

Richard Frederick Deckert (1878–1971), Florida naturalist and natural history artist

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ABSTRACT: Richard Deckert (born in Germany in 1878, immigrated to New York in 1887, died in Florida in 1971) was a polymath with great enthusiasm and wide ranging interests in natural history. His collections and publications did much to document the reptiles, amphibians, and land snails of Florida. His contributions to natural history illustration were equally important, as his carefully detailed line drawings and water colour paintings delineated the intricate details of snails, fishes, amphibians, and reptiles (particularly snakes and turtles), as well as fossil vertebrates, and were used in a wide range of systematic publications. Deckert also contributed to the modernization of fish taxidermy, leading to the current methods for creating lifelike fish mounts. This paper documents his scientific and artistic work.

KEY WORDS: Everglades – fish taxidermy – herpetology – *Liguus* – natural history illustrators.

DECKERT THE HERPETOLOGIST

Richard (“Dick”) Frederick Deckert was born in Germany on 5 December 1878. His uncle was the geographer Friedrich Karl Emil Deckert (1848–1916), who was well known to Germans for his publications on the geography of North America, based on his extensive travels in that continent in 1884–1885 and again from 1891 to 1899 (Brogiato 2005; Roemer 1957). In 1887, Richard Deckert emigrated with his mother and three sisters from Germany to the United States, joining his father in New York City.¹ The United States census and immigration records confirm that Deckert was born in Germany, yet when Deckert provided biographical information in the early 1940s for a herpetological directory, he stated that he had been born in New York City (Wright 1949: 14), which may reflect his desire to avoid anti-German feelings of that time.

In 1917, Deckert wrote that he had “over fifteen years of experience as observer and student of Amphibians” (1917b: 113), which suggests that he commenced his herpetological studies around 1900. He married Hazel Joss on 27 March 1904 in Manhattan. In 1910, his occupation was listed as “stock clerk” in the “farm implements industry”.² Deckert moved to Jacksonville, Florida, in 1911 and remained there for about a year. He became an avid collector and observer of the local snakes and amphibians in what was then a largely unpopulated subtropical region. When Deckert was interviewed in 1966, at the age of 87, he told the reporter, with some exaggeration, that he began drawing “before I could walk,” but the reporter noted his explanation that “it wasn’t until he lost four fingers³ on his left hand in an industrial accident that he made it [drawing] his occupation” (Reynolds 1966).

Although Deckert was evidently not educated beyond the high-school level (no further information is available on his early years), Raymond Ditmars, Assistant Curator at the

New York Zoological Society (NYZS), wrote in 1909 to Hermon Bumpus, Director of the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH), to recommend Deckert, “who, without special training, shows great skill in drawing and painting the batrachians [amphibians]. His sympathetic portrayal of these creatures, which is technically correct to the finest detail comes from his great love for these creatures. He has a collection of many species at his home.”⁴

In 1912, Deckert returned to New York from Florida and was employed at the NYZS as an assistant to Ditmars, who was by then Keeper of the Reptiles (Wright 1949: 14).⁵ The NYZS, now known as the Wildlife Conservation Society, operated the Bronx Zoo. Deckert spent much time studying the habits of numerous reptiles and amphibians at the Reptile House, and did extensive field collecting in order to increase the diversity of its holdings. In the NYZS’s annual reports for 1913 to 1915, Ditmars praised Deckert for having enlarged the amphibian collection, doubling the number of living species from 18 to 36 (Ditmars 1914, 1915, 1916). However, Deckert was not mentioned in the annual reports for 1916 or later years, which instead reported that the number of living species of amphibians, as of 1918, had dropped to twelve (Ditmars 1919), implying that Deckert’s collecting had ended.⁶ Deckert wrote to Henry Fairfield Osborn, President of the AMNH, on 15 January 1918, to advise that he had resigned from the NYZS, and told Osborn that he was now available to work at the AMNH and elsewhere⁷:

I have left the employ of the Zoological Park, to devote myself to painting, drawing and studying the reptiles and amphibians and other animals. I would therefore be very grateful to you if you could use me for some work of this kind, either at the Museum or otherwise. I have painted a few colour plates of African toads and lizards, and one of genets, for Mr. Herbert Lang, for his narrative of the [Belgian] Congo Expedition, and am now at work on a picture of snakes for him. I have also made a series of water colour drawings of turtles for Dr. Glover M. Allen of the [Boston] Society of Natural History.

Osborn forwarded this letter to Frederic Augustus Lucas, Director of the AMNH, with the note that “He is really a very accomplished artist and rapid worker, so that I trust you may be able to take advantage of his talent in the Congo work and elsewhere.”⁸ Osborn also responded directly to Deckert, stating that “I am glad to recommend you to the attention of Director Lucas and other officers of the American Museum for such work on the reptiles and amphibians especially as we may have occasion to represent in color.”⁹ Lucas also promptly responded to Osborn, “As regards Mr. Deckert, he has already made some drawings for the Congo Report, both plain and colored, and while his work is a little hard, yet it is very accurate and naturally we shall use him as much as possible.”¹⁰

Also while at the NYZS, Deckert began publishing research articles and popular notes in herpetology (for a chronological list of his known publications, see Appendix, pp 336–337). Between 1914 and 1919, he published 25 herpetological papers, with an additional three papers from 1920 to 1922. His earliest papers were based on his field observations in Florida. Deckert was one of the first authors to publish in *Copeia*, which at that time was issued as four-page pamphlets, and was edited by John Nichols (1883–1958), Curator of Ichthyology at the AMNH (Anonymous 1958). Deckert published 14 articles in *Copeia*.

