

one step ahead

Insects, Geckos, and Birds

by Juliet Lamb

All through my school years, I relied on a strict internal schedule: do well in high school, get accepted to a college with a good biology program, get the right internships, go straight to veterinary school, and—voilà!—I'd be set for life at age 23. I'd been committed to this plan since second grade, when veterinary medicine was the automatic choice for any kid who loved animals.

It wasn't until I got to college at age 16 that I began to realize how many other animal-focused careers existed. I met professors and graduate students who studied wildlife populations in some of the most remote places on earth. Unlike working in veterinary offices, as I'd done throughout high school, this kind of research genuinely excited me—actually, it seemed like too much fun to qualify as work. I slogged through my veterinary prerequisites and rewarded myself with courses I loved: ornithology, primate psychology, animal behavior.

By the time I was 19, I was ready to graduate and go on to vet school as I'd planned, yet something stopped me from filling out the applications. One night, as my friends and I talked about the future, I finally told them what I had been afraid to admit to myself: I wasn't going to vet school. For the first time in my life, I had no idea what I was going to do. Their reactions surprised me. "I've seen how your eyes light up when you talk about watching birds," explained one of them. "I couldn't picture you spaying cats for the rest of your life."

Some of the most interesting people I know have taken round-about journeys to find what they loved. One friend spent years as a dockworker in Canada loading slabs of rock into container ships. The fossilized insects embedded in the rocks fascinated him so much that he decided to pursue a PhD in paleoentomology. Another friend was in law school in Southern California when geckos clinging to the glass panes of her window inspired her to give up law in favor of biomechanics. Another switched from pre-med to hotel management after taking a summer job at an inn. These tracks now seem neatly drawn, as though destiny directed my friends toward the careers that would make them happiest. In reality, they had plenty of doubt and confusion.

I was scared to give up on vet school because I didn't want to let people down. More than that, I didn't want to let myself down. Nevertheless, I couldn't ignore my uncertainty. I needed time to explore the world if I was going to find my insect fossils, my geckos, my hotels. Two weeks after graduation, I packed my bags and flew to Panama to spend six months tracking Harpy eagles through the rainforest. I've never looked back.



As gifted students, we feel a great deal of pressure to choose our futures early and start working toward them. However, being good at school shouldn't mean we need to cram our creativity, passion, and inspiration into easy boxes. The sheer variety of careers in the world means that we can do almost anything, and our intelligence means we can contribute something important no matter what we choose to do. The only way to learn about ourselves and what we want is to try things, without being afraid to fail or fall behind.

You have your whole life to decide what you want to do. Maybe you'll find what you love in a summer math program; then again, maybe you'll find it while loading boats, or working in a hotel, or staring out the window. Taking the time to be sure of what you want will make you a better professional and a happier person, and open up experiences you might never have imagined. **i**

Juliet Lamb graduated from Harvard University with a degree in Environmental Science and Public Policy and has worked as a wildlife biologist throughout North and Central America. She recently finished her master's degree in Wildlife Conservation at the University of Massachusetts and will soon be moving to Scotland's Orkney Islands to study seabird movements. When she isn't chasing birds, she spends most of her time playing the French horn, writing musicals, doing crossword puzzles, and climbing trees.