



# SHORT BIOGRAPHIES OF MILITARY VETERAN HERPETOLOGISTS

THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE PARTNERS IN AMPHIBIAN AND REPTILE CONSERVATION NETWORK SALUTES  
DR. HENRY S. FITCH FOR HIS SERVICE TO THE MILITARY AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO HERPETOLOGY

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For Open Publication

May 30, 2019

Department of Defense  
OFFICE OF PREPUBLICATION AND SECURITY REVIEW

Dr. Henry Sheldon Fitch was born in Utica, NY, December 25, 1909 and died on September 8, 2009 (just a few months before his 100th birthday). When he was one year old, his family moved to Medford, Oregon, where he began exploring and finding reptiles on his father's 116-acre farm. In 1926, he left the farm for the halls of academia. In 1937, Dr. Fitch began working for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) studying rodents, such as squirrels, gophers, and kangaroo rats. After returning from his service in the Army during World War II, he continued to work for USFWS. In 1948, the University of Kansas (KU) hired him as the Superintendent of the University of Kansas Natural History Reservation (KUNHR) and as a Zoology instructor. He remained at KU and became an assistant professor in 1949, a full professor in 1958, and continued teaching until retiring in 1980.



H. S. FITCH. Army  
Pharmacy School  
El Paso, TX  
Aug. 1941

Dr. Fitch, in his seventies, continued to live at the KUNHR where he put in another career's worth of scientific observations and publications. In 1986, KUNHR was renamed as The Fitch Natural History Reservation (FNHR), in his honor. Still not resting on his laurels, he continued to record ecological data on the FNHR for another 20 years. He published research from 1933 to 2006 with almost 200 publications in total. Besides being labeled by some as the "Father of Snake Ecology," he was also a great naturalist having worked on birds, mammals, mollusks, plant community succession and a variety of herpetofauna species. He has had two species named after him: Valley Gartersnake (*Thamnophis sirtalis fitchi*) and Fitch's Anole (*Anolis fitchi*).

**Military Service:** Dr. Fitch was drafted in the spring of 1941, at the age of 32, and placed in the Medical Corps. The Army sent him to William Beaumont General Hospital in El Paso, Texas, for three months of training as a pharmacist. In September 1941, he was released from the Army and returned to his former job with USFWS. This military reprieve was short lived. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, he was recalled and assigned to the 348th Station Hospital at Camp Beale, CA. There, he served as a pharmacist first in Wales, then in Scotland after D-Day, later in France, and finally in Germany. He was released from the Army in 1945.

**Contributions to the Field of Herpetology:** Dr. Fitch contributed publications and presentations on amphibians, lizards, and snakes throughout his eight-decade career, with snakes being his forte. While living and working on the FNHR, Dr. Fitch determined the kind of data necessary to conduct ecological studies of reptile life histories. He emphasized, "In order to understand the ecology of a species, it is necessary to recognize individuals and to trace individual histories. It is necessary to ascertain how the typical individual animal is limited in time and space in order to understand the population dynamics of the species."

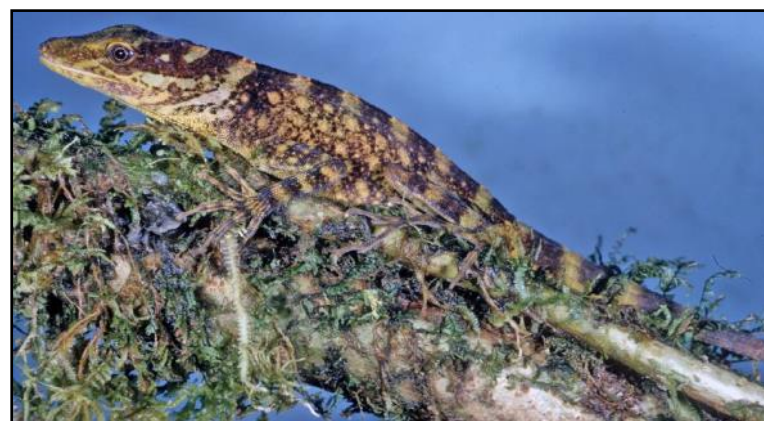
Being at the forefront of snake ecology, he devised many of the methods of live capture and data collection for small mammals and reptiles. The use of artificial cover objects and mark-recapture techniques allowed him to determine relationships between species and their plant and animal associates. Two of his well-known books, *Autecology of the Copperhead* and *A Kansas Snake Community: Composition and Changes Over 50 Years*, used these data. The long-term interaction with his research subjects is almost incomprehensible. One study had 1,472 recaptures of narrow-mouthed toads while another saw a single collared lizard captured 101 times over six years. His 1993 summary of relative abundances on the FNHR comprised 33,117 snakes of 34 species.

In addition to the work he performed at the FNHR, starting in 1965, Dr. Fitch conducted work on lizards in Costa Rica that resulted in a study spanning the country and encompassing 15 lizard species. He also conducted a study of about 50 species of anoles from Mexico to Ecuador and the Dominican Republic. In 1976, he started studying iguanas and ctenosaurs in Nicaragua and other Central American countries. His Central American studies lasted 20 years in total.

**Education:** Dr. Fitch began college in 1926 at the University of Oregon at the age of 16. After receiving his degree, he moved on to the University of California, Berkeley, for his Masters in 1933, and then his Ph.D. in Zoology in 1937.



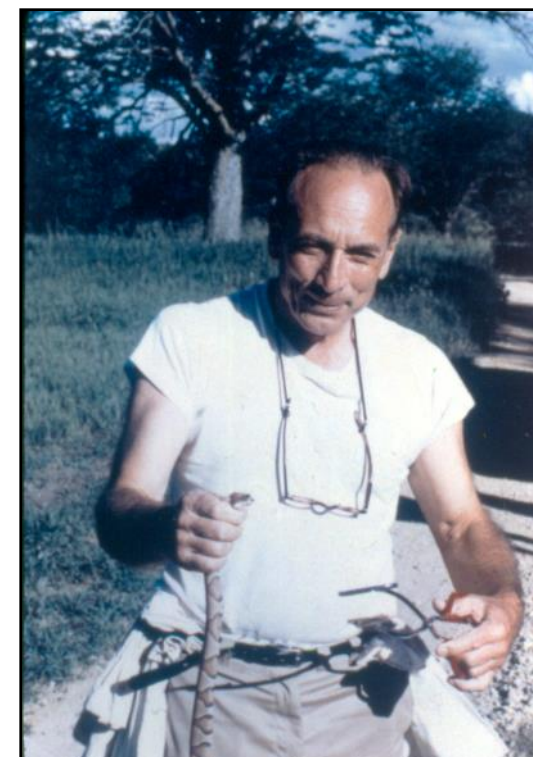
Henry S. Fitch with a *Thamnophis sirtalis* at the Fitch Natural History Reservation, 23 May 1991. Photograph by Vada Snider.



Holotype of *Anolis fitchi*. Ecuador.  
Photograph by William E. Duellman.  
Source: Phyllomedusa 8(2): 75-79, 2009.



Henry S. Fitch measuring a Western Diamond-backed Rattlesnake (*Crotalus atrox*) at the Okeene, Kansas rattlesnake roundup. Photo by Virginia Fitch.



Henry S. Fitch with a Copperhead (*Agkistrodon contortrix*). 1970.