

And God Laughs...

The Arthur Jones Autobiography

www.ArthurJonesExercise.com

“Believe nothing of what you read or hear and only half of what you see.”

Anon.

During a period starting around the turn of the century and extending for a number of years afterwards, a man named Raymond L. Ditmars published several books on the subject of snakes and other reptiles; these books were published in a large format and were lavishly illustrated with hundreds of photographs.

These books by Ditmars could be found in almost any public or school library, and they were undoubtedly responsible for generating a rather widespread interest in reptiles; and, to this day, many people still consider Ditmars to be the final authority on the subject of reptiles. But, unfortunately, the man was a liar; and, while mistakes of one kind or another are probably unavoidable, lies in a supposedly authoritative publication are unforgivable.

By his own account, Ditmars made only two trips to Florida in his life, for a total period of only fourteen days, yet he claimed to have personally captured rattlesnakes in excess of eight feet in length on both of those trips. I have handled tens-of-thousands of Florida rattlesnakes, and the largest one I ever saw measured one and three-quarters inches less than seven feet; and that was a snake that I raised in captivity under perfect conditions, so his size was far in excess of anything ever found in the wild.

Ross Allen handled hundreds-of-thousands of Florida rattlesnakes over a period of more than fifty years, and the largest one he even claimed to have ever seen was seven feet and two inches in length; and I believe that snake was a figment of his imagination.

Ray Singleton probably handled more Florida rattlesnakes than anybody else who ever lived, over a period of about sixty years; and when I asked him how big the largest one he ever saw was, he said . . . “Years ago, I saw a rattlesnake that was supposed to be six feet and two inches long, and at the time I believed it; but since then, having measured a lot of other big snakes in the meantime, I don’t believe it was quite that large.”

Some years back, NASA published a picture of a supposedly giant Florida rattlesnake that was an outright fake, and a poor fake at that; they took a medium sized dead rattlesnake, suspended him from an overhead beam with a string tied to his tail, put a man on the far side of the snake from the camera and had him hold his arm above his head as if he was holding the string tied to the snake’s tail. But, in fact, the man was quite a long way away from the string holding the snake; thus, with the camera located quite close to the snake, the picture was supposed to show a man holding up a giant rattlesnake.

But they made two mistakes: one, the man’s fingers that were supposedly holding the string were not lined up properly, so they airbrushed out the actual string and drew in another string. Apparently failing to notice that the drawn in string was not vertical; but, then, perhaps gravity works differently on Cape Canaveral. Two, in the picture the man has a shadow, but the snake does not; they airbrushed out the snake’s shadow because it would have been a dead giveaway clearly indicating that the picture was a fake.

But why would NASA fake a picture of a rattlesnake? In an attempt to convince the people in Washington that Cape Canaveral was a dangerous hardship post . . . “Look at the size of this brute; this is an example of the dangers that we are exposed to here while going to and from work. Give us more money.”

Another rather widespread picture of a supposedly giant rattlesnake shows a long line of men holding the snake in front of them; but again the picture is obviously a fake and the proof exists in the picture itself; the snake shown in this picture is as stiff as a long piece of pipe, does not sag down between the hands that are supporting it as an actual snake would do. That fake snake was made by wrapping the skins of several snakes around a post or a length of pipe.

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Sometime in the late 1940s a man in Miami named Bill Haast managed to convince a doctor at the medical school there that he had discovered some sort of relationship between cobra venom and cancer, and with this doctor's help then talked the medical school into building a large serpentarium on land owned by Haast a few miles south of Miami.

Before he started that scam, Haast had been a steward for Pan American Airlines, but afterwards he always wore a white jacket like a doctor, and even signed his letters as Dr. Haast when writing to people who did not know his true background.

I first met him in the late winter of 1952 when Ralph Demers took me out to his place in an attempt to buy some cobras from him. He had several large concrete pits for snakes, and at least half of the snakes in these pits were obviously dead; yet he stood there with a couple of hundred dead snakes in plain sight and told me that none of his snakes ever died. Rather than viewing a large area as freedom, captive snakes apparently consider it a threat, and never live very long in a large enclosure.

Later, during that initial conversation, Haast quoted a weight for a snake of a given length that was more than twice the maximum possible weight for a snake of that length. A statement that pushed me a bit too far; whereupon I offered to throw him out of his own place of business, so Ralph and I did not leave on the best of terms with Haast.

