H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Manny Rubio. *Rattlesnake: Portrait of a Predator.* Washington, D.C., and London, Eng.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998. xxvii + 239. $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56098-808-3.

Reviewed by David Wilson (Program in American Studies, University of California, Davis)
Published on H-Nilas (August, 1999)

Manny Rubio has written and the Smithsonian Institution Press has produced an abundantly illustrated, thoroughly researched, instructive, provocative, and handsome book that will repay careful study by rattlesnake enthusiasts as well as more casual reading and viewing by amateur naturalists, campers, hikers, and nature lovers. Most unusual and welcome are the high-quality, color photographs of rattlesnakes of both genera and the many species and subspecies found in the United States and south of the border.

Rattlesnakes have fascinated English and continental immigrants to the Americas since the earliest colonial days.[1] Travelers and explorers described them and attributed Providential Design to the balance of "warning" rattles at one end and venomous fangs at the other. "Don't Tread on Me" put into words on colonial flags and military banners the "ethic," if you will, embodied in the rattler. They are slow to anger, inclined to avoid confrontation, but fearless and dangerous if pushed too far, as colonial Americans believed they were being pushed by Britain. The emblematic potency of a coiled or "rampant" rattlesnake continues to serve on military patches, fraternity banners, ecology flags, and marching-band uniforms.[2]

The iconic eloquence of coiled rattlers was captured two and half centuries ago by Mark Catesby in his tinted engraving of a coiled rattlesnake in a folio-size plate for his *Natural History of Carolina...* (1727-47).[3] And its threat to settled society he dramatized in his description of one that entered the house of Col. Blake of Carolina, upsetting "Hogs, Dogs, and poultry." And worse, of another he discovered "lying coiled between the sheets" of his bed.[4] Thus have rattlesnakes and rattlesnake tales and images fascinated Americans for ages.

Tales of their fascination–their purported hypnotic powers to lure small squirrels or birds into their range with their fixed stare–abound in popular lore and literature. But such popular culture and folklore do not much interest Rubio except in passing, where he dismisses them as "widely repeated, fallacious" tales (p. xx). His real and earnest interest is in the physiology, evolution, distribution, natural history, behavior, and misuse of these reptiles which occur only in the Americas.

Rattlesnakes *qua* rattlesnakes engages his interest first. Two genera, *Crotalus* and *Sistrurus*, embrace the 83 taxa detailed by Rubio. *Crotalus* contains twenty-nine species, with a total of seventy-four subspecies, and *Sistrurus* consists of three species and nine subspecies recognized by scientists (p. 6). "Diamondback," "Sidewinder" and "Timber Rattlesnake" name in common language the most familiar *Crotalus* species. Rubio's photographs will please and serve herpetologists and snake fanciers, especially by his close-up color photographs of more than 62 of the taxa, from the more familiar Prairie, Timber, and Diamondback rattlers to the more regionally specific pigmy, long-tailed, black, massasauga, montane, and island subspecies. Close-ups of the distinguishing head scales of the *Crotalus* species (small and nondescript) and *Sistrurus* (nine large scales), head shots of the distinguishing facial markings of ridgenose subspecies, and photos of color variations (albino, melanistic) speak to the concerns of serious fanciers. Pictures of snakes ingesting centipedes and rodents, giving birth to live young, and striking a sandaled prosthenic foot further illuminate the life of the rattlesnake.

A number of pictures of rattlesnakes cryptically at home in wild environs warns and instructs the hiker and camper of just how easy they are to overlook or stumble upon. And how beautiful they are. Accounts of the damage done by bites, of the danger of ignoring "dry bites," or wrongly treating "envenomations," as he terms venomous ones, further instruct as well as caution the unwary. Rubio has assembled the most recent advice about treatment (stay calm, get to a hospital, keep the bitten part below heart level, etc.) and first aid devices ("The Extractor," a field suction device). And he warns against some old field first-aid practices: cutting into the wound, sucking out poison, applying tourniquets, chill-

ing the wound with ice, injecting antivenin (leave antivenin treatments to professionals who have species specific antitoxins at hand).

Rubio has limited his scientific searches to literature produced since L. M. Klauber's 1956 landmark, two-volume work for the University of California Press.[5] The first nine chapters of *Rattlesnake* (148 pages) convey what Rubio has learned from reading, from museums, from others and from his own extensive field experience. Intellectually and emotionally, Rubio's work falls into two portions. In the first nine chapters, he speaks authoritatively and objectively of the rattlesnakes he admires and knows so well.

