

South-east Asia

On an adventure in the Malay archipelago, **Juliet Rix** follows the path of a Victorian naturalist who put forward a novel theory about the animal world. And no, he wasn't Charles Darwin



A natural selection of wild wonders

There was a rustling in the trees and a glimpse of creamy-white feathers, lacelike through the leaves. A flash of metallic green and a beak. A louder rustle and "There!": Wallace's standardwing bird of paradise is parachuting through the air, feathers fanned, "standards" flying, in full display.

It is rare to see a bird of paradise so easily. We were just 10 minutes' walk from the road on the Indonesian "Spice Island" of Halmahera. We were travelling in the footsteps of Alfred Russel Wallace, the British naturalist who first described this extraordinary bird and who, here on Halmahera, formulated the theory of evolution by natural selection. The letter he wrote to Charles Darwin on the subject was read at the first public presentation of the theory (which was then credited to both men) at the Royal Society in London in 1858.

Wallace's theory was the culmination of eight years' travelling in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, observing wildlife and collecting 125,000 specimens (thousands of them new species), many of which are now in London's Natural History Museum. In his thoroughly readable book *The Malay Archipelago*, Wallace describes the region as: "to the ordinary Englishman... perhaps the least known part of the globe". Today it is

of course much more accessible and I joined a new tour led by Wallace scholar Dr George Beccaloni and his arachnologist wife, Jan. David Attenborough said of Wallace: "There is no more admirable character in the history of science," and our trip had something of the Attenborough epic about it.

We started, like Wallace, in Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo. Wallace spent many months here and much admired the local Dayak tribes. He found them scrupulously honest and non-violent... apart from their ritual headhunting. Our excellent local guide, Rives, told us that he remembers when the last fresh head

A Borneo anglehead lizard, below; a female and baby orang-utan, right. The Malays made the connection between these great apes and man long before the evolutionary theory

arrived in his village - which gave an extra frisson to our visit to a still-inhabited local longhouse. In the community headhouse, a metal cage swung gently from the ceiling as its contents of smoked human heads stared empty out. I was grateful that we would not be spending the night beneath these macabre talismans, as Wallace once did.

The Dayaks retain many traditional beliefs, including fear of the rafflesia, the world's largest flower. Antonia, our jungle guide at Gunung Gading National Park, was robust about such things and lead us to this rare stemless flower in full bloom. Its weird fleshy petals, like great lumps of knobbled orange rubber, surrounded a cavernous flytrap giving off a whiff of rotten meat. No wonder the Dayaks believe it can steal your spirit away.

Antonia was Attenborough in disguise. She pointed out a handsome spiky-backed Borneo anglehead lizard watching us through bright blue eyes, and a flying lizard so perfectly camouflaged that when I looked away I could not find him again without help. We saw termite nests and colourful lantern bugs; strangler fig trees, sandpaper leaves ("don't use them as toilet paper") and rattan, known as the "wait-a-minute" plant for its tendency to catch on clothing. Just as most people had set off back to base, Antonia swung her laser pointer into



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Essentials

Getting there

In Wallace's Footsteps in the Malay Archipelago is a 2 1/2-week tour run by Jon Baines Tours (020 7223 9485; jonbainestours.co.uk). The tour includes all accommodation and transport through Singapore, Sarawak, Sulawesi, Bali, Ternate and Halmaheira, national park entrance fees and most all meals for £3,720 or £4,278, with international flights from London.

Staying there

Weda Bay Resort, Halmaheira (0062 812 443 3754; wedaresort.com). Six one and two-bedroom environmentally friendly bungalows on a remote seashore, plus an open-sided communal lounge/restaurant. Private bungalow with three excellent meals and laundry from £120 a night.
Park Regis Hotel, Singapore (0065 6818 8888; parkregissingapore.com). Smart, well-designed four-star hotel conveniently located in the central business district, minutes' walk from China Town and across the road from

the Quays. Doubles from £85.

The Bulakan, Ubud, Bali (0062 361 849 3377; bulakanboutique.resortubud.com). A boutique resort on the edge of Ubud with 24 large and comfortable rooms overlooking a very pleasant central pool. Small spa. Friendly, helpful staff. Doubles from £50.

