

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](#).



A specimen of sea teak collected by Christopher Smith in the first known collection of a plant in Singapore in 1796.

Accidental pioneer

CHRISTOPHER SMITH
Sea teak

After accidentally missing his boat to the Spice (Maluku) 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 this six-month expedition that he stumbled upon "Barn 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 polystachyus* or sea teak, in 1796. This also makes the specimen the oldest natural history material known from Singapore.



The green broadbill is among the wildlife recorded during Sir Stamford Raffles' biodiversity collecting expedition to Singapore in June 1819.

Surprise naturalist

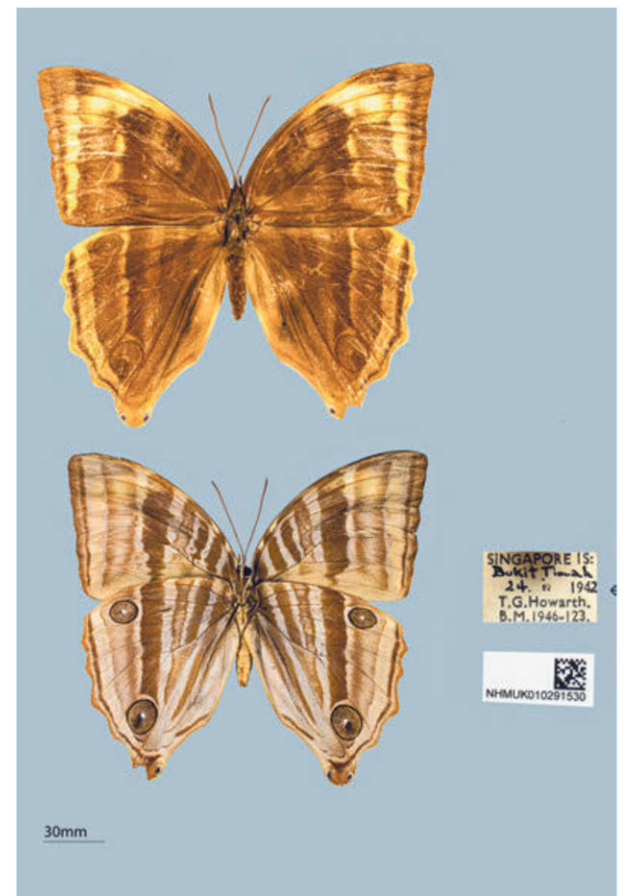
SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES
Green broadbill

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 native 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 is Singapore's 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 bird.



A specimen of the palm king butterfly collected by Graham Howarth in Bukit Timah before the fall of Singapore in 1942. PHOTOS: SIGNIFY

War-time entomologist

GRAHAM HOWARTH
Palm king butterfly

The thought of being a prisoner of war brings up ghastly images of starving inmates yearning for home, 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 his 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 Kranji and Nee Soon. Among his collection was the palm king butterfly, a specimen of which he collected in Bukit Timah before the fall of Singapore in 1942.