

GREAT SNAKES OF THE AMAZON

A Traveler in the Jungles of South America Tells of Big Reptiles.

In an article on reptiles published in the National Geographical Magazine, Curator Ditmars, of the zoological park, makes the following statement regarding the length and size of the boa constrictors or anacondas of South America:

"Species of the genus boa inhabiting tropical America attain a maximum length of 12 to 14 feet."

Having recently explored a section of the upper Amazon valley, called the Javary river region, situated about 2,200 miles from the mouth of this great river, I have published my observations in a volume called "In the Amazon Jungle" (Putnam's) wherein I state that I have assisted in the killing and skinning of a sucuruju or anaconda having a total length of 54 feet, eight inches when dried.

This measurement was taken very carefully and was witnessed by several men. The statement made by Dr. Ditmars would therefore seem too conservative and possibly is the result of a too limited knowledge of the fauna of South America and the upper Amazon in particular.

It may be said in favor of my statement concerning the length of this enormous boa, which to some may appear exaggerated, that few white men have ever penetrated this remote part of equatorial South America, where the land is inundated for the better part of the year. The entire Amazon valley is then transformed into a vast swampy forest steaming under the equatorial sun and in it there is an astonishing development in reptilian life.

Of the few white men that ever penetrated into this region still fewer, I do not hesitate to say, were interested in looking for snakes. Their object was merely a commercial one, and it is thus easily explained how these serpents escape observation. No one has the right to deny their existence. There are still several hundred of species of fish and reptiles to be discovered and classified by scientists.

Evidence in support of the contention that there are larger serpents in this region than Mr. Ditmars's statement would lead one to suppose may be found in the following volumes: H. W. Bates's "A Naturalist on the Amazon," A. R. Wallace's "Travels on the Amazon and Rio Negro," and C. Waterton's "Wanderings in South America." These authors are among the acknowledged authorities on the fauna and flora of equatorial countries and their books are accepted as standard works.

In order to show that Mr. Ditmars's statements need some modification I may quote what these authors have to say on the subject of the anaconda or boa constrictor.

Charles Waterton in his volume, "Wanderings in South America," says on page 250 that an associate of his killed a boa 22 feet long. This boa, he says, "had a pair of stag horns in its mouth. The boa had swallowed a stag, but could not get the horns down, so he had to wait in patience till his stomach had digested the body and then the horns dropped out."

The same author records on page 95 that "the Camoudi snake of the Orinoco (the anaconda) has been killed from 30 to 40 feet long; though not venomous, his size renders him destructive to passing animals . . . the Spaniards on the Orinoco positively affirm that he grows to a length of 70 to 80 feet, and that he will destroy the strongest and largest bull. His name seems to confirm this; there he is called Mata-toro, which literally means bull killer."

A. W. Bates in his famous volume, "A Naturalist on the Amazon," says on page 156: "I was aroused a little after midnight, as I lay in my little cabin, by a heavy blow struck at the side of the canoe close at my head. This was succeeded by the sound of a weighty body plunging in the water."

"I got up, but all was again quiet, except the cackling of the fowls in the hencoop, which hung over the side of the vessel, about three feet from the cabin door. I could find no explanation of the circumstance, and, my men being all ashore, I turned in again and slept till the morning. I then found my poultry loose about the canoe and a large rent in the bottom of the hencoop, which was about two feet above the surface of the water. A couple of fowls were missing."

"Senor Antonio said the depredator was a sucuruju (the Indian name for the anaconda) which had for months past been haunting this part of the river and had carried off many ducks and fowls from the houses. I was inclined to doubt the fact of the serpent striking at its prey from the water, and thought an alligator more likely to be the culprit, although we had not yet met with alligators in

this river (River Tapajos.)

"Some days afterward the young men belonging to the different cities agreed together to go in search of the serpent. They began in a systematic manner, forming two parties each embarked in two or three canoes, and starting from points several miles apart, where they gradually approximated, searching all the inlets on both sides of the river. The reptile was found at last, sunning itself on a log at the mouth of a muddy rivulet and was finally dispatched with harpoons."

"I saw it the day after it was killed. It was not a very large specimen, measuring only 18 feet, nine inches in length and 16 inches in circumference at the widest part of the body. I measured several skins of the anaconda 21 feet in length and two feet in girth."

