

NATURAL HISTORY

The Cajun Prairie: A Natural History. By Malcolm F. Vidrine. 2010. The Division of Sciences and Mathematics (LSU-E), the Cajun Prairie Habitat Preservation Society, and the Cajun Prairie Gardens. (ISBN 9780615368139). 314 pages. Softcover. \$25.00.

The prairie ecosystem of North America once stretched over 100 million hectares, from southern Canada to the Gulf of Mexico and from west of the Appalachian mountains to the Rockies. Prairies were mostly extirpated from the landscape in less than a century with the settlement of Europeans. A southern protrusion of this gigantic prairie ecosystem, however, reached almost the waters of the Gulf of Mexico, between southeast Texas and southwest Louisiana. This prairie along the southern coast is also known as “Cajun prairie,” because this is the territory where Europeans of French origin (the Cajuns) settled in largest numbers, since the last *dérangement* (mass deportations of French colonists by the British who had settled initially in Nova Scotia, Canada, in 1755).

Vidrine could have not done a better job in connecting the natural history of the Cajun prairie (flora, fauna, soils, hydrology, and other abiotic factors) with its people (both non-native and indigenous). A well-seasoned biologist with the knowledge gained in a lifetime in the coastal region of the South, Vidrine chronicles the demise of coastal prairies due primarily to human activities and development. From large-scale agriculture to urban sprawl, this habitat fragmentation must be contained in order to preserve the biotic diversity of prairies for future generations and also to retain the ecological integrity of the region. This is the main message and emphasis of the manuscript. The book is structured in 10 chapters that frame the natural history of the Cajun prairie through the author’s upbringing, ecological studies, and professional experience.

The first four chapters describe the Cajun prairie and its people, highlighting major events that determined drastic changes to this environment. Agricultural expansion and development caused the major loss of prairie to the point that in the 1930s, prairies had mostly disappeared from southwestern Louisiana. Chapters 5 and 6 present early studies on prairie remnants by naturalists and botanists often associated with Louisiana State University. The impetus for habitat restoration most likely triggered by the works of Aldo Leopold in Wisconsin inspired more naturalists to reconstruct and restore the habitat that had previously existed. Also, the reader will grasp from these chapters the compelling need to restore a culture of knowledge for prairies that had become almost completely obliterated, leaving the author and his generation as “illegitimate children” of an environment devoid of attributes their parents and grandparents only vaguely remembered. In the 1980s, however, the rediscovery of the Cajun prairie occurred in the vicinity of Eunice, Louisiana (the Cajun Prairie Capital), and this triggered the restoration movement in the region that Charles Allen, regional botanist, and Vidrine, regional zoologist, have been leading since.

Chapters 7, 8, and 9 focus on the ecology of coastal prairies and biotic diversity (plants and animals). The last chapter (10) aims at promoting prairie restoration and reconstruction as a form of sustainable landscape. Regretfully, the author does not have the power to preserve remnant prairies on common rights-of-way or other lands, and often decisions that lead to further extirpation of prairie habitats are made by owners and stakeholders. Conservation efforts can become futile endeavors without significant support from the community; thus, fragile and unpredictable remains the future of the few remnant prairie strips in southwestern Louisiana to this day. Simply limiting the

expansion of lawns in the urban and peri-urban environment is a worthy effort to reconstruct habitat and reconnect and educate people about the Cajun prairie on which they dwell.

The volume contains a plethora of appendices, with plant scientific names, phenological data, maps, charts, and other documents related to the 30-year restoration projects in the southwest Louisiana region the Vidrine has led and participated in. This book is a great read for all conservationists, biologists, and environmental educators. It is a must read for the inhabitants of the Cajun prairie bioregion, and it makes an excellent textbook for place-based education in grade schools and beyond.



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HERPETOLOGY & PET TRADE

Stolen World: A Tale of Reptiles, Smugglers, and Skulduggery. By Jennie Erin Smith. 2011. Crown Publishers, New York; available from Herp Digest. (ISBN 9780307381477). 336 pp. \$25.

