

An Expert Talks on Snakes as They Are Popular Fallacies Regarding Serpents Exploded--Hypnotic Power All Nonsense

From the Philadelphia Public Ledger

The average person has a strange, undefinable antipathy to snakes, it amounts to more than antipathy, really—it is a shivery, creepy loathing for which the senses supply no adequate explanation, nor mere courage an antidote. Scripturarians tell us that this instinctive emotion of horror at the sight of serpents was bequeathed to man as a result of certain events in the Garden of Eden some years ago. However that may be, the fact remains, pure and simple. Nor, indeed, with few exceptions, are the various animal tribes exempt. Lions, tigers, panthers—all give the "poison people" or, in fact, snakes of any kind a wide berth.

Strange it is, then, to talk to a man who fears not the reptiles of the order Ophidia; who, on the contrary, has a profound regard for them; who understands them better than they understand themselves; who loves to handle them, and who sees in their vermiculations the very poetry of motion, and in the markings of their skins nature's most beautiful and lavish display. Such a man is Raymond L. Ditmars, curator of the reptile house in the Bronx Zoological Park, New York, who began the study of snakes in boyhood, and who since has carried his investigations into almost every country in the world.

One suffers the destruction of several serpentine illusions in a brief talk with Mr. Ditmars. Things you read in childhood's nature books of travel melt into sheer nonsense his calm first-hand knowledge and snake logic—and it's hard to have illusions killed. But the curator of reptiles does it very nicely and gently and in exchange gives facts almost as interesting.

As, for instance, when you question him as to stories concerning birds that have been so hypnotized by snakes as to walk down their throats. Mr. Ditmars smiles softly.

"Yes, yes, I know," he says, blandly. "That is the common belief, but it is far from true. Snakes have no hypnotic power—none whatever. Here it is: You are walking across the street, and suddenly you look up and see an automobile bearing down upon you. You are tied to the spot with fright. So it is with the poor little bird suddenly confronted by his hungry snakehood. Lying in wait upon the limb of a tree, the bird is too frightened to fly. But—and here is where the exchange comes in—"some snake will allow birds to roost on their backs without exhibiting any desire to have them anywhere else. Take the Mississippi river water snake which eats only frogs, for instance, etc., etc."

Mr. Ditmars talks while he works among the glass houses of the reptiles. There is something almost sinister about the movement of his arm as he thrusts it into a copperhead's case to arrange interior decorations and conveniences.

"I did a rare thing with him once," said Mr. Ditmars. "In a spirit of folly, I suppose you might call it, I held him in my hand while a photographer took a time exposure picture. In handling poison snakes, you know, you must lift them so as to have no sure anywhere. Snakes are all stupid, and if you gently insert your hand under them and lift them up, they cannot tell your hand from a stick. As long as they feel no restraint you may carry them about as you would a kitten. But—let them feel so much as the pressure of a finger, and they strike, and you know you never can see a snake strike lightning is not swifter. Well, that is the way I held this copperhead—and oh, yes I forgot to say that the hand must not tremble. When the picture was taken I dropped him quick, and for the first time I noticed that I was wet with perspiration from head to foot, I have not done that with a poison snake since. Why? Oh, because I am a married man now and have children to think of." Here the curator exhibited the picture. He seemed very proud of it; in fact, he did not hesitate to admit that he was proud.

Mr. Ditmars approached the rear of a rattler's cage with a nice fresh rat. You could see the snake coil up to strike, while a whirr like the buzzing of insects emanated from the rattles of his quivering tail.

"All right, Pete, be good," he said, thrusting in the rat and walking on.

"Does he know you?" we asked.

"You called him by name," he said.

"No, of course not. Snakes have no intelligence. I might as well have spoken to a telegraph pole. Well no, I was not quite accurate in that statement—you will see a form of intelligence among the larger snakes, the rock pythons and the boas. As a general thing they are good natured and docile, and are inclined to recognize good treatment from bad, and I think grow to have a certain liking for the man who feeds them at feeding time."

Nearby was a cage containing a twenty-five foot python getting ready to crawl out of its skin. Mr. Ditmars remarked that this serpent was very good natured, and proceeded to prove it by reaching in his hand and patting the diamond-scaled head. And the python looked actually pleased, as though he expected something good to follow it.

"He will bite if he gets mad, and his teeth would make a fearful tear, but there is no poison to fear. They bite quite hard with their heads, these snakes, although not so hard as

a strong man could hit with his—" exit all belief in Mr. Kipling's terrible Kaa, who used to butt down stone walls. But the snake man did admit that this snake could crush a man to death if it caught him in its folds.