Deckert also published four articles in *Aquatic life*, a monthly magazine for hobbyists and others interested in fish and amphibians, and at least seven articles in the *Zoological Society bulletin*, published by the NYZS. However, as the latter journal also included numerous anonymous articles on reptiles and amphibians, it is likely that some of these unsigned articles were also written by Deckert, perhaps in collaboration with Ditmars. It appears from the remarks in one of Deckert’s NYZS articles, which mentioned

“the thousands of frogs that during the past fifteen years have been caught for our reptile collection” (Deckert 1916a: 1306), that at least some of the amphibians he collected served as food for the reptiles at the Bronx Zoo.

Deckert also published two articles in other professional journals. In 1915, he wrote a paper in *Zoologica*, the NYZS’s professional journal, which provided more detailed descriptions of numerous amphibians, including those observed at the Bronx Zoo, accompanied by his own coloured illustrations (Deckert 1915e). Two years later he contributed an article to *Science*, which reported his analysis of two species of *Bufo*, concluding that *B. americanus* (LeConte, 1831) and *B. fowleri* Hinckley, 1882 “are closely related, and that they possibly interbreed occasionally,” based on his analysis of numerous specimens in the AMNH research collection (Deckert 1917b). The hybridization between these two toad species remains an active research topic – the subject of numerous papers published over the past century (Green and Parent 2003).

Even those papers that were intended as popular articles included what were likely the first observations of the feeding, reproduction, and other habits of the amphibians and reptiles that Deckert studied, both in the field and at the Bronx Zoo. Although Deckert did not describe any new species or revise the taxonomy of previously described species, his contributions to herpetology expanded the knowledge of these organisms and provided a starting point for other field biologists to conduct more detailed studies.

DECKERT AND THE FLORIDA TREE SNAILS

Deckert returned to Florida by 1920 (Wright 1949: 14). Around that time, he met Joseph (“Joe”) N. Farnum (1893–1930), a young naturalist who was an enthusiastic collector of the Florida tree snails (*Liguus*).¹¹ In those decades, species were often described through a typological approach, so that each colour variation could be, and often was, named as a new species, or at least a new subspecies. Molluscs were no exception to this typological approach, and the genus *Liguus* – whose shells were readily collected on tree trunks, and were noted for their multicoloured bands, resembling brightly coloured candies – became particularly encumbered with numerous supposed species, subspecies, varieties, and forms. Although *Liguus* is only found in southern Florida, Hispaniola and Cuba, about 50 names had been established by 1946 for taxa found in Florida alone (Clench 1946). Today, this genus is thought to comprise at most six species across its entire geographical range, with the remaining nominal taxa being mere colour forms (Clench 1946: 119).

Before the biological species concept provided a narrower framework for *Liguus* taxonomy, collecting these tree snails was a popular hobby, called liggig, for both professionals and amateurs (Close 2000). The distribution of *Liguus* in Florida was generally limited to islands, known as hammocks, within the Everglades. In the 1920s and 1930s, before southern Florida became overdeveloped, some of these hammocks were located within walking distance of Miami, but most were much more remote, deep inside the Everglades, and required rigorous hiking through swampy and hazardous terrain. Humes (1965: 67–68) described the hazards of liggig: “For what other reasons would men or women endure mosquitoes, horseflies, deerflies, ticks, redbugs, bees, wasps, scorpions, centipedes, fire ants, poison ivy, and poisonwood, and subject themselves to the ever-present dangers of poisonous snakes, potholes, and alligators?” Humes (1965: 73) claimed that in the Pinecrest area alone, just west of Miami, there could be 25 collectors during a single

weekend in the early 1930s, taking at least 1,000 shells, and this collecting accelerated once the formation of the Everglades National Park was announced in 1934, as the amateurs were “anticipating the time when the area would be closed to all collecting.”

For many decades, after being introduced by Farnum, Deckert corresponded with William J. Clench (1897–1984), Curator of Mollusks at the Museum of Comparative Zoology (MCZ), Harvard University, and a fellow enthusiast for *Liguus*. Clench was fortunate in that Thomas Barbour (1884–1946), the MCZ Director, was a herpetologist and greatly interested in the natural history of southern Florida and the West Indies. More importantly, Barbour was wealthy, financed Clench’s collecting expeditions and specimen acquisitions, and was specifically interested in the colourful *Liguus*, as Barbour (1943: 225–226) enthusiastically described in his autobiography:

I believe a hundred years from now there is one thing that conchologists are certain to say – “It was a darn good thing old T. B. got interested in Ligs when he did.” Ligs, be it known, are the tree snails of the genus *Liguus*. . . . Years ago it became clear to me that the hammocks were going to be cut over for plantations and the snails would disappear. . . . I made up my mind to get a representation of the snails from every hammock. . . . When I started out, our [MCZ] collection of these marvelously beautiful creatures was but a few hundred, whereas today we have 43,235 individuals in the [MCZ] collection from 490 localities, representing 65 named forms, with 48 types. For anyone with an eye for beauty, it is a joy to collect Ligs. . . . Some are pure white with pink stripes, some white with green, some exactly like tortoise shell. . . . These creatures indeed are so beautiful that a cult of *Liguus* collectors has come into being and thousands of specimens have been gathered with no record whence they came. . . . Ligs have disappeared from many localities where they were once abundant and I take satisfaction in the fact that before they disappeared we got the best collection of *Liguus* in the world. And none better will ever be made.

Deckert, in his early correspondence with Clench, vividly described his hikes with Farnum in search of colour forms of *Liguus*, with each hammock seemingly having its own, unique form. In 1928, Clench arranged for Barbour to purchase Farnum’s collection, which Clench (1929: 18) singled out for being “very complete for the Florida forms”, since “many specimens are from localities now destroyed by fire, building operations, or land clearing, and it would be impossible to replace them.” Clench (1945: 2) described a visit in 1929 to see Farnum’s “fine, and at that time, unequalled collection of *Liguus*.” Despite having sold that collection, Farnum renewed his collecting with vigour.