They were all born a generation late. Growing up reading Frank Buck’s *Bring ‘em Back Alive* and Ray Ditmars’s *Thrills of a Naturalist’s Quest* was inspiring to teenagers of the 1950s, but the world had changed by the time they became young adults. There were few remaining unexplored corners of the world, and adventures became more focused on scientific quests – academic team efforts supported by grants with specific missions. The world of individual freelance adventure had become tamed by quick and efficient international travel and TV documentaries, and collecting animals was now cumbersome, what

with the need for permits and a fast growing list of totally protected species. What's an adventurous herpetologist wannabe going to do? Seek adventure of course; there were still places to go, and rare reptiles to acquire, while the growing number of international laws to bypass made the task even more exciting. In the process of protecting various species from commercial exploitation, their retail values increased exponentially. The quests continue, perhaps no longer for fame and glory, but the next best thing – the fun of lawless adventure and cash.

Welcome to the worlds of Hank Molt, Tom Crutchfield, and Anson Wong, reptile smugglers extraordinaire. Smith's book recounts a series of interwoven stories of their lives, spanning half a century of scams and other global misadventures. The illicit reptile hunters become the hunted as wildlife agents try to crack down on the smuggling rings, yet even after terms of imprisonment and financial ruin the tales of recurring deviant behavior continue. This book is a tour of the dark side of the convoluted exotic pet industry.

These individuals, each with unique aberrant personalities, are constantly scheming, while stabbing each other in the back, and coining nonsensical lines like "Conservation through commercialization." Molt and Crutchfield strive for recognition in the real world. Squandering their time in rivalry and again and again plunging into shady deals and illegal activities in a competition to see who can get the best and rarest of creatures becomes their driving force. The line "There is honor among thieves" never applies to these guys. Gad, and you thought reptiles were creepy and scary. The main characters, because they are wrong on so many levels, hold your interest.

Molt and Crutchfield spend much of their time scamming each other, screwing their suppliers, and dealing with their legal woes. And what about their customers? Do those purchasing wildlife not care that they are supporting and indirectly endorsing criminal behavior? Or that many of the snakes, lizards, and turtles they are purchasing arrived in this country illegally? The commercial exploitation of wildlife clearly needs better controls, international laws that can be enforced, and properly worded and consistent state regulations that prevent reptile dealers from playing games of interstate hide-and-seek with their inventory.

While profiting from the illegal wildlife trade, the same importers are also selling many legally acquired species, though the obscene numbers marketed would cause

many to question the ethics of even this. In reality these guys are quite knowledgeable about the individual species themselves, and if you were to meet them they are personable and charming, with a good sense of humor – all positive attributes that combine to make them successful at what they do. In addition to the lead characters – Molt, Crutchfield, and Wong – there is a whole supporting cast that learned well from their mentors. As the senior characters step aside or go to jail, their shoes are quickly filled by capable understudies. Some were already stealing from their bosses even while they were still their apprentices.

One of the interesting aspects of this book is its tracking of the modern-day, rapidly evolving exotic animal supply, along with herpetology, the role of public institutions, regulatory agencies, and the emerging interest in private-sector herpetoculture. It was a changing world for Molt, Crutchfield, Wong, and the others, one they needed to constantly renegotiate in order to stay in tune with the interest of hobbyists and avoid the reach of strengthening international wildlife laws. Sometime in the 1980s, a small cottage industry went mainstream. Mailed price lists were replaced by faxed ones, ensuring more rapid sales of valuable inventory. With the Internet, sales often became instantaneous. Captive breeding, weekend reptile trade shows in every part of the country, high-end color morphs, advertising in magazines that specialized in captive reptiles, credit cards and money wire transfers, and laundering forbidden species through various ports all became part of the economic formula. The smugglers were adaptable and successful.

