

## Scientific treasure comes down from the attic

By Roger Highfield, Science Editor

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These are the priceless, long-lost treasures of Alfred Russel Wallace, one of the greatest scientists of his day, whose contribution to scientific understanding of evolution rivals that of Charles Darwin.

A newly discovered collection owned by Wallace, perhaps the best known scientist in the world when he died in 1913, has been given to the Natural History Museum in London.

Wallace had sold his private collection around 1870 and kept a few boxes of "showy things" as mementos of his tropical adventures.

Last September, Wallace's grandson Richard rediscovered them, badly damaged by insect pests, in his attic where they had been stored for decades.

A museum curator, Dr George Beccaloni, has meticulously glued the specimens back together and he believes they are now 90 per cent intact. They will be available to researchers who want to study them.

Wallace is widely credited as being the co-discoverer of the theory of natural selection with Darwin. They jointly wrote the 1858 paper *On the Tendency of Species to Form Varieties and On the Perpetuation of Varieties and Species by Natural Means of Selection*, which preceded by one year Darwin's seminal work *On the Origin of Species*.

When the men were alive, it was called the Darwin-Wallace theory. But few people today have heard of Wallace and the theory is now always attributed to Darwin, said Dr Beccaloni. In fact, he said, Wallace could have usurped Darwin because he was the first to have his ideas ready for publication.

The four drawers hold 219 specimens, including beetles, bugs and stick insects, which Wallace collected in the 1850s and 1860s as he travelled through the Malay Archipelago and East Indies (now Malaysia and Indonesia).

The collection features some of the most spectacular insect species that Wallace discovered, such as the huge longhorn beetle *Batocera wallacei*, plus several of the specimens illustrated by woodcuts in Wallace's famous travel book *The Malay Archipelago*, published in 1869 and still in print.

Dr Beccaloni said: "It is incredible that these historically important specimens have now been rediscovered. This collection is a major acquisition for the Natural History Museum and it will be of considerable interest to the many people fascinated by this great man."

The find forms a kind of Rosetta Stone, a reference for identifying other Wallace specimens and decoding his system of labelling, he said.

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A member of NHM staff studies the restored collection

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