"You might call rattlesnakes the most recent snakes," said Mr. Ditmars. "All poison snakes are of more recent origin than non-poisonous snakes. They represent a certain process of evolution, as I figure it out. Centuries hence, or aeons hence, rather, most snakes will be poisonous. But, at the same time, poison snakes have no intelligence at all. For that matter, I have never seen signs of affection in any snakes, so docile that you could tie them in knots—do every thing you wished with them. But docility might mean anything other than intelligence. Serpents, in fact, are the lowest in order of intelligence of all reptiles. I rank them this way: Tortoises, alligators and crocodiles, lizards, and then snakes."

"You will notice, curious things about big snakes which, as I have said, do give frequent evidence. This twenty-five foot Python, Jim, for example, will eat only out of my hand—I don't know why. Big snakes take just such a kink as this very frequently. We lost a twenty-eight foot Python recently because of this. He took the notion of refusing food unless it was handed to him. Snyder was taken ill, and I was on my vacation last summer, and neither of us returned until two weeks had elapsed. We had neglected to tell the other keepers about this snake's peculiarity, and as a result he refused to eat all the time we were away. We returned to find him starving. He died a few days later."

"Snake charmers use these big snakes because, as a rule, the larger species do not much care what one does with them so long as they are well fed. Any person could handle them as well as the average charmer could. I have seen very few charmers who used the genuine poison article. Only one, in fact—good old Rattle-snake Jack. The snakes he had were rattlers all right, and they had their fangs, poison and all. He depended upon that deft, sticklike motion of the hand when picking them up. He would slide his hand gently under them, and up they would go, as nicely as you please." Here Mr. Ditmars demonstrated with a little ring snake.

"Now you would suppose that these snakes in time would have become used to him. But they never did. He had to be just as careful with them the first day as the hundredth day of their acquaintance. I sent Jack two Florida diamond backs, and he liked them so well that he sent to Florida for two more."

"He was a good, light-hearted fellow, Jack was, and he at last came to have a sort of contempt for his rattlers. The last time I saw him was in Boston, and it was then that I noticed his increased insouciance. I spoke to him after the act was over, warning him that he was playing with death, and that they would get him if he were not careful. In fact, I advised him to give up the rattlers and do his act with non-poisonous snakes. But he laughed. The next day, the very next day, before a matinee crowd—Jack was showing off and making extra fillips with his hands—one of the Florida fellows struck him. Right on the finger, it was, Jack lived a day, I think. It was the second time he had been bitten."

"No, I have never been bitten by a poison snake. Of course, I've had hundreds of narrow escapes, but I always considered a miss as good as a mile, and never worried. I usually, when working among them, take care to keep out of striking distance, which is two feet, a third of their length. If I have to lift them, I just shove a nerveless hand under them and move them in the desired place. A nervous man has no business with snakes."

"Contrary to general belief, snakes are hostile to man; that is, they do not seek battle with us. As a snake will invariably run from a man if he has time. A rattler will never go after a man; they strike when they are stepped on, or when they become so frightened in the presence of man as to arouse their instincts of self-preservation; but neither rattlers nor other snakes kill for the love of killing. As to rattling their tails to give warning, I consider that sheer nonsense, however. All snakes quiver their tails when excited, and the fact that one species has rattles, and thus give warning of their presence, does not argue that they rattle with design to warn human beings. No one really knows what those rattles are for."

"I like rattlesnakes, there is something husky and powerful and beautiful about them that incites admiration. They have a certain amount of self-possession, too, and they do not get nervous and ready to fly off at the handle the first second—see how long Rattlesnake Jack handled them before they finally struck him to death."

"I have no respect for the cobra," continued the curator, pointing to a hooded viper, standing almost on its tail, its flat head swaying as though in a gentle wind. "They are as nervous as a stretched wire, and strike at a puff of wind. I don't like them at all. No, I never handle a cobra. They do not impress me as a rattler does; they have none of a rattler's husky build, and seem to me less snake-like. Cobras really belong to a harm-

less species of serpent life, and why nature endowed them with the most deadly poisonous attributes of all vipers I can not fathom.

"There are strange things to be noted in the habits of these poison snakes that perhaps might be attributed to that sixth sense which some scientists believe is possessed by poisonous snakes. One of them is a desire to be alone. Poison snakes are not at all gregarious. Last month we had a fine prairie rattlesnake in that case there. Two more snakes were received and I put them in with the prairie fellow. None of the three would eat after that, and all took care to occupy separate corners. Finally I had to take on the new arrivals and place them by themselves. They began to eat then, but the rattler whose home had been invaded never ate again, sulking in a corner until it starved to death. Why, I don't know. Snakes have no maternal instinct either. The minute little snakelets come into the world they are surprised, and I might add that they are as well provided with fangs at their birth and are as generally dangerous as their parents."

"There is nothing to fear from non-poisonous snakes. I handle them as I would pieces of rope. But, then, I suppose I naturally take to snakes and consequently like them."

