really chase people as has been portrayed? Why does bushmaster venom kill people so quickly despite its surprisingly low toxicity rating in the laboratory? What is the correct treatment protocol for bushmaster bite? The unique anatomical features the bushmaster uses in courtship and copulation, the territorial battles for females, the age-related changes in venom composition, surprising dietary requirements and many more evolutionary quirks are described for the first time. Once considered a single taxon, included are Ripa’s original papers that led to their reclassification. Ripa’s own bushmaster bites are recounted in horrifying, close-up detail. Stylishly awesome, iconoclastic, irreverent, penetrating, and with an almost diabolical eye for the marvelous and strange, here is a book quite unlike any other that has ever been written on any snake species, lifted from exhaustive laboratory experiments, decades of relentless observation and study, and torn from so many near-death experiences that one can almost smell the reek of hospital corridors lurking in the background.

The photographic library is by far the largest and most comprehensive ever published on this rare pitviper. The scientific information amassed in this book was a labor spanning more than 25 years.

**Cape Fear Serpentarium**

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(GENUS *LACHESIS* DAUDIN, 1803)

**SILENT FATE OF THE AMERICAN TROPICS**



**DEAN RIPA**

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SILENT FATE OF THE AMERICAN TROPICS

DEAN RIPA

*Cape Fear  
Serpentarium*





Dean Ripa was born in 1957, in Wilmington, North Carolina. A herpetological *Wunderkind*, he was already catching venomous snakes before the age of ten in the swamplands near his home, and recording their habits in captivity. At age 13 he was seriously bitten, and hospitalized in intensive care for two weeks, losing the functional use of his right hand. Undaunted, he continued, and by age 15 was already keeping some of the world's most dangerous snakes— king cobras, Gaboon vipers, black mambas, and many others— unbeknownst to his parents, in cages hidden in the attic rooms of their spacious mansion-like house. In his early twenties, he left for Africa to capture and bring live snakes back to America. As this proved successful, he began traveling the world hunting snakes for a living. Major zoos, laboratories, dealers and private fanciers were his customers. Long before television snake-wrangers were staging “cobra captures” in front of hidden movie crews, Dean Ripa was prowling the remotest areas of the earth, far from medical help, catching deadly serpents and bringing them back alive to America in order to study their habits in captivity. His adventures have taken him to five continents and more than 30 countries, and they have sometimes been harrowing. He has been wracked by malaria, schistosomiasis and dysentery, lost in Amazonian jungles, stranded in the New Guinea highlands, and held up at gun point during military coups in West Africa and Suriname. He has survived fourteen envenomings to date, including seven by bushmasters, surely the record number of bites on any individual by this most lethal of vipers. As author William S. Burroughs described him in his book, *The Western Lands*, “Dean Ripa could have stepped from the pages of a novel by Joseph Conrad.”

No one knows the deadly bushmaster more intimately than Dean Ripa. From his years hunting them in the jungles of Central and South America, to his extensive laboratory research, to the gobs of bushmaster venom flowing in his veins, this book represents a wealth of information and experiences never to be repeated. Dean Ripa is the owner and director of one of America's premier reptile museums, Cape Fear Serpentarium, where he maintains the largest breeding population of bushmasters in the world.