While the author stops short of direct indictment of zoos in schemes to import illegally obtained reptiles, a close reading of her book shows that some of our major zoos helped create paperwork that allowed for export, purchased animals from the smugglers themselves, and used their influence within the conservation community to acquire illegally obtained animals from confiscations. Much of this was done in the name of captive breeding and conservation. The zoo community has since done much to cleanse public images tarnished by U.S. Fish and Wildlife investigations, but it is interesting to see that Smith's documentation of zoo curators' zeal for rare species of questionable origin was not particularly different from that of the smugglers. Even today zoos continue to obtain wild-caught animals from dealers, but get around the concept of purchase by paying the dealers and collectors only for "their time and effort," not the

animal itself, and they make sure the export paperwork is in order.

The lead characters fancy themselves as having rock-star status among some elements of the herp hobbyist community, and I suspect some people do see them this way – as modern-day Billy the Kids and Bonnie and Clydes. Instead of robbing banks, they rob jungles and national parks in foreign lands. Unfortunately, most of today's herp hobbyists are more likely to know the identity of the smugglers and dealers than the contributions of Carr, Auffenburg, Pope, or Kauffeld. At the last Daytona Reptile Expo, the star smugglers could be found autographing copies of *The Lizard King*, yet another book featuring the escapades of felonious smugglers, and they were seen wearing custom-made tee shirts with slogans that, while humorous, boldly spit in the eye of wildlife enforcement agents.

While the book focuses on the smugglers and their supporting accomplices, the larger problems are addressed as well, and should not be overlooked. We are dealing with a growing market for rare and illegally obtained species, clients that have little regard for conservation ethics or even for the species they are compelled to possess. And, more importantly, we are dealing with a maze of porous international and state wildlife laws and ineffective enforcement. The smugglers can often remain ahead of agents with creative paperwork, reporting inaccurately the sites of collection, using countries with less stringent export laws, and playing games with phony zoo uniforms and labeling wild-caught animals as ones of captive-bred origins. Our current wildlife laws need to become more clear-cut, universal in intent, and supported equally by all nations.

The excellent descriptions of the smugglers themselves are captivating almost to a fault. It's easy to get caught up in the rogue lives of the characters, and one may forget the major conservation and legal issues that form the basis of this tale. These people are stealing rare and endangered wildlife out of their natural homes and turning them into black-market commodities. And more importantly, these are but a few of a multitude of players in a billion-dollar business that annually imports millions of reptiles and amphibians into the United States alone. The importers we never hear about are likely even a bigger problem, commercial dealers that wisely have continued to maintain a low profile. The overall world market adds another order of magnitude to the figures. The fact that our featured smugglers carry large knives and enjoy the company

of moonlight ladies, while interesting, is actually a very minor part of the overriding issue.

If I were still teaching, this book would be required reading for my students. And it's not just a book for zoology majors; the text should also be of interest to people involved in environmental policy, international law, regulatory and enforcement agencies, those keeping reptiles and amphibians, and students of pathological and psychological disorders. In the introduction the author dedicates the book to her late grandmother, "who liked her stories a little on the rough side." Her grandmother would have really enjoyed this book.

Reading assignments may not be necessary; I suspect that we can look forward to the day when *Stolen World* becomes the basis of our newest soap opera. Seriously! It has all the required elements: creepy characters, narcissistic misfits, failed romance, prostitution, heavy drinking, smuggling and other felonious activities, enforcement heroes who are usually one step behind the villains,

views of life in third-world prisons, endless plots and schemes, comical stupidity, greed, court cases, and gifts of Rolex watches all woven into a world full of illegal and dangerous reptiles. This will be a TV program that is not likely to run out of topics for new episodes for years to come; and as a true story, based on proven repeat offenders, it is likely to continue on for decades. Glenn Frey's *Smuggler's Blues* would make a good theme song.

I should point out that the author spent 10 years interviewing people, reading court records, and rechecking her sources prior to writing *Stolen World*. To vouch for the authentic nature of the text, it's interesting to note that months prior to production, Anson Wong was convicted of illegal wildlife trafficking, some of the people featured in the various chapters attempted to legally block the book from going to press, and others, based on Internet chatter, are quite unhappy with the content and the author. It's interesting to see them try to hatefully label her as an animal-rights person. This is clearly

not Smith's focus; she is simply providing an in-depth account of interwoven events and activities. I wonder if there will be a second volume. God knows there is enough additional material for one, and the story line continues.



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