

# Out to the Jungle at 9

By Anne Pinto Rodrigues

“Breakfast at 8. Out to the jungle at 9.” wrote British naturalist, Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913) to his mother, in an 1854 letter from Singapore. He went on to propose the evolutionary theory of natural selection (independently of Charles Darwin) in the middle of his eight-year stay in Southeast Asia. Very simply put, natural selection means that the species with the more favourable adaptations will survive in the long term, whereas the ones with the less favourable traits will become extinct.

In March 1854, the self-taught Wallace left Britain on a Peninsular & Oriental steamship, bound for the Far East. After six weeks at sea, he arrived in Singapore on 18 April 1854 and used the island as a base where he stayed several times, for a total of 228 days, during his long stint in Southeast Asia.

From the Dairy Farm area alone, Wallace is believed to have collected over 700 species of beetles. Today, a one-kilometre track in the Dairy Farm Nature Park, named the ‘Wallace Trail’, commemorates his time in Singapore. He also collected many specimens of local birds, including the multi-coloured bee-eaters, Asian fairy bluebirds, red crowned barbets, among others. Wallace collected multiple specimens of the same species – for study and his personal collection as well as for sale to museums and rich patrons back in Britain.



An Asian brown flycatcher specimen from the Wallace Collection, now at the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum. Photo courtesy Dr Tan Heok Hui, Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum

During his time in Southeast Asia, Wallace undertook over 50 separate journeys, amounting to approximately 14,000 miles – from Peninsular Malaysia to the far-flung islands of the Dutch East Indies (modern-day Indonesia) as well as to Papua New Guinea. During this span, he and his assistants collected over 125,000 specimens of mammals, birds and insects, of which over 1,000 species were unknown to man at the time.



The Wallace Trail as seen today in the Dairy Farm Nature Park, photo by the author

On 8 February 1862, Wallace returned to England. He published his much-awaited book *The Malay Archipelago* in 1869. Wallace opens Chapter II (on Singapore) with the comment “Few places are more interesting to a traveller from Europe than the town and island of Singapore.” He goes on to astutely describe colonial Singapore and the various communities that called it home, such as “the native Malays who are mostly boatmen and fishermen and form the main body of the police” or that the “great mass of the population is Chinese including some of the wealthiest merchants, the agriculturists of the interior, and most of the mechanics and labourers”. This scientific travelogue was said to be the favourite bedtime reading of British novelist Joseph Conrad.

Wallace’s collection of specimens is particularly significant to Singapore as it is one of the oldest records of the species that were originally present on the island. A bird specimen from Wallace’s collection, an Asian brown flycatcher from Malacca procured by one of his associates, is said to be one of the oldest and most valuable exhibit at the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum.

Wallace was extremely concerned about the disappearing forests in Singapore, natural habitats that were being cleared to make way for plantations. He made a strong case for conservation when he wrote in an 1863 letter, “Future ages will certainly look back upon us as a people so immersed in the pursuit of wealth as to be blind to higher considerations. They will charge us with having culpably allowed the destruction of some of those records of Creation which we had it in our power to preserve.” Truer words were never spoken.

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**Anne Pinto Rodrigues** recently walked the Wallace Trail and was fascinated by its rich flora and fauna. She writes about interesting places and people on her blog No Roads Barred. ([www.noroadbarred.wordpress.com](http://www.noroadbarred.wordpress.com))

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