In one of his letters to Clench, Deckert included a drawing, dated 22 February 1930, of himself and Farnum, “debating” whether to keep on hiking through the swamp to another hammock (Figure 1). Deckert, then aged 52, appears quite vigorous, brandishing a machete used to cut through the nearly impenetrable saw grass, while the taller Farnum, then aged 36, has a long walking pole and a first-aid kit on his belt. Farnum died in April 1930, evidently of a heart attack, leaving a widow and a daughter. As the Great Depression had just started, but the economic programs of the New Deal were several years yet to come, Farnum’s family was nearly destitute. Hence, Clench arranged to have Barbour purchase Farnum’s second collection of *Liguus* for \$2,000 (equivalent to \$27,150 in 2012). This second collection included 310 lots (8,183 specimens) collected in 1929 alone (Clench 1930: 24).

Deckert, despite the unexpected death of Farnum, and the death of his wife in July 1930¹², continued collecting *Liguus*, and met Clench in March and April 1931, when Clench travelled to Florida with William Schevill (1906–1994). Clench and Schevill, who later studied marine mammals (Rolfe 2012), hiked through the hammocks with Deckert, Henry Frampton (1902–1966, a newspaper reporter and *Liguus* enthusiast), and Henry A. Pilsbry (1862–1957, Curator of Mollusks at the Academy of Natural Science of Philadelphia



Figure 1. Pencil sketch by Deckert, “Locality N° 28 – Feb. 22 – 1930” (reproduced by permission of Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University). Joe Farnum is on the left; Deckert on the right. Deckert’s handwritten caption read:

Joe: Come on, let’s go over there while we’re
this far – it’s only a step and it’s the best
looking hammock we’ve seen yet.

Dick: Aw go on – it’ll be another false alarm.
But I’m game – let’s go.

(ANSP)) (Clench 1930: 26, 1931a, 1931b, 1931c, 1967: 32). Pilsbry (1946: 72) credited Deckert for having collected and identified the relatively few sinistral specimens of *Liguus*.

Deckert was an early member of the American Malacological Union (AMU), which was founded by Clench and Pilsbry in 1931. Deckert joined in 1932. At the 1932 meeting of the AMU in Washington, D.C., another amateur naturalist, Maurice Kirby Brady (1904–1958), gave a talk entitled “A word on the *Liguus* situation in southern Florida”, and stated: “There are three types of collectors in Florida. First, scientific men like Deckert and Frampton; second, mere collectors; third, the menacing type – collecting for commercial purposes” (Robertson 1932: 2).¹³ Brady thus recognized what Clench knew – that Deckert was a careful collector who recorded the locality of each specimen, thereby enhancing the scientific value for future generations. However, there is no record that Deckert attended any of the AMU’s annual meetings, and he was no longer listed as a member in 1937.

In addition to collecting specimens for (and with) Clench, Deckert expanded his artistic abilities by illustrating specimens for Clench’s publications. According to the correspondence files in the MCZ Mollusk Department, Clench mailed type specimens of

new species to Deckert in a cardboard tube, and Deckert promptly returned the specimens with his watercolour plates. Barbour presumably provided the funds to pay Deckert for these watercolours.

Deckert, in addition to donating numerous specimens of *Liguus* to the MCZ and a smaller number to the ANSP, also retained a large personal collection. Deckert exchanged specimens with other collectors, and obtained a range of other colourful land snails. For example, in 1956, Deckert wrote to Clench that he had recently obtained “a nice batch of Peruvian land shells from Dr. Weyrauch in Lima, and am very much intrigued by many of them, especially the pretty *Neopetraeus* and *Scutalus* and *Drymaeus*. The lot contained many paratypes, which made it more valuable to me.”¹⁴

In 1965, Ralph Humes (1902–1981), a sculptor and an amateur naturalist in Florida, “persuaded” Deckert “to donate his notable collection of some 12,000 specimens [of *Liguus*], also taxonomically rich in paratypes and [topotypes]” to the research collection of the Everglades National Park (South Florida Collection Management Center), which now has one of the larger museum collections of that taxon (Lewis 1993: 267).

DECKERT AND FISH TAXIDERMISTRY

After Deckert returned to Florida, he needed to obtain a job in order to earn a living while pursuing his interests in natural history. Initially, Deckert worked as a gardener on the estate of Charles Deering (1852–1927), who owned the International Harvester Company, and then on the estate of William John Matheson (1856–1930), who owned several chemical companies (Anonymous 1924; Dieterich 1985: 11–12). In 1924, Deckert explained to a newspaper reporter that his hobby was collecting and studying snakes (Klopper 1924): “I love my work . . . the fact that I have been fortunate enough to methodically study reptiles, frogs, alligators, and other tribes of the animal kingdom has afforded me pleasure and mental profit, if not financial. This is compensation in itself.”

He eventually found what was to be the perfect position for his combined expertise in art and natural history – working as a fish taxidermist, for Albert Pflueger, Sr., in Miami. Pflueger (1903–1962), a native of New Jersey who dropped out of school at the end of eighth grade (approximately age 14), moved to Miami in 1925, and started his own fish taxidermy shop, Al Pflueger, Inc. (also known as Al Pflueger Taxidermy) after he impressed a fishing boat captain with his ability to mount fish (Anonymous 1962). At that time, fish were customarily mounted by taking the skin and draping it over a solid wood form, which resulted in a very heavy mount. In the 1920s, Pflueger pioneered a method of mounting the fish skin on hollow wood or styrofoam mounts, which weighed much less, and he successfully patented his method (Pflueger 1933a, 1933b). However, even a dried fish skin would only last a decade or two in that condition, as the oils in the skin would cause significant deterioration, and the colours would be lost as the chromatophores and iridiophores in the fish skin decomposed, so that a fish taxidermy mount was not a durable product.

