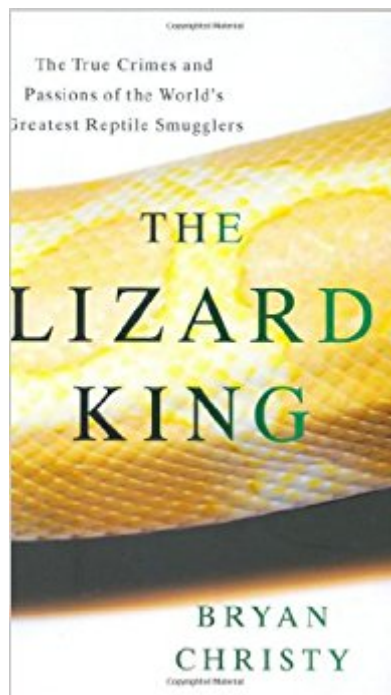




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# **The Lizard King: The True Crimes And Passions Of The World's Greatest Reptile Smugglers**



## Synopsis

Imagine The Sopranos, with snakes! The Lizard King is a fascinating account of a father and son family business suspected of smuggling reptiles, and the federal agent who tried to take them down. When Bryan Christy began to investigate the world of reptile smuggling, he had no idea what he would be in for. In the course of his research, he was bitten between the eyes by a blood python, chased by a mother alligator, and sprayed by a bird-eating tarantula. But perhaps more dangerous was coming face to face with Michael J. Van Nostrand, owner of Strictly Reptiles, a thriving family business in Hollywood, Florida. Van Nostrand imports as many as 300,000 iguanas each year (over half the total of America's most popular imported reptile), as well as hundreds of thousands of snakes, lizards, frogs, spiders, and scorpions. Van Nostrand was suspected of being a reptile smuggler by Special Agent Chip Bepler of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, who devoted years of his life in an obsessive quest to expose The Lizard King's cold-blooded crimes. How this cat-and-mouse game ended is engrossing and surprising.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Reptile smuggling is big business, and in his book debut, Brian Christy mounts an intense and highly readable investigation into this unique black market's surprising depths. Besides the reptiles themselves, this exciting narrative investigation focuses on two main protagonists: Michael Van Nostrand, a notorious dealer; and Chip Bepler, the Fish and Wildlife Service agent whose single-minded aim was to bring the former to justice. --Jason Kirk

Albino pythons, endangered lizards and other reptiles are the currency of an underworld as dangerous and lucrative as the drug trade. Freelance writer Christy's debut is an enthusiastic but scattered chronicle of the rise and fall of a lizard kingpin and the federal agent who pursued him. Mike Van Nostrand inherited Strictly Reptiles, an import-export business in Florida, from his father, Ray, turning it into a multimillion-dollar smuggling operation. Van Nostrand imported reptiles of all shapes and sizes, usually concealed in the suitcases or clothing of his mules, and sold them to collectors and pet stores. He exploited loopholes in the international treaty on endangered-species trade and paid off corrupt officials. In the early 1990s, Fish and Wildlife Services agent Chip Bepler set his sights on Van Nostrand. After Bepler's years of surveillance and hard work, Van Nostrand was sentenced to eight months in prison, his export license revoked, and Strictly Reptiles was forced to pay \$250,000 in fines to a wildlife fund. Christy's frenetic approach—bouncing from Mike's smuggling to young Ray catching snakes to the neglect of wildlife crime prosecution—is disorienting in what could have been a fascinating tale. (Aug. 1) "Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved."

1st--I'm amazed to see Bill Love commenting on a reptile book. It'd be like seeing Jimmy Hendrix commenting on someone's guitar album. I've been keeping reptiles since I was 12 or 13, and I remember some of these events, and characters. When I was an adolescent, Strictly Reptile's nickname was Sickly Reptiles...that place had a distinctly unsavory reputation attached to it (apparently it's back in business and I'm unaware of any improvement in it's rep). The author mostly avoids demonizing people--even the Nostrands. The subject is treated fairly well, but I was disappointed that the author didn't delve into the mortality rate of the seized animals. One thing that's always angered me about USFW is the fate of far too many animals taken in the course of an investigation. They mostly die, in large part due to the fact there's not a good enough network in place to care for them. USFW hypes itself on protecting endangered species, but the animals they seize don't seem to fare well under their care, which is a depressing irony. The saga of strictly's is fairly well known, as is the busting of Wong (which I found hysterical) but it's good to have it all written down in one place, and I appreciate the mostly even handed treatment that the author gives the subject. I just wish the writing were clearer--timelines can jump around, as can focus, particularly in the earlier chapters. The characters are odd, and sympathetic at times, even the bad guys. Black and white simplicity is eschewed in favor of a more detailed approach to both the criminals and the LEOs and agencies, something refreshing.

Who knew selling snakes was so lucrative? *The Lizard King: The True Crimes and Passions of the World's Greatest Reptile Smugglers* goes inside the exotic world of reptile smuggling. I've read other books about the wildlife trade, who consumes what, and why (notably Richard Ellis' *Tiger Bone & Rhino Horn: The Destruction of Wildlife for Traditional Chinese Medicine*). Christy takes a fresh perspective. He goes beyond the headlines and statistics and take use deep into the criminal syndicates and personalities engaged in the trade. He really makes his characters come alive: the reptile smuggler who curses out agents but loves his family passionately; the Asian wildlife kingpin who reeks of smooth confidence; and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife agent who cares about animals and the rules. All are unforgettable individuals who are so fascinating yet so real. Overall, *The Lizard King* is a fun, quick read. At times, the book reads like a Mario Puzzo novel - except that it's all true, based on Christy's extensive interviews with the main people involved in the drama. I recommend this book for anybody who cares about wildlife or anybody who loves to read a crimes novel.

If you're into reptiles its a good read..

Having looked at Strictly's price lists during the time frame this all went down, I felt like I was a part of this story. It's amazing the things that were going on that no one ever had any idea about. I know I never thought about it back then. Then I was just a twenty something who dreamed of owning some of the things on those lists (without the cash, I did a lot of dreaming). I'm not, nor ever will condone the things these people did, but like it says in the end of the book, if it weren't for Strictly, the reptile hobby wouldn't have some of its keystone species that we think of as common today. Great book.

The first few pages were spellbinding and brings you into the real world of reptile smugglers. The author brings out the best and the worst in the people and how their actions changed the world of reptiles. I have been collecting reptiles for years and attended the reptile shows mentioned in the book, funny how small the world really seems. This is a must have for all reptile owners and one I will revisit over and over. I gave this a five star rating because it is one of the best books that I have read in many years. Grab a cup of coffee, find your favorite chair and enjoy a great book you will find hard putting down.

Can't recommend the book enough for fellow exotic keepers, and anyone interested in wildlife.

Great read that helped me understand the industry I worked in as a teenager, and continue to follow.

Very well-written tale which shares insights into these illegal activities & how this one man changed the reptile industry singlehandedly. Excellent read!

I met Brian Christy, the author, a few months ago here in Ghana! He is helping to make this world a better place exposing the evils of illicit wildlife trafficking. I read this book in one sitting. Get informed - read this book. Joe - Accra, Ghana 2013

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