"The reptile has a most hideous appearance, owing to its being very broad at both ends. It is very abundant in parts of the country, nowhere more so than the Lago Grande, near Santarem, where it is often seen coiled up in the corners of the farm yards and is detested for its habits of carrying off poultry and young calves or whatever animals it can get within reach of."

"At Ega or Tefe"—a small town situated on the banks of the Amazon about 1,800 miles from its mouth, where Mr. Bates spent several years—"a large anaconda was once near making a meal of a young lad of about 10 years of age belonging to one of my neighbors. The father and son went out, as was their custom, a few miles up the Tefe river to gather fruit. Landing on a sloping sandy shore, the boy was left to mind the canoe while the man entered the forest."

"The beaches of the Tefe river form groves of the wild guava and myrtle tree, and during most months of the year are partly overflowed by the river. While the boy was playing in the water in the shade of these trees, a huge reptile of this species stealthily wound its coils around him until it was too late to escape. The boy's cries brought his father quickly to the rescue. He rushed forward and seizing the anaconda boldly by the head tore its jaws asunder."

H. W. Bates further says: "There appears to be no doubt that this formidable serpent grows to an enormous bulk and lives to a great age. I have heard of specimens having been killed which measured 42 feet in length."

"The natives of the Amazon universally believe in a monster serpent said to be many score of fathoms in length, which appears successively in different parts of the river. They call it 'ae das aguas' or Mother of the Waters. This fable, which was doubtless suggested by the appearance of sucuruju or anacondas of unusually large size, takes a great variety of form and the wild legends form the subject of conversation between old and young over the wood fires in lonely settlements."

A. R. Wallace in his book "Travels on the Amazon and Rio Negro," on page 33 says: "We received a fresh inmate into our veranda in the person of a fine young boa constrictor. It was tightly tied around the neck to a good sized stick, which hemmed the freedom of its movements and appeared nearly to stop respiration. It was only 10 feet long and very large, being as thick as a man's thigh."

"We fitted out a box with bars at the top and got the Indian who sold it to us to put it into the cage. It immediately began to make up for lost time by breathing most violently, the expirations sounding like high pressure steam escaping from a Great Western locomotive."

On page 322 he says: "I have had several accounts of anacondas having been killed and having measured 32 feet long. They have been seen very much larger, but, as may be supposed, are then difficult to kill and secure owing to their tenacity of life and their aquatic habits. It is an undisputed fact that they devour cattle and horses, and the general belief of the country is that they are sometimes from 60 to 80 feet long."

On the same page he says: "As so few whites have seen these large serpents and the very existence of any large enough to swallow a horse is generally discredited, the following account by a competent scientific observer, the well known botanical traveler, Dr. Gardner, is given. In his "Travels in Brazil," page 356, he says:

"In the marshes of this valley in the province of Goyaz near Arrayas, the boa constrictor is often met with of considerable size. It is not uncommon throughout the country, particularly in the wooded margins of lakes, marshes and streams. Sometimes they attain the enormous length of 40 feet."

"The favorite riding horse of Senor Lagoriva, which had been put out on pasture not far from the house, could not be found one day, although a strict search was instituted all over the fazenda. Shortly after this, one of his vaqueros (cattlemen) in going through the woods by the side of a small river, saw an enormous boa suspended in the fork of a tree which hung over the water. It was dead, but had evidently been floated down alive by a recent flood, and being in an inert state it had not been able to extricate itself before the waters fell."

It was dragged down to an open place by two horses and was found to measure 37 feet in length. On opening it the bones of a horse in a somewhat broken condition and the flesh in a half digested state were found within it, the bones of the head being uninjured. From these circumstances we concluded that it had devoured the horse entirely."

In the volume called "O Amazona," published by the Brazilian government in 1902, and intended to give an accurate account of the bio-

logical and commercial phases of the state of Amazonas, the following paragraph relating to the anaconda is found on page 28:

"The ophidia form an interminable collection; the sucuruju or anaconda (Eunestes murinus) is the largest aquatic serpent in the country; it measures sometimes 20 meters in length," or more than 60 feet."