Pflueger evidently met Deckert through their shared interest in *Liguus*. Pflueger amassed a sizable *Liguus* collection, which he intended to donate to the University of Miami (McClane 1954: 66, 108; Blassingame 1955: 108).

In the 1930s, Pflueger, perhaps inspired by Deckert’s watercolour paintings, came up with a new method for soaking the oil out of the fish skin, and transformed fish taxidermy



Figure 2. Deckert in 1960, painting an angelfish mount at Pflueger's (reprinted from Rainey 1960: 51).

entirely by having artists paint the skin in its original colour. Subsequently, Pflueger skipped the fish skin entirely, by using the lightweight forms or mounts previously used for mounting the fish skin, and Deckert and the other assistants would paint directly on the forms, reproducing the original appearance of the live fish. As Milgrom (2010: 29) noted, "Taxidermists don't use actual skin for fish mounts anymore, because the skins curl, ooze grease, and ruin the paintings." However, as Morris (2010: 106) noted, "Painted fish are often not very lifelike because the paint is applied externally, whereas in life the colours are derived from layers deeper within the skin or scales. This is an effect that is extremely hard to replicate artificially."

In order to reconstruct the colour patterns – given that the colours start fading as soon as a fish is caught and killed – Deckert prepared several hundred carefully detailed paintings of the marine fish species likely to be caught off Florida and the Bahamas. Those paintings were used by Deckert, and Pflueger's other assistants, to paint the fish mounts or forms for the customers. As a result of Deckert's artistic talent combined with Pflueger's business acumen, Pflueger's taxidermy shop was grossing over \$1 million annually in the 1950s and 1960s, processing as many as 8,000 or more fish mounts each year in an assembly-line fashion.

The numerous popular articles published about Pflueger's enterprise all recognized Deckert's prominent role as the artist whose paintings allowed the life-like reconstruction of the fishes. For example, in *Field and stream*, Pflueger remarked that "My art man Deckert has made over five hundred water colors of different Florida fish just as quick as they were caught" (McClane 1954: 108). The *Saturday evening post*, then one of the largest-circulation weekly magazines in the USA, had a photograph of Deckert labelled "Working from one of his own water-color pictures, Richard Deckert paints the faded skin of a trunkfish", and the text noted that Deckert, then 76, "may have sketched more kinds of fish than any other man" (Blossingame 1955: 24, 107).

In 1960, aged 81, Deckert was photographed (Figure 2) for *True* (a monthly men's lifestyle magazine, now defunct) painting an angelfish mount, and he explained that

when painting a fish mount it was important to know where the original specimen was caught, since “the area in which a fish was caught plays an important part in its coloring. . . . So our pictures are labeled to show where they were made, and we match that against the origin of the fish we are painting” (Rainey 1960: 51, 94), which confirmed that, just as for *Liguus*, Deckert appreciated the importance of locality data, no matter how the specimen was to be used.

Such articles make clear that Deckert was instrumental in the success of Pflueger’s business, which provided specimens not only for private fishermen (McClintock 1973), but also for natural history museums. Richard W. Foster (1920–1964), a malacologist and a research associate at the MCZ, donated the funds to acquire a number of Pflueger’s fish specimens for the MCZ exhibits.¹⁵ Pflueger himself donated the fish for the exhibits at the new Miami Museum of Science and Natural History (Rainey 1960: 97). Pflueger’s shop also prepared for the Smithsonian Institution a 1,560 lbs (705 kg) black marlin caught off Peru in 1953, which was then the world’s record size for the largest bony fish (Phinizy 1972: 27).

Pflueger also opened “Pflueger’s Marine Museum”, at 1367 N. Miami Avenue, which was enthusiastically described by the travel guides written by the Federal Writers’ Project (an economic relief program) as having “displays [of] mounted specimens of south Florida marine life. Each case has a painted reef scene as a background for the brilliantly colored fish such as the rainbow parrot, mud parrot, red-lined parrot, four-eyed butterfly, angel, trigger, file, and many others” (Corse 1939: 215–216). The museum was in a former bank building, in which “the high ceiling supported by massive columns in the one time lobby makes an impressive setting for the hundreds of mounted fish” (Sweeting 1941). It is likely that Deckert painted some of the specimens displayed in this museum. Michael Lerner (1890–1978), the department store magnate, AMNH donor, and founder of the Lerner Marine Laboratory in Bimini (Bahamas), sponsored numerous AMNH expeditions to the Bahamas. The director of the 1937 Lerner Expedition reported that: “During our first stay in Miami, we were indebted to Mr. Deckert of the Pflueger Marine Museum for conducting us through that very interesting establishment, for giving us some very practical advice on collecting in the Bimini region, and for arranging for fish traps to be sent to the island for our use.”¹⁶

Given the volume of fish that passed through Pflueger’s shop, and his competitors elsewhere in Florida, it is not surprising that trophy fish became overhunted in that region, resulting in a statistically significant reduction in the average fish size from the 1950s to the 2000s (McClenachan 2008), much as *Liguus* became over-collected in the 1930s.

According to articles about Pflueger, and Deckert’s correspondence with Clench, Deckert continued working at Pflueger’s fish taxidermy business until his death in 1971, and he was feted in 1966 by the Miami-Dade Chamber of Commerce for being the oldest employee in Dade County (Reynolds 1966; Snellings 1972).

