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### **Alexandr Pavlovich Rasnitsyn – 75<sup>th</sup> birthday**

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Alexandr Pavlovich Rasnitsyn (Александр Павлович Расницын) is a well-known Russian zoologist and palaeontologist, one of the leaders of the Russian school of palaeoentomology. He was born on 24th September 1936 in Moscow, where he has lived ever since. Even as a child he was fascinated by animals, especially insects. Such interests resulted in his attending the meetings of the Circle of Young Biologists, which was active at the Moscow Zoo. The Circle was a breeding ground for future scientists, including zoologists well-known both in Russia and worldwide. In all probability, it was then that Professor Rasnitsyn developed the character trait that allowed him to gain insight into the heart of biological processes, as well as his habit of planning and actively participating in field research projects. These invaluable characteristics he has retained until this day.

Professor Rasnitsyn commenced his studies in 1955 at the Faculty of Biology of the Moscow State University and from the very beginning actively participated in the activities of the scientific group led by Professor E.S. Smirnov, the head of the Department of Entomology. That research group brought together young entomologists who later became leading Russian scientists in the fields of palaeoentomology and entomology. Alexandr Pavlovich graduated from the university having written a thesis entitled “Hibernation in the ichneumon flies of the subfamily Ichneumoninae” and began to work in the Arthropoda Laboratory headed by Professor Boris Borisovich Rohdendorf at the Palaeontological Institute of the USSR (now Russian) Academy of Sciences in Moscow. Alexandr Pavlovich has worked in that laboratory ever since; having started as a technical worker, he was promoted to the position of junior and then senior research worker, until he finally became head of the Laboratory, the position which he still holds at present.

Alexandr Pavlovich, while remaining true to tradition, has at the same time shaped the Russian school of palaeoentomology. This school, in contrast to many other scientific centres worldwide, assumes that it is possible to study fossil insects only after having gained a thorough knowledge and understanding of the contemporary representatives of the

investigated group of insects. However, one of the major principles of the Russian school consists in the primacy of the biological approach over the geological approach, but without devaluing in any way the importance of the latter. It is probably this approach that allowed Alexandr Pavlovich Rasnitsyn to make a significant contribution to such seemingly varied areas as systematics, phylogeny, embryology, comparative anatomy, palaeoecology, the theory of systematics and the theory of evolution, and even the theory of plant community development. It would be difficult to decide in which of these areas Professor Rasnitsyn has acquired greater renown. He has published over 300 books and papers in several languages worldwide. For entomologists he remains, first and foremost, one of the most famous specialists studying the phylogeny and systematics of the Hymenoptera (PhD in 1967 on “Mesozoic Hymenoptera Symphyta and early evolution of Xyelidae”, and DSc in 1978 on “Origin and evolution of Hymenoptera”). He was the co-author and editor of the monograph “Историческое развитие иласса насекомых (The historical development of the class Insecta)” 1980, and “The history of insects” 2002. It is also worth noting that in 1976 Alexandr Pavlovich propounded one of the most popular and widely accepted theories of how the ability of flight developed and also a theory on the origin of wings. He has recently (2008) written, together with V.V. Zherikhin and A.G. Ponomarenko, “An Introduction to Palaeoentomology”.

Professor Rasnitsyn is not only a scientist who is highly respected by entomologists and palaeontologists, but also an excellent colleague. For this reason he was appointed the first President of the International Palaeoentomological Society (2001-2005), and was awarded the Niven Honorary Membership of the Russian Entomological Society (2004). In August 2008 he was awarded the Distinguished Research Medal of the International Society of Hymenoptera. The esteem that Alexandr Pavlovich Rasnitsyn enjoys among his fellow scientists is illustrated by the fact that over 50 species of animals have been named in his honour, as well as some taxa of higher rank.

There are many scientists who feel at home in the laboratory, where they willingly and efficiently study the material they have collected. Unlike them, however, Alexandr Pavlovich is an old hand at field expeditions. He has participated in many such expeditions, which have taken him to various parts of the former Soviet Union, from the Taimyr Peninsula in the north to Central Asia in the south, the European part of Russia and even to the Far East. He has also visited Canada, China, the United Kingdom and South Africa. Alexandr Pavlovich Rasnitsyn is a full-blooded palaeoentomologist, who enjoys collecting, and more importantly knows how to collect, fossil insects, regardless of whether they are Palaeozoic accumulations or Cenozoic ones, which are millions of years younger. He is one of the persons who have contributed to the richness and variety of the PIN collection, which has been made available, a point worth highlighting, to researchers from all over the world.



Alexandr Pavlovich Rasnitsyn – in Spain. (Photo: E. Lukashevich, [www: wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)).

Apart from all the virtues of Alexandr Pavlovich Rasnitsyn as a scientist, one must also mention the human side of his personality, which can be most easily observed during field research projects. On several occasions I have personally had the pleasure of working with him. Alexandr Pavlovich Rasnitsyn is an affable person, enjoys joking, and is well capable of talking on subjects other than science and insects. In this respect he is a true naturalist. He has an excellent knowledge of classical Russian and other literature and can quote long passages by heart. We, in Poland, are happy to discover that Alexandr Pavlovich has an extensive knowledge of the works of Stanisław Lem, which he enjoys reading.

The staff of scientific academies and research institutes, regardless of the country, usually find it rather difficult to find common ground with less experienced, younger colleagues. This is why they rarely have followers, do not establish a school and have no pupils. In this respect, too, Alexandr Pavlovich has proved to be extraordinary. The proof of his successful cooperation with younger generations of scientists lies in the fact that he has supervised over 50 undergraduates and 11 PhD students. Many scientists whom he has taught now work in Russia and other European countries. Some of them have continued their studies of contemporary and fossil insects, following the passion which was once awoken in them by their master – Alexandr Pavlovich Rasnitsyn.

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