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## 2003's new faces, fins and claws

Dozens of new species were discovered by Singapore scientists last year

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SOME unusual new faces have helped ring in this New Year - fish, frogs, prawns, spiders, snakes, flies and other fauna.

Despite Singapore's urban sprawl, researchers have discovered several dozen new species of such creatures over the past year that are native to the island.

The bulk of them are insects, the least studied of creatures here.

'This tells us that even in Singapore, where we don't have much forest or mangrove, the diversity of animal life is much greater than we give it credit for,' said Associate Professor Peter Ng, director of the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research at the National University of Singapore.

Such creatures are being found all the time, he added. Two new species of prawns, for example, were found in streams in the central catchment area, and dozens of new species of flies were spotted in swamps and forests.

Local researches also found other new creatures during expeditions in the region, which is widely acknowledged as one of the least studied biodiversity hotspots.

According to conservative estimates, the planet is home to between five and 10 million animal and plant species.

Although 30 to 40 new species are uncovered weekly, only 1.8 million or so have been discovered by science over the last 250 years.

It is believed that scientists are aware of fewer than one in 10 animals in existence in South-east Asia.

Scientists are also turning conventional wisdom on its head by relooking at old classifications with the help of new techniques, such as DNA profiling.

For example, one famous giant freshwater prawn - a popular food item - had farmers scratching their heads because it sometimes refused to mate.

The problem was solved with the recent discovery by NUS graduate student Daisy Wowor that what was long thought to be one species was actually two species that looked alike.

'After we found this out, we realised that getting the two to breed was like matching cats and dogs,' said Prof Ng.

'In hindsight it was obvious that there were two species, but we found out only when someone took the trouble to study them in detail. And we're opening up these pandora's boxes all the time.'

Stressing the importance of such research, he added: 'The region is a gold mine of undiscovered species. And we're trying to find out as much as we can about them before they disappear.'

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