DECKERT THE NATURAL HISTORY ARTIST

Deckert was talented as a natural history artist, and his artistic work ultimately eclipsed his publications and collecting. It is not known whether Deckert was self-trained, perhaps learning by copying others, or had taken art classes, but some of his publications,

particularly those in *Aquatic life* and *Zoologica*, used his own illustrations, with those in the former journal being particularly detailed and naturalistic. During the 1910s, Deckert also illustrated fossil vertebrates for the AMNH paleontologists, where he was one of the three illustrators (along with Charles R. Knight and Erwin S. Christman) of the 136 figures in a popular book on evolution by Henry Fairfield Osborn (1917); those illustrations were later reproduced by yet other authors (Reed 1930). Deckert also illustrated fossil vertebrates for Barnum Brown (1873–1963), another AMNH paleontologist, including two drawings of a duckbill dinosaur, *Corythosaurus*, shown swimming (Brown 1916: plates 21 and 22). Three of Deckert's original illustrations, measuring 22 inches high and 28 inches wide, are in the AMNH Archives.¹⁷ When Deckert wrote to Osborn in 1918 to request the opportunity to do additional work, Deckert fondly recalled his paleontological efforts: "The restorations I did for you and Mr. Brown at the Museum were a source of constant delight for me to execute, and I would indeed like to have the opportunity to again have a try at them."¹⁸

Davidson (2008: 137–139) recently discussed the significance of the illustrations by Deckert and others in Osborn's book, since Osborn was among the first to combine line drawings with photographs of a specimen, and he attempted "to give readers an idea of how the animal looked in life and how it might have behaved." Unfortunately, both Brown and Osborn misinterpreted a fossil specimen of a duck-billed dinosaur as "probably aquatic" based on the arrangement of its limbs in the specimen, and Deckert erroneously illustrated this species as swimming. Davidson (2008: 139) concluded that "The idea that the pose was due to the way the animal had laid down and died, or the way its body had sunk and rested prior to petrification, rather than to its having died instantaneously while swimming, seems to have passed Osborn by. Generations of readers no doubt thought this was a great example of a swimming *Corythosaurus*."

Deckert's snake paintings were also published in the "Snakes" article for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Parker and Schmidt 1949: plate facing page 850). This article was co-authored by Hampton Wildman Parker (1897–1963), Keeper of Zoology at the British Museum (Natural History), and Karl Patterson Schmidt (1890–1957), Curator of Herpetology at the Field Museum (Adler 1989: 91–92, 106).

Deckert illustrated numerous turtles from life for *The turtles of New England* by Harold Lester Babcock (1886–1953), a Boston physician who also worked at the Boston Society of Natural History. This seminal work (Babcock 1919) has 16 plates, of which two are photographs, and the others are from original watercolours – ten by Deckert and four by James Henry Blake (1845–1941), a Boston natural history artist. Deckert's illustrations were based mostly on live specimens from the New York Aquarium (then located in Battery Park at the southern tip of Manhattan) and the Bronx Zoo; the musk turtle was captured from the nearby Bronx River. Some of these illustrations were reproduced in the *Field guide to New England turtles*, but without attribution to the illustrators (Babcock 1938).

Deckert's fish illustrations were used not only for taxidermy purposes at Pflueger's shop, but also became artistic works in their own right, and compare favorably with those of Charles Bradford Hudson (1865–1939), a particularly renowned fish painter (Springer and Murphy 2010: 27–29). At least one fish book (Ackerman 1951) used 150 colour illustrations by Deckert of the marine fishes of the western Atlantic. Despite the small size of the illustrations in that book, even closely related fish are easily distinguishable by Deckert's detailed drawings in which the key differentiating characters are readily recognizable.

Sometime during the 1920s or 1930s, Deckert came into contact with Howard Atwood Kelly (1858–1943), Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in Baltimore, Maryland. Kelly's legacy encompassed his substantial natural history library, which included numerous rare books on reptiles and fungi. Most of Kelly's natural history books are now at the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor). Davis (1959: 182), in his admiring biography of Kelly, devoted a chapter to his library, which included a collection of Deckert's watercolours: "A large round table at one end of the room held the massive portfolios of the hundreds of reptile paintings, exact in pattern and scale count, done for Kelly by the naturalist-artist Richard F. Deckert of Miami . . .". Kelly had used some of Deckert's illustrations for his *Snakes of Maryland* (1936).

From 1939 to 1941, several years before Kelly's death, Walter D. Lantz, an antiques dealer in Baltimore, announced the sale of the "Collection of Dr. Howard A. Kelly," of which *Catalogue no. 5* (of seven) comprised the "Natural History Paintings in Water Color by R. F. Deckert 1911–1929" (Lantz 1941). This remarkable catalogue, comprising 19 typeset pages, listed 362 watercolours by Deckert, of which 179 were of snakes, 14 were toads, 2 were lizards, 107 were turtles, 54 were birds, and 6 were flowers.

In a typewritten postscript added in 1948, Lantz noted that the entire Deckert collection, except for three items that evidently had sold, was now offered in its entirety to the highest bidder. Lantz noted that "the intention at first was to sell these paintings individually," but "this plan was abandoned, in preference for one that would keep the collection intact" (Lantz 1948: 20). Alas, Lantz erred in describing these paintings as "executed by the late artist and naturalist, R. F. Deckert, during the years 1911 to 1929." As of 1948, Deckert was only 70, and lived for another 22 years.

Lantz's catalog is most helpful in specifying "that the price shown after each item in the catalogue represents the original cost", which indicates what Deckert charged Kelly and others for his watercolour paintings. Thus, the snake paintings, which ranged in size from 8 × 13 inches to 14 × 20 inches, cost from \$15 to \$50, a function of size. In contrast, the 107 turtle paintings were priced somewhat more cheaply, with none exceeding \$30, and most in the \$15 to \$20 range.

Lantz reproduced several of Deckert's paintings; the snake paintings include diagnostic close-ups of the scale patterns, and the turtle is shown in an elevated pose, while the one bird painting shown (of three Floridian species on a bush) is done exactly in the naturalistic style of Audubon (Lantz 1941: 3, 7, 10, 17).

Unfortunately, Lantz was unsuccessful in selling the Kelly collection, for the MCZ Mollusk Department correspondence files reveal that in 1959 the alumni magazine of Michigan State University (which Clench received as an undergraduate alumnus of that institution) published a note that "a highly valuable collection of wildlife paintings by the late artist-naturalist R. F. Deckert has been presented to the University Museum by William Boulton Kelly and his brother, Howard A. Kelly of Baltimore, Md." (Anonymous 1959: 3). As had Lantz, Michigan State University (MSU) erred in assuming that Deckert was deceased. According to correspondence from Kelly's son (William) to Victor Hogg, an artist at MSU, "the entire collection was once sold to a university in Illinois for \$5,000 but the outbreak of the war [Second World War] prevented them from going through with it."¹⁹ Deckert's paintings remain in the MSU Museum archives.²⁰

Deckert's artistic ability was also recognized by John M. Goggin (1916–1963), who while a graduate student at Yale published on archaeological finds in Wakulla, northwestern

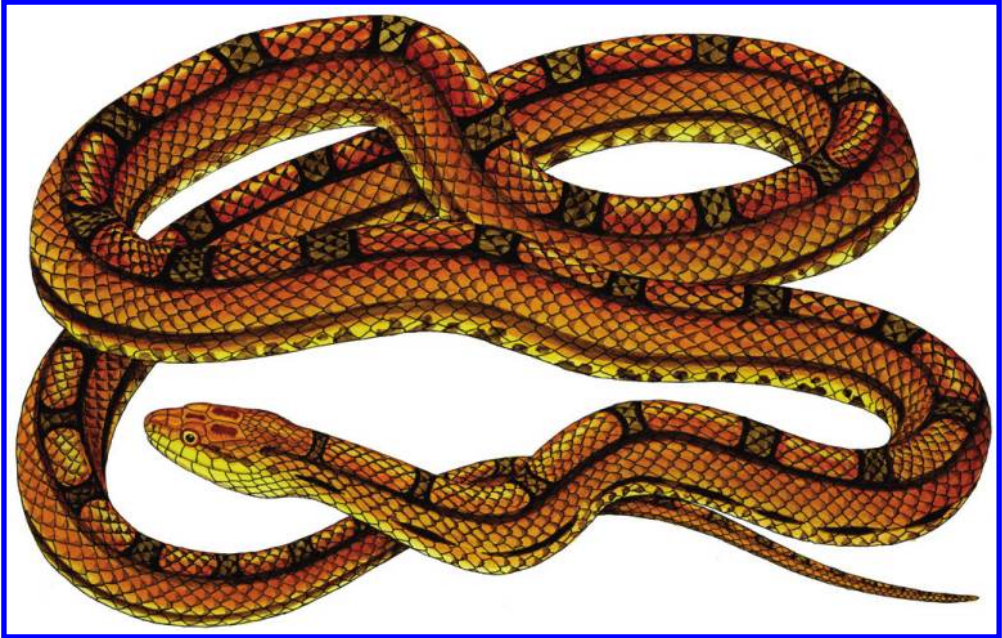


Figure 3. Deckert's watercolour of *Elaphe quadrivittata deckerti* Brady, 1932, collected in 1944 from Matecumbe Key, Florida (reproduced by permission of Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University).

Florida. Deckert illustrated the elaborately detailed gold and copper ornaments created by the natives; one ornament is thought to be a representation of the ivory-billed woodpecker (Goggin 1947).

DECKERT'S EPONYMS AND NEW TAXA

In the 1930s, three new taxa were named after Deckert. Clench (1935: 121–122, plate 7, figure 4) described *Liguus fasciatus deckerti* from Long Pine Key in the central Everglades, Florida, and stated that this was “probably the rarest of all Florida *Liguus*.” As Close (2000: 58–59) recognized, this is just a colour form of the polymorphic *Liguus fasciatus* (Müller, 1774) (Gastropoda: Pulmonata: Orthalicidae).

Brady (1932: 5–8) described a new subspecies of the common rat snake, collected by Deckert from Lower Matecumbe Key (Monroe County, Florida), as *Elaphe quadrivittata deckerti*, named “in honor of Mr. Deckert who has contributed so much to our knowledge of Florida herpetology.” Other herpetologists (Burbrink 2001; Ernst and Ernst 2003: 115–122) concluded that Deckert's rat snake and its nominal species (*E. quadrivittata*) are a subspecies or a mere colour form of *E. obsoleta* (Say in James, 1823) (Reptilia: Colubridae). In 1944, Deckert prepared a watercolour of “his” eponymous snake, based on a specimen collected from Matecumbe Key in 1944 (Figure 3).

John Kunkel Small (1869–1938), of the New York Botanical Garden, named a pinweed from Lemon City, Miami as *Lechea deckertii* (Cistaceae) (Small 1927). Deckert's pinweed is still recognized as a valid species, endemic to Florida and Georgia (Wilbur and Daoud 1961: 113–114).

While Deckert did not describe any new taxa of molluscs, amphibians or reptiles, he was later credited for having ghost-written the descriptions of two new subspecies of *Liguus*. According to Humes (1965: 70) and Close (2000: 59), Deckert wrote the descriptions of *L. fasciatus solisoccasus* De Boe, 1933 (from the central Everglades, Collier County, Florida), and of *L. fasciatus doherlyi* Pflueger, 1934 (from Lower Matecumbe Key, Monroe County, Florida). Both taxa are now recognized as mere colour forms of *L. fasciatus* (Müller, 1774) and *L. solidus* (Say, 1825), respectively (Close 2000: 90, 104).

DECKERT – FROM NATURALIST TO NATURIST

In 1956, when Deckert was 77, he renewed his correspondence with Clench. After noting that he was still working for Al Pflueger, Deckert told Clench that he had some “perhaps startling news: I have joined the American Sunbathing Association (nudists) and also am a member of Lake Como Club in Tampa!”²¹ Deckert reassured Clench that “No – I have not gone cuckoo! I have practiced nudism in the house for over 10 years and am convinced that it has added to my continued good physical health.”

