



## MEET THE SCIENTIST

# Vladimir Dinets

*Research scientist, Okinawa Institute of Science & Technology, Japan*

Whether it's researching Siberian cuckoos or tool-using crocodilians, Vladimir Dinets refuses to specialise. Instead, he champions first-hand experiences with as many species as possible

A love of nature is catching. These days, we even have a name for it – ‘the Attenborough effect’. But growing up in and around Moscow in the 1970s, Vladimir Dinets had no one to catch it from.

Dinets remembers a childhood devoid of naturalist mentors among friends and family and lacking in nature books. And yet...

“I knew that I wanted to be a zoologist at the age of three,” he says. “It started with the love of animals, and the fun of chasing, tracking and observing them.” At five, he was spending every day of the summer looking for wildlife in the parks near his home.

Having fulfilled his ambition, Dinets has drawn on his childhood as evidence that a love of nature is at least partly innate – an echo of an instinctive urge to hunt. His argument is bolstered by his discovery that his divorcee father, whom he did not meet until he was 12, was an avid butterfly collector.

But the human species is just one of many that Dinets has studied professionally. He has worked on North American moles, Himalayan flying squirrels, desert carnivores and Arctic ptarmigan, to name but a few. He has written books, in English and Russian, on mammals, birds and reptiles. His research – on pack-hunting snakes, playful fish and tool-using

Vladimir reintroduces whooping cranes into the wild; and (below) discovers why crocodiles use sticks



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crocodilians (they use sticks to lure nesting birds to their deaths), for example – features regularly on these pages. His most recent published paper is on the response of Alaskan birds to the recent arrival of Siberian cuckoos.

Dinets says his “most gratifying” work has involved reintroducing endangered species. “A few years ago I participated in returning whooping cranes to Louisiana where

they were hunted out a century ago. The chicks I taught to catch crayfish are now adults and do good jobs at raising their own chicks.”

Specialisation is something he has resisted, as “it often hampers our understanding of the living world. First-hand experience with animals from as many groups as possible is the only way to gain some understanding of how things work in general,” he says. “A good biologist has to be a good naturalist, and a good naturalist by definition is a good biologist.”

Is there any unifying theme to Dinets’ diverse research portfolio? “Initially I tried to understand how animals manage to survive in the harsh world they inhabit. More recently my motivation is panic. I’m moving towards conservation science, because without major changes in our relationship with the environment, we will have nothing to study except rats and cockroaches by the end of the century.” **SB**



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