BEHIND THE SPECIMENS

Natural specimens of plants and other wildlife are presented to visitors at the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum, but it is often a mystery who collected them. The museum’s researchers share some stories of the origins with Gena Soh.

Accidental pioneer

CHRISTOPHER SMITH

Sea hunk

After accidentally missing the boat to the Spice (Malacca) Islands by six days, a man known as Christopher Smith, whose name has largely been lost to history, decided to go on a nature expedition around the Strait of Malacca. It was during his six-month expedition that he stumbled upon “Bent Island” off the Straits of Singapore – known today as Pulau Senang, 13km off the Republic’s southern coast.

It was on this island that he made the first known collection of a plant in Singapore, Podocarpus polyanthemos or sea hunk, in 1706. This also makes the specimen the oldest natural history material known from Singapore.

Surprise naturalist

SIR Stamford Raffles

Green broadbill

While Sir Stamford Raffles is mostly known as colonial Singapore’s founder, he had another surprising occupation – as one of Singapore’s first naturalists.

In June 1819 he and three other naturalists came here to collect and record the fauna. This month-long trip took place shortly after he signed a treaty that brought Singapore into Britain’s sphere of influence in January that year and its first biodiversity collecting expedition.

It was during this effort that a few of Singapore’s first animals and birds were collected and recorded, such as the Raffles’ banded langur and green broadbill.

War-time entomologist

GRAHAM HOWARTH

Palm king butterfly

The thought of being a prisoner of war brings up ghastly images of starving, unshaven men huddled in the dark. But Graham Howarth, an English entomologist and member of the Royal Army Medical Corps, spent his years as a prisoner of war in Asia collecting and breeding butterflies for study after World War II.

Using cigarette tins, he preserved, smuggled and eventually took back to England the collection of more than 1,500 butterflies and moths, as well as 100 other insects.

Before his capture in Singapore, he collected insects while undertaking anti-malarial work in Kuala Penyu and New Sono. Among his collection was the palm king butterfly, a specimen of which he collected in Bolkat Timah before the fall of Singapore in 1942.