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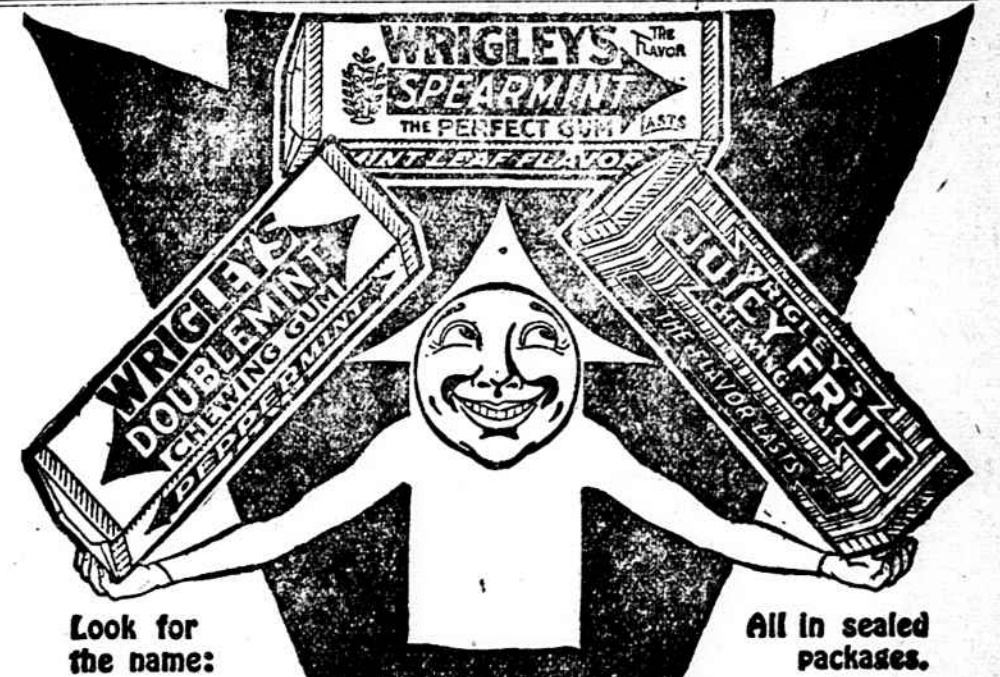
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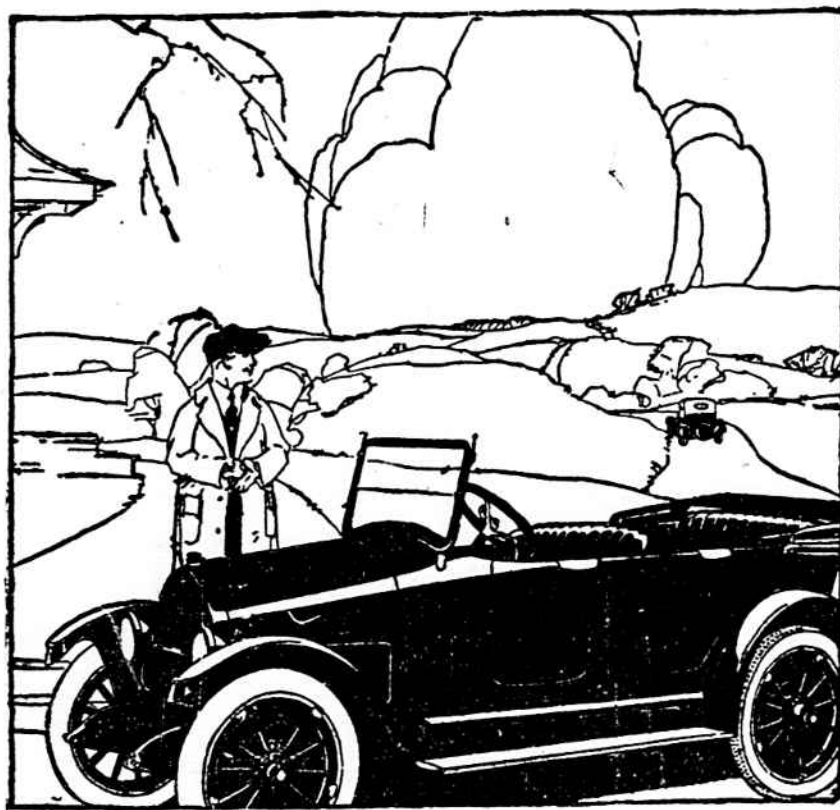
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