

TALES FROM THE CRYPT

The Body-snatchers

Once in a while, our forests and seas reveal their hidden animal secrets to our great surprise and dismay. For when we do witness the surprises, it is usually animals which turn up dead, as a result of roadkill, injury or old age.

The body is still important - it is an important record of the species' continued presence in Singapore, and fresh specimens provide clues about diet from stomach contents. DNA is also easily extracted from fresh internal organs. All important in conservation work, we do try our best to retrieve these carcasses.

Getting the carcass can be tricky! Though I once reached the scene of roadkill at Adam Road within an hour of the phone call, the pangolin (a scaly anteater) had disappeared! Ex-graduate student Alvin Wong once separated the head of a dead

dugong at Changi beach, toiling in the rain. Too smelly for the car, he hid the head for retrieval later. It too disappeared! Both occasions, workers from the Ministry of the Environment (ENV) had cleaned up the scene by early morning.

In recent years, we publicised the need to retrieve such dead animals through our electronic newsletter *Habitatnews*, ensured that we were better prepared when retrieving bodies, and got the help of volunteers and the ENV or NParks unit in charge of the area. And the group of us who do this call ourselves "the Bodysnatchers"!

The year 2001 saw more bodies recovered. A rare leopard cat roadkill was recovered (June) - the first such incident in more than 30 years, three beautiful, migratory Blue-winged Pittas which mistook glass panes for the sky and bashed their heads against the hard glass (October), we extracted a dugong

skull from a 5-day old rotting carcass off East Coast (July) and a fresh young pangolin roadkill was collected off Jalan Bahar (November).

Singapore is full of surprising wildlife, and when you encounter a wild animal that has met with an untimely demise, call us at the museum at 6874-5082 and fill in the roadkill report at the webpage. We'll try to convert that specimen into a valuable record. It will remain within the museum of RMBR for a long time. Having lasted more than 150 years, that's not an idle promise!

Once in a while, we get pleasant news. I received a call about a live pangolin wandering in a friend's garden. I contacted one of our *Bodysnatchers* in NParks, Benjamin Lee. He retrieved the animal and it was released back into its forest home!

-N. Sivasothi

