

From Pokemon Go to birdwatching: Scientist studies how we express our inner hunter

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Interested in birding or wildlife photography? Enjoy playing Pokemon Go and catching imaginary creatures? If so, you may simply be expressing your inner hunter.

So says a new study from Vladimir Dinets, a University of Tennessee, Knoxville, research assistant professor of psychology. Dinets used himself as a [case study](#) to demonstrate that at least some humans do have a hunting instinct—or, more precisely, an innate interest in finding and catching prey.

"To prove such a theory, you don't need a large sample size; you need just one well-documented case," he said of the unconventional method.

The study was published recently in the open-access journal *Humanimalia*.

Hunting has played a major role in human history, helping humans survive and populate the world. But do we have an inherited hunting instinct, like dogs, cats and other predators?

"It is possible that we all have the hunting instinct, but it has never been proven," Dinets said.

To probe this question, Dinets looked to his own childhood. His father, Leonid Kaabak, a chemist, has had a lifelong hobby of chasing, catching and studying rare butterflies. Yet after his parents divorced, Dinets grew

up in a family where no one had an interest in wild animals or the natural world. From the age of 3, however, Dinets has shown an interest in wildlife. By the time he was 5, he would spend every summer combing suburban forests for animals of all kinds, from insects to mammals. This passion was so intense that he kept "hunting" during the rest of the year, when he moved to the central part of Moscow, a city of 10 million people. He would spend a lot of time looking for birds in city parks and, weather permitting, for beetles and worms in vacant lots and lawns.

In his searches, he noted that he instinctively used certain patterns known to tribal hunters worldwide. By age 12, he had switched from simply chasing animals to observing them, and began a seven-year study of the European mink, a rare and endangered mammal, that was later published in a scientific journal. He eventually earned a doctorate in zoology and now specializes in studying animal behavior. He still enjoys finding rare species and often travels to remote parts of the world to search for them. He is the author of the Peterson Field Guide to Finding Mammals in North America.

"The recent explosive popularity of the Pokemon Go game, which allows players to hunt for virtual animals across a real terrain, shows how addictive such proxies can be and how many people can enjoy hunting-like behavior despite being city dwellers completely isolated from natural environments," Dinets said. "The take-home message of the study is that we have predatory instincts and have to be aware of them. But this doesn't mean that we have to be real predators; instead, we can follow these instincts in more intelligent ways."

Dinets noted that conducting studies on oneself has been important in the history of science, most famously with infectious disease research.

"Nowadays people mostly use it to avoid going through complex permit applications and legal issues with studies on human subjects," he said.

Dinets would like to further the research by conducting a study to see if identical twins are more similar in their hunting behavior than nonidentical twins.

"If this is the case, it would provide much stronger evidence that hunting instinct is innate," he said. "I'm looking for collaborators with experience in anthropological research."

Provided by University of Tennessee at Knoxville

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