ANIMAL MIGRATION

Preparation work has begun on Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research’s move to the new, $46 million purpose-built Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum. Even though it will be ready only in the second half of next year, curators (from left) Chua Keng Soon, Lua Hui Kheng, Kelvin Lim and Tan Siong Kiat have been busy getting the 500,000 specimens ready for the migration. Visitors have until the end of this month to visit the Raffles Museum’s public gallery at the National University of Singapore.

ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG
Animal specimens prepped for move

Curators at NUS museum will pack up collection after it closes on March 31

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ITS new home will not be ready until later next year, but the 100,000 specimens at the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research are already being prepped by their guardians for the big move.

The museum's public gallery, which opened in 2001, will welcome its last visitors on March 31 before curators get down to some serious packing.

Work actually started on preparing for the move as early as last year, after the National University of Singapore (NUS) managed to raise $46 million from private and public donors for a purpose-built museum that will house one of the largest collections of South-east Asian animals in the region.

"This building is 25 years old. The collection has expanded a lot since," said Mr Kelvin Lim, curator of invertebrates. He has been with the museum, at the Department of Biological Sciences, since 1991.

The four curators will now busy themselves with cleaning the specimens, taking inventories and chasing researchers and students to return specimens they have taken out on loan.

They have accepted that not all that went out will be able to make their way home.

"If people don’t return them, there’s not much you can do," said Mr Lim. "Some researchers die too."

But the highly valuable century-old specimens inherited from the British - as well as extinct and endangered animals - stay in the custody of the museum.

Even curators like Ms Lua Hui Kheng, who has been tending to this collection since the 1970s, thinks twice about handling them sometimes.

"If you’re not in the mood, don’t do it," said the mollusc and insect expert.

Many of the mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, fish, crustaceans and other invertebrates in the collection are seasoned “travellers”.

Some originated from the Raffles Museum, founded in 1849, which later became the National Museum.

When the latter decided not to focus on natural history, the collection was given to the Singapore Science Centre in 1970 and then to the former University of Singapore.

It has moved from five World War II huts where the National University Hospital now stands, to the university’s Bukit Timah campus, to then Nanyang University’s library building, and finally to its current home at NUS.

The caretakers are glad that the collection will be going to a bigger, better home - the 7,500 sq m Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum, named after the philanthropist because of a sizeable donation from the Lee Foundation, on the NUS campus.

But while the new museum will have about 10 times more gallery space than the current one, that is hardly good news for the curators.

"You actually don’t want the specimens to be shown, because you’re scared they will deteriorate," said Ms Lua.

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Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research’s curator of invertebrates Kelvin Lim holding a bottle containing the skull of a black giant squirrel. The collection will be housed in the new Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG