

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Johann Baptist von Spix

Although Prince Maximilian zu Wied-Neuwied had previously explored the coastal regions of Brazil, zoologist J.B. von Spix and botanist C.F.P. von Martius were the first biologists to visit the interior. Johann Baptist von Spix was born in Bavaria in 1781. Planning a career in theology, he spent several years in seminaries, but, in 1804, decided to pursue medicine at the University of Würzburg, where he also studied natural history. After graduating in 1806, he practiced medicine in Würzburg and Bamberg, but, in 1811, became the first Curator of Zoology at the Bavarian Academy of Science in Munich.

Correspondence with Alexander von Humboldt triggered plans for a South American expedition. In 1817, Spix and Martius began at Rio de Janeiro, moved inland, crossed the coastal mountains, proceeded north through the dry caatingas, and eventually traveled up the Amazon River. The dangers, including violent encounters with native tribes, were very real. In addition, Spix became quite ill. Nevertheless, he continued to collect specimens and record observations, primarily on animals, but also on the native tribes he had encountered. The two Germans departed from Belém, at the mouth of the Amazon, for Europe in 1820.



Lithograph of "IGUANA squamosa" (= *Iguana iguana*) by Philip Schmid. This lithograph is in *Lacertarum* by J.B. Spix. An original of this volume and the other herpetological volumes based on Spix's travels to Brazil are in the Kenneth Spencer Research Library at the University of Kansas. This lithograph was previously reproduced (in color) in *Slithy Toxes*.



Johann Baptist von Spix. Illustration courtesy of Kraig Adler.

Spix died in 1826 of complications from a disease contracted during his trip to Brazil. However, in the period between the trip and his untimely death, either alone or with collaborators, he produced eight books on all of the vertebrate classes plus molluscs and arthropods. Three of the volumes addressed herpetological topics: *Serpentum* (on snakes, but also including caecilians and amphisbaenians) was written by Spix's assistant, J.B. Wagler, from Spix's notes and published in 1824; *Testudinum et Ranarum* (on turtles and frogs) was written by Spix and published in 1824; and *Lacertarum* (on lizards and crocodiles) also was written by Spix and was published in 1825. These volumes, profusely illustrated with hand-colored prints, together with Wied-Neuwied's works, provided the foundation for the study of the rich Brazilian herpetofauna.

Sources

- Adler, K. 1989. Herpetologists of the Past, pp. 5–141. In: K. Adler (ed.), *Contributions to the History of Herpetology*. Society for the Study of Amphibians and Reptiles, Contributions to Herpetology, vol. 5. Ithaca, New York.
- Haines, S. 2000. *Slithy Toxes. Illustrated Classic Herpetological Books at the University of Kansas in Pictures and Conversations*. Society for the Study of Amphibians and Reptiles in cooperation with the Kenneth Spencer Research Library at the University of Kansas, Contributions to Herpetology, vol. 5. Ithaca, New York.