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Feb 6, 2006

## 150 new species of flies found

**Belgian expert discovers them in one year of research here**

**By Chang Ai-Lien**  
**SCIENCE CORRESPONDENT**

CALL him lord of the flies.



**FLYING HIGH: Dr Grootaert, who has spent the past year in Singapore, is a specialist in long-legged flies.**

In a single year here, Dr Patrick Grootaert has uncovered an unprecedented 150 new species of long-legged flies - to add to the 44 already known to exist.

'This is really a large number, especially for such a small country,' said Dr Grootaert, curator of flies at the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences who has spent the past year in Singapore. 'For a biologist, it's a dream come true.'

Dr Grootaert, 53, is a specialist in long-legged flies, which with their large greenish eyes are some of the more attractive members of the fly kingdom. They are also its assassins, and have developed large mouth parts to crush insects and pierce them to suck out their juices.

Some of the richest repositories of his six-legged treasures were the Central Catchment Area, Sungei Buloh and Chek Jawa. The mangroves here are home to perhaps the world's richest collection of long-legged flies, he said.

'I was so surprised to find so many species here, with different communities living in microhabitats just 500m apart. We are just scratching the surface and the information is already overwhelming.'

He said the vast spectrum of creatures still undiscovered in tiny pockets of biodiversity here makes it even more critical to save what is left.

'Singapore is like an open laboratory. All you need is a short drive and you get to see insects in their natural habitats, displaying and feeding,' he said.

This is not the first time flies have been under the microscope here.

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- Tough action hits pirates hard
- Student flung from motorbike dies
- Navy man killed in car driven by friend
- Youth arrests up
- Retailers unaware of customers' needs: survey
- Students take on the weather for national study
- Chingay Parade rolls into Ang Mo Kio
- S'porean named new Anglican Archbishop
- Fiery end for junk
- Bridge issues narrowed down to those that can 'take off': Syed Hamid
- [150 new species of flies found](#)
- [Three of a kind](#)
- [Let's talk about GOING GREEN](#)
- [Eco-friendly? Far more pressing](#)

In 2003, a group of researchers was given \$250,000 by the United States National Science Foundation to study flies. The five-year project, which started in 2004, is part of a massive international effort, called Tree Of Life, to document the world's biodiversity.

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Technology is one way to save the earth

Surprisingly little is known about flies, even though they have been a key part of the earth's fauna for at least 250 million years.

If only everyone puts in more effort...

About 120,000 species of flies and mosquitoes - which belong to the same group as they have only one pair of functional wings (other insects have two) - have been discovered.

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However, scientists estimate that millions of species remain unknown, particularly in this region.

Many will never be known. Singapore has lost about half its animal species in the past 200 years.

A National University of Singapore (NUS) study in 2003 estimated that at least 881 of 3,196 recorded species have vanished forever. Taking into account the probable number of animals here before detailed records were made in the late 1800s, the study predicted that the actual figure is even higher.

Singapore's nature reserves, which make up 0.25 per cent of the island's land area, are home to many of the native plants and animals here. Because of its tropical location, the variety of species that have survived is still rich enough to draw scientists from all over the world hoping to unearth new flora and fauna.

Specimens of the flies discovered by Dr Grootaert are housed at the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research at NUS.

Museum director Peter Ng is one of many scientists who believe less than 10 per cent of the animals of South-east Asia are known to science. Dr Grootaert's work was yet more evidence of the multitude of creatures just waiting to be discovered, he said.

'We must go all out to save what we have left.'

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