Deckert reassured Clench that joining these naturist groups required “a very rigid investigation as regards background, morals, character and habits” since “very few clubs will accept single men or women So, I feel really honored and privileged to be at once accepted.” Deckert also asserted that “Only the nicest people are real nudists. We believe that there is nothing indecent or obscene about the naked human body or any part of it, including the genitalia.” Deckert then described the setting at the Lake Como Club, including its 200 acres of grounds and a 35 acre lake, and closed his letter by complaining that this club was “270 miles by Greyhound Bus” from Miami, but that now he was a member, he could also visit another, unnamed club at Homestead, closer to Miami, and asked Clench for “your reaction to all this.” The MCZ Mollusk Department archive does not possess any reply by Clench, who otherwise was well-known as a frequent correspondent with numerous collectors around the world.

In 1960, when Deckert was 82, he wrote to Clench, to advise him that he had moved to a new address in Miami, and had acquired a room-mate, a fellow naturist, Ray Boymer (1897–1978), a charter fishing boat captain.²² Deckert wrote that after finishing the work week at Pflueger’s, “every Friday night I take the Greyhound Bus to Delray”, where another naturist who owned a car would take him to a nudist camp:

... this new, healthy and clean life agrees with me and has been largely responsible for my very good health. . . . The folks at the club are the nicest, friendliest bunch I have ever met, and all are so kind and considerate, even the kids. Especially the teen-agers, both girls and boys, will do anything to please me . . . Every one calls me Uncle Dick, and the club has made me a permanent member, an honor which I appreciate beyond words.

Deckert described his daily swims in the naturist club’s pool, and afterwards, “I go into our small club-house for a cup of coffee and a cigar. So you see, I am having the time of my life in my late years, and something most pleasant to look forward to every week end.” Deckert closed his 1960 letter, as for his 1956 letter, by extending his best wishes to Clench, to Clench’s wife (Julia), and to “dear Ruthie” (Ruth D. Turner, 1914–2000, a student of Clench and a long time malacologist at the MCZ). No reply from Clench is in the archives.

The history of naturism in Florida is nowhere near as well documented as is the history of natural history. Deckert later became a member of the Sunsport Gardens Family Naturist

Resort in Loxahatchee (Palm Beach County), founded in 1965, in a town that remains known for its eccentric characters (Demko 2000).

Deckert's healthy life style – whether a product of his strenuous hikes through the Everglades, his naturism, or pure chance – did result in a long life. Richard Deckert died, aged 92, on Monday 18 January 1971 at Loxahatchee, Florida.²³ At the time of his death, he was still employed at Pflueger's taxidermy shop, which was then run by Al Pflueger, Jr., who had taken over the business after his father's death in 1962.

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Kraig Adler (Cornell University) provided a partial listing of Deckert's herpetological publications and information on several works illustrated by Deckert; he and Arnold Norden (Maryland Department of Natural Resources) provided additional information on Howard Kelly. Deb Phelps (Olathe, Kansas) provided information on her grandfather, Joseph Farnum. Albert Pflueger, Jr. (Village of Palmetto, Florida) shared his reminiscences of Deckert's last years. Val R. Berryman (Curator of History, Michigan State University Museum) confirmed the presence of the Deckert watercolour paintings at that institution, and provided copies of correspondence with Kelly's sons relating to the donation of those paintings. Barbara Mathe and Gregory August Raml (American Museum of Natural History) facilitated my visit to the AMNH Archives, and helped find numerous items of interest. Eleonore Dixon-Roche expertly prepared the illustrations for publication. An anonymous reviewer provided helpful comments on the manuscript.

NOTES

¹ Deckert's father, Oscar, a furrier, emigrated from Germany to New York in August 1886. Oscar's wife Emma, son Richard, and three daughters (Hedwig, Clara, and Frida) emigrated to New York in December 1887: New York passenger lists for 1886 and 1887; U.S. and New York census and immigration records (accessed through www.ancestry.com; copies on file with author).

² Thirteenth census of the United States, Borough of Manhattan, New York (1910). Deckert had married Hazel Christina Joss (née Dickson) (1868–1930), a Scottish immigrant, with two children by her first marriage, Douglas Joss and Christy Joss.

³ On 12 September 1918, at age 39, Deckert registered for the draft for the First World War I; he was then living in the Bronx, and was employed as a "clerk" for the West Coast Fruit Company, with an injury noted as "four fingers missing on left hand": Draft registration cards, Bronx County, New York.

⁴ R. L. Ditmars to H. C. Bumpus, 13 March 1909: original ms in American Museum of Natural History Central Archives (hereafter AMNH-CA) 262.

⁵ Ditmars (1876–1942) spent nearly his entire professional career at the NYZS (Adler 1989: 73–74). "Possessed of enormous enthusiasm and a flair for drama, Ditmars lectured widely, and his seventeen books . . . enjoyed a large audience in their day and greatly increased the public's understanding of and sympathy for many animals, especially snakes, creatures with which Ditmars was forever linked in the popular mind" (Goddard 1995: 85).

⁶ The NYZS archives have no later records of Deckert other than "a pension fund resignation card dated April 9, 1919." Steven P. Johnson (NYZS) to E. Dominguez (AMNH), 8 May 1991: AMNH-CA.

⁷ R. F. Deckert (hereafter RFD) to H. F. Osborn (hereafter HFO), 15 January 1918; AMNH-CA 771 (1918–1933) (Box 197).

⁸ HFO to F. A. Lucas (hereafter FAL), 25 January 1918; AMNH-CA 771 (1918–1933) (Box 197).

⁹ HFO to RFD, 25 January 1918; AMNH-CA 771 (1918–1933) (Box 197).

¹⁰ FAL to HFO, 26 January 1918; AMNH-CA 771 (1918–1933) (Box 197).