Given the outcome of that first meeting, I did not go back for several years, and when I eventually did pay him another visit I certainly did not expect much in the way of a friendly welcome. But, in fact, he welcomed me like a long lost son, and then immediately asked me how he could stop his snakes from dying in such great numbers. Later, he paid me \$3,000.00 for one of the crocodiles that I captured in the Caprivi strip, and kept it in his exhibit until it killed a mentally disturbed child who jumped into the pit with the crocodile in order to commit suicide. Whereupon Haast shot and killed the crocodile, as if the tragedy was the animal's fault.

Later yet, Haast came out with what he called PROVEN, a name which was a contraction of the words Professional Venom, but which implied that it had been approved by the FDA and was widely accepted by the medical community. But when the FDA finally got around to running tests on it they found that it did not contain the types of venom that Haast claimed it did; and that it was not even consistent from one bottle to another.

For a period of about thirty years, every time business at his exhibit dropped off a bit Haast would claim that he had been bitten by a cobra again, and that always assured him a lot of publicity and more visitors for his exhibit. The last time I heard, he was then claiming to have been bitten by cobras more than a hundred times.

Sometime in the 1920s a then very famous explorer from England, Colonel Fawcett, disappeared together with his son and another young man while on an expedition into the then unexplored interior of Brazil; and to this day nobody knows what happened to them, although it has generally been assumed that they were killed by headhunters.

Fawcett published several very popular books about his supposed adventures on a number of expeditions, but like Ditmars he was a liar. Early in one of his books he said . . . "When I first went to Brazil I heard stories about giant snakes, thirty or even forty feet long; but, as a scientist, I simply laughed at these stories. But I was in for a surprise."

Having thus planted the seed for a lie to follow, he did not mention the subject of giant snakes again until near the end of the book; but then stated that he killed and carefully measured an anaconda that was sixty-two feet long. Then, having told that lie, in an attempt to make it more believable, he said . . . "However, it was very thin, less than a foot in diameter."

And I must at least agree with that last statement, since the spinal column of a sixty-two foot anaconda would be more than a foot in diameter; so, if the snake had lost all of its skin, all of its muscle and fat, all of its ribs, all of its internal organs, and part of the spinal column, then I would have to agree that it was very thin indeed.

If a twenty foot anaconda weighed more than 300 pounds, as it would if it was in even reasonable condition, then how much would a sixty foot anaconda weigh? A lot more than you would probably expect; because increasing the length of a snake also increases both its horizontal and vertical dimensions, so the sixty footer would be three times the

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length of the twenty footer, and thus you would expect it to be three times as wide and three times as high through the body; and if so, it would then weigh twenty-seven times as much as the twenty footer, because you must multiply 3 by 3 by 3, which will be 27, and then multiply 27 by the weight of a twenty footer, and 27 times 300 pounds would give you an expected weight for a sixty footer of 8,100 pounds.

But, in fact, a sixty footer would actually be far heavier than that; because animals change their body proportions as they grow larger, must do so in order to maintain enough structural integrity to support their increased weight. So a sixty foot anaconda would probably be about five feet wide and high, and when we multiply 3 by 5 by 5 we get a factor of increased weight of 75 rather than one of 27, so a sixty footer would then weigh about 22,500 pounds if it was not starved almost to death, and would require a spinal column at least a foot thick to support that weight. Such a snake probably could not survive for long on a diet that provided it with anything less than several horses a month. So Colonel Fawcett was not only a liar but obviously did not understand the simple laws of basic physics either; if so, he would probably have said . . . “But is was very thin, was little more than three feet thick.”

During the last twenty-six years, since I returned to this country from Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), I have written and published several hundred articles and four books on the subjects of exercise and rehabilitation; and during the eleven years before I moved back to this country I produced, directed, filmed, edited and narrated more than 300 films for television on the subject of animals and reptiles; but in spite of the fact that I have probably had more experience with snakes and other reptiles than any other ten men who ever lived, I have never previously published anything on the subject of reptiles or other animals.

Apart from my business dealing in reptiles and animals, my interest has always been a personal thing that I shared with very few people; and while I have read anything I could lay my hands on that was devoted to the subject of reptiles or other animals, I have found very little in the way of truth in any of these published works. I have never belonged to any of the herpetological associations, have never been a speaker at any of their meetings, and did not like most of the people who I have met who did belong to such groups of supposed experts. Like the experts in most fields, it is apparently impossible to communicate meaningfully with any of them; so why bother?