Mr. Ditmars went on to explain the lavish colors with which nature has endowed them, but the visitor could not share the enthusiasm of his host. There was something about the writhing reptiles, the thick foliage of their quarters, the heavy odors of bloom, that got on his nerves, and once when the curator touched him on the shoulder he jumped three feet from the floor.

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WILD GAME IN JAPAN

(Tokio Correspondent London Field)

Men often ask me about the sport obtainable in Japan, and so with respect to this it may not come amiss if I here explain. Hunting, such as the people of England and Ireland understand it by that term, is absolutely non-existent in the land of the Mikado. Foxes, deer and hares are plentiful enough, but Japan's natural features and the methods of agriculture followed by its farming classes are all, and most uncompromisingly too, against it.

Of candidates for the rifle Japan possesses quite a respectable number among them being three species of bears, a wolf, a species of stone goat or antelope, and, if it is permissible for an old Anglo-Indian to place him in the same category, the wild boar. All are, however, scarce, and getting scarcer yearly, and it certainly would not pay any one to make extensive preparations for going in search of any of them, for, though the Aino, that extremely hairy aboriginal of Japan, hunts them all most assiduously, he will render no assistance to a stranger to do likewise, and as for the Japanese hunter, he is the most pitiful of shags.

And then again, the slightest deviation by a foreigner off the beaten tracks of foreign travel in Japan is more likely than not to lead to unpleasantness for him, for suspicion of foreigners and their motives is one of the leading and worst traits in the Japanese character. Not being sportsmen or travelers in the same sense and from the same motives as the English speaking people are, they cannot understand why any one should spend his time in pursuit of objects which to them, at least—bring no tangible results. To travel they have no objection, but only do so to see places of interest and with some very definite object in view, such as for the spying out of a foreign land or for the gaining of knowledge upon a special subject, but never for sport.

To revert, however, to the wild game of Japan, it is a pity indeed that matters are as described, for the bears of the land are unique, as well from the point of view of the enormous size, strength and fierceness of one species as from the diminutiveness of another. The first is a great carnivorous brute, a sort of grizzly, who makes nothing of killing and carrying off a fourteen hand pony. Next to him comes a black beast very much like the sloth bear of India, and last of all a diminutive little brute scarce larger than a good sized spaniel, exceedingly shy and seldom seen.

The wolves of Japan are scarce, cowardly and of little account, and found now only in the extreme northern parts of the empire. The stag is about the size of and in make and shape and habits, too, like the fallow deer of England and Scotland. The little Japanese antelope must be a very near relative indeed of the jungle bakri of India, possessing, as he does, the same general appearance and shy habits.

The wild pig of Japan appears to be a domestic pig run wild. I have seen herds of Manchurian and Mongolian swine, great black hairy beasts, driven through the streets of Peking, of a far wilder and fiercer breed than any wild pig I have come across in Japan. The boars there are, however, of a fair size, but never so tall on the legs nor with such fine tusks as the jungle soar of India. To ride one of them down, as we do his brother of India, would be an impossibility, for as it would be the case in hunting, so, too, in this sport, the nature of the country would be all against any one attempting to do so.

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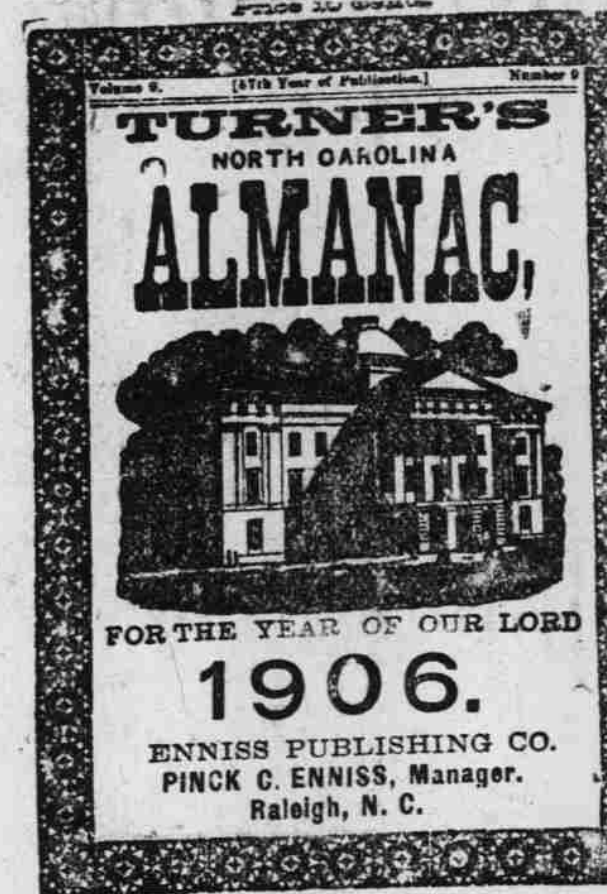
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