Wildlife after death

Half a million specimens of South-East Asian animals are stored at the NUS faculty of science
Corrie Tan

The Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research’s public gallery looks like it has just been ransacked. Exhibits are gone from the walls. An eclectic mix of coloured information panels, seemingly pushed together at random, form an impromptu wall. Cardboard boxes and conservation-grade packing paper take up most of its floor space. Tucked away on the third floor of the concrete maze that is the National University of Singapore’s faculty of science, the cramped 200 sq m gallery looks even smaller when lit! Visitors. But have no fear – nothing has been stolen. This is simply part of the big move to a spanking new building.

When the museum opens its doors in the second half of next year, the 8,500 sq m, seven-storey Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum will be home to a priceless collection of about 500,000 specimens of vertebrates and invertebrates, along with three dinosaur fossils. This is more than three times the size of the Raffles Museum’s current storage facilities.

For now, the rest of the specimens are under lock and key in the back rooms. It closed to the public in March for the small team of staff and four curators to start on their daunting task: cleaning the thousands of specimens both wet and dry, taking inventory and choosing researchers and students to return specimens they have taken out on loan.

All of the specimens shown to Life! by collections manager Kelvin Lim, in his 40s, do not usually go on public display.

He explains: “Type specimens are the original specimen which the species is described from. We usually don’t display or lend type specimens. Especially when something is known from only one or two specimens, it’s quite precious.”

The geography and sociology graduate from NUS has been working at the museum since 1991. An exhibition manager of the public gallery when it opened in 2001, he was in charge of its layout and design. One of his main interests is in documenting the diversity of fishes, amphibians, reptiles and mammals found in Singapore.

He shows Life! a drawer full of three-striped squirrels that are extinct here. When packed tightly, dozens of the dark brown creatures can fit into a single drawer. The reason why most of the animal specimens are still flat and a practical one.

Mr Lim says: “They are preserved in such a way that you can store them in a small space. If you were to mount them in a life-like pose, one specimen would take up a lot of space. When they’re flat, you can stack them up and put them in a box.”

Specimens that need to be stored in ethanol, such as fish, are kept in a different roots on the floor below. The museum also receives calls to pick upRodill -including pangolins - once or twice a year.

The collection has grown from 160,000 in 1988 - when President Tony Tan, then education minister, opened the Zoological Reference Collection at the NUS science faculty - to half a million today.

The new building will be located about 850m from the current premises. NUS has raised $46 million for a purpose-built museum that will house one of the largest collections of South-East Asian animals in the region.

But there is still some way to go. The museum needs another $10 million in endowment for post-doctors, fellowships and staff costs. Members of the public can also make this fund-raising drive at https://nstre.nus.edu.sg/