The next four chapters (49 pages) find him reporting on human greed and folly, including rattlesnake roundups ("rodeos"), medical uses, and quack-medical misuses of rattlesnake meat, organs, skins, and bones. He is often disgusted, angry, dismayed. His reportage of ritual handling of rattlesnakes by some charismatic Christians, on the other hand, is remarkable for its dispassionate, non-judgmental tone. In all cases his on-site observation and reportage leads the reader beyond snakes *per se* and into the minds and hearts and culture of fellow humans. One chapter, "Rattlesnakes as Symbols: The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly," supplies an entertaining tour through the art and artifacts inspired by rattlesnakes and collected by the author. Like other authors who have taken a totem animal or plant or sacred place as a focus for study, he seems to have been the recipient of a plenitude of ephemera (T-shirts, belts, posters, beer cans, caps, plaster likenesses, fetishes and goofy gags) which, as much as anything else, signify the widespread fascination shared by fanciers and casual collectors. This side of the story of rattlesnakes merits further and deeper investigation than it is Rubio's mission to supply.

Oddly absent from this gallery of popular "takes" on the rattlesnake are Gary Larson's "Far Side" cartoons which go right to the heart of American fear of and fascination with rattlesnakes. No other popular cartoons, in my experience, so consistently occupy center stage on the cork boards of academic and public-sector naturalists. Also absent are Ernest Thompson Seton's woodcut illustrations for his turn of the century books, including the one of a rattlesnake, burrowing owl, and prairie dog tied together with a ribbon, an icon which suggests an ecology more complex than simple predation, the weight of emphasis in Rubio's book.[6] The more complex fabric of cross-species interaction has been the study of two psychologists, Don Owings and Richard Coss, at the University of California, Davis. They have found that some ground squirrels have an immunity to rattlesnake venom and that burrowing owls make a rattling noise that sounds like that of a rattlesnake. The ecology of mind that is opened to us by the ways in which people have responded to rattlesnakes goes deeper than can be photographed and begs to be unfolded as we begin to talk about how to manipulate a populace into kinder contacts with wild things.

As one might have predicted, Rubio favors protection of the rattlesnakes, captive breeding, more studies, and education of the public, especially children, about the danger these creatures face in our modern world. I applaud his aim, as will others. And he clearly cares about these snakes he has spent years tracking and studying. He speaks for many of us when he confesses the joy and fascination his first contact produced: "I was transfixed.... I approached cautiously, not wanting it to escape.... Stopping within 6 feet, I slowly, deliberately crouched to relish the experience . I was ecstatic, in awe. My knees wobbled and my heart pounded...." (p. 1). He feels what Emily Dickinson so nicely called "a transport of cordiality," although Dickinson drew the line at snakes. Grace Olive Wiley did not. The first to raise rattlesnakes in captivity, she let "Stanley," an adult rattlesnake, curl in her lap "like a contented old cat" as she sewed at home at night in her apartment in Minneapolis in the 1920s. And she reported that another rattler, "Huckleberry Finn," liked to be petted and raised his back against her hand as a cat would.[7] Rubio stands rather further back from his subjects and warns the reader that "under no circumstances can rattlesnakes be considered pets" (p. xxi). But for those who would keep them or other reptiles, he lists in an appendix the names and addresses of four "Professional Societies" and forty "Avocational and Regional Societies" in twenty-four states and two Canadian provinces, Quebec and Ontario. A well-done, useful, handsome book.

Notes

[1]. David Scofield Wilson, *In the Presence of Nature* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1978), throughout.

[2]. David Scofield Wilson, "Rattlesnakes," in *American Wildlife in Symbol and Story*, eds. Angus Gillespie and Jay Mechling (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987), 41-72.

[3]. Mark Catesby, *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands....* (London: 1731-47), II: plate 41.

[4]. Catesby, 41.

[5]. *Rattlesnakes: Their Habits, Life Histories, and Influence on Mankind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956).

[6]. Ernest Thompson Seton, *Wild Animals At Home* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1917), 21.

[7]. Grace Olive Wiley, *Bulletin* of the Antivenin Institute of America, 3 (1929), 8-14, and 3 (1930), 8-14.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: David Wilson. Review of Rubio, Manny, *Rattlesnake: Portrait of a Predator*. H-Nilas, H-Net Reviews. August, 1999.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3304

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.