¹¹ Joseph Norman Farnum was born on 28 November 1893, in Southboro, Massachusetts. He married Mildred Lincoln Pierce on 11 December 1920 in Greenville, South Carolina; they had one daughter (Mildred Elizabeth Farnum), born on 12 September 1921 in Black Mountain, North Carolina. Farnum died on 5 April 1930 in Miami, and is buried in Woodlawn Cemetery, Miami. D. Phelps, pers. comm., 4 December 2010.

¹² Hazel Deckert (see note 2 above) died in Miami on 10 July 1930; Florida death records (1930). The 1935 Florida census shows that Richard “single”, was living in Miami and was employed as an “artist”: Florida population census, Dade County.

¹³ Maurice Kirby Brady (1904–1958) is a footnote to the history of herpetology and malacology, having published or presented several articles in those fields. According to a cursory, unsourced biographical note, Brady was a businessman in Washington, DC, and served for one term as the President of the Washington Biologists’ Field Club (Perry 2007: 85).

¹⁴ RFD to W. J. Clench, 18 February 1956; original ms in Mollusk Department archives, Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University (hereafter MCZ-MD). Wolfgang Karl Weyrauch (1907–1970), a native of Germany who emigrated to Peru, became known for his numerous publications on the non-marine mollusks of South America, but the subsequent widespread dispersal of his paratypes (including to Deckert) made it difficult to track them down in later years (Barbosa *et al.* 2008).

¹⁵ R. I. Johnson, pers. comm., November 2006.

¹⁶ F. LaMonte, Lerner-Bimini Expedition 1937, Report to the Director (1937); AMNH-CA 1216 (1935–1939), Box 607.

¹⁷ AMNH Art Survey nos 730, 731, and 732.

¹⁸ RFD to HFO, 15 January 1918; AMNH-CA 771 (1918–1933) (Box 197).

¹⁹ W. B. Kelly to V. H. Hogg, 7 October 1958; Michigan State University Museum Archives.

²⁰ V. R. Berryman, pers. comm., 10 July 2006.

²¹ RFD to W. J. Clench, 18 February 1956; MCZ-MD (emphasis in original).

²² RFD to W. J. Clench, 7 March 1960; MCZ-MD.

²³ Certificate of death, Office of Vital Statistics, Florida, State File No. 71-005021. Deckert’s home address was listed on the death certificate as “P.O. Box 356, North Road, Loxahatchee,” which evidently corresponds to the Sunsport Gardens, also located on North Road.

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APPENDIX 1: Publications in natural history by Richard Deckert. A date within parentheses after the year of a reference is the stated month or day of publication.

- 1 1914a (14 February) List of Salientia from near Jacksonville, Florida. *Copeia* 3: 3.
- 2 1914b (15 April) Further notes on the Salientia of Jacksonville, Florida. *Copeia* 5: 2–4.
- 3 1914c (29 August) Further notes on the Salientia of Jacksonville, Florida. *Copeia* 9: 1–3.
- 4 1914d (15 December) Salamanders collected in Westchester County, New York. *Copeia* 13: 3–4.

- 5 1915a (15 May) Further notes on the Salientia of Jacksonville, Florida. *Copeia* 18: 3–5.
- 6 1915b (27 July) Concluding notes on the Salientia of Jacksonville, Florida. *Copeia* 20: 21–24.
- 7 1915c (September) Our collection of swimming frogs. *Zoological Society bulletin* 18 (5): 1264–1265.
- 8 1915d (September) The crocodilians' nursery. *Zoological Society bulletin* 18 (5): 1266–1267.
- 9 1915e (October) Review of two series of amphibians. *Zoologica, scientific contributions of the New York Zoological Society* 2 (1): 1–34, 2 plates.
- 10 1915f (19 November) An albino pond frog. *Copeia* 24: 53–54.
- 11 1916a (January) An albino frog. *Zoological Society bulletin* 19 (1): 1306.
- 12 1916b (January) Tame California toads. *Zoological Society bulletin* 19 (1): 1324–1325.
- 13 1916c (24 March) Notes on *Amblystoma opacum* Gray. *Copeia* 28: 23–24.
- 14 1916d (September) A tree-climbing salamander. *Zoological Society bulletin* 19 (5): 1405.
- 15 1917a (January) The oval ant frog. *Zoological Society bulletin* 20 (1): 1440, 1442.
- 16 1917b (2 February) Do the Fowler's toads and the American toad interbreed? *Science* 45 (1153): 113–114.
- 17 1917c (24 March) ["1916"] Another record of *Amblystoma opacum* from Long Island. *Copeia* 41: 24.
- 18 1917d (24 May) *Pipa americana* rediscovered on Trinidad. *Copeia* 44: 49–50.
- 19 1917e (November) The common tree toad. *Aquatic life* 3 (3): 41–43.
- 20 1918a (January) South American frogs. *Zoological Society bulletin* 21 (1): 1567.
- 21 1918b (17 February) A list of reptiles from Jacksonville, Florida. *Copeia* 54: 30–33.
- 22 1918c (August) The southern soft-shelled turtle. *Aquatic life* 3 (12): 157–158.
- 23 1918d (28 September) South American frogs. *Scientific American supplement* 86 (2230): 196.
Note: reprinted from Deckert (1918a).
- 24 1918e (October) The blue-tailed skink. *Aquatic life* 4 (2): 21–24.
- 25 1919 (April) The Surinam toad. *Aquatic life* 4 (8): 99–100.
- 26 1920 (25 March) Notes on the Florida gopher frog, *Rana aesopus*. *Copeia* 80: 26.
- 27 1921 (March 15) Amphibian notes from Dade Co., Florida. *Copeia* 92: 20–23.
- 28 1922 (20 November) Notes on Dade County Salientia. *Copeia* 112: 88.