Wallace's iconic animals

Wallace's standardwing bird of paradise One of the thousands of species first described by Wallace, this remarkable bird of paradise is endemic to just three islands in the North Moluccas.
Proboscis monkey This large, comical monkey, right, is endangered and endemic to Borneo.
Orang-utan Wallace prized the orang-utan very highly and called it mostly by its Dayak name, Mias. There are two species, the **Sumatran** and the



Bornean orang-utan

White cockatoo This endangered species, endemic to the North Moluccas, is typical of the Australasian wildlife to the east of the Wallace Line.
Wallace's golden birdwing butterfly, above. First described by Wallace, who calls it "one of the most gorgeously coloured butterflies in the world". We saw many stunning butterflies and moths, but this large endangered species eluded us.



the canopy, where to my delight a patch of reddish fur morphed into a giant squirrel stepping lightly along a branch.

There was more activity in the trees at Bako National Park, an area of mangrove, beach and cliff forest at the end of a pleasant boat ride. We were welcomed by proboscis monkeys, sitting in the trees peacefully munching. They are known in Malay as *orang Belanda* (Dutchmen) and the association with Westerners is unfortunately obvious: the monkeys have large noses in white faces above pot bellies and knobby knees.

Bako was the perfect place for lazy wildlife watchers. "It is no good being a good trekker here," we were warned, "the farther you go from HQ, the less wildlife you'll see." So we wandered in a radius of a couple of hundred metres finding wild bearded pigs, skink, a foot-long millipede, an Asian leaf turtle in a swampy pool, a horned spider... and, stars of the show, two furry flying lemurs who had hung themselves on a tree trunk to sleep.

Among Wallace's most prized

Sarawak specimens were orang-utans. The Malays made the connection between these great apes and man long before evolutionary theory: orang-utan means "man of the forest". We stood in a jungle clearing in Semonggoh Orang-utan Centre as a local man hooted and cooed. Nothing happened. We had almost given up when the oranges



were suddenly right above us: a female and a baby hanging laconically from a branch.

The viewing seemed distinctly two-way and it was heartbreaking to think of Wallace having to shoot and skin these fabulous beasts to gain his specimens. On one occasion he killed an orang only to find its month-old baby, which clung tightly to Wallace's beard. For months he cared for "the most wonderful baby I ever saw" until it finally died. Our only shots, thank goodness, were from our cameras.

It was in Sarawak that Wallace wrote his first essay on the origin of species, published in London in 1855. It would be a few more years before he alighted on the mechanism of natural selection, but in the



meantime he made his other most enduring discovery.

Then as now, Singapore was the regional hub of trade and transport, but Wallace could not find a boat direct to Sulawesi (eastern Indonesia) and was forced to island hop. He stopped first in Bali, which, even then, he considered too developed to be of interest, a view he regretted the moment he arrived on neighbouring Lombok. The islands are separated by a mere 22 miles but Wallace found that the wildlife "differed as much as those

Clockwise from top: storm clouds over Bali, which has typically south-east Asian fauna; the feared rafflesia flower; and Alfred Russel Wallace

of South America and Africa". In Bali (and to its west) the animals are typically south-east Asian with copious monkeys and squirrels, while on Lombok (and east) they are Australasian, rich in marsupials and cockatoos. The divide is still known as The Wallace Line.

We flew over this invisible boundary (now understood to be the border between two tectonic plates) to Sulawesi, and thence to the Moluccas, the "Spice Isles". We landed on Wallace's "earthquake-tortured island of Ternate", a conical volcano with cloves and nutmeg drying in the sun. In the congested strip of coastal habitation, we visited a large graffiti of Wallace's bearded visage on the local football stadium and George posed on a tiny street named after his hero, before crossing the water to Halmaheira.

At our first stop by the side of the road, three perfect white cockatoos swooped past and settled in a tree to feed. There could now be no doubt that we had crossed the line. Hornbills followed, a long-billed crow and a stunning endemic blue-and-white kingfisher – and that was just the first five minutes.

Halmaheira was the place on our itinerary least changed since Wallace's day. It has no industry, little tourism and significant

primary forest in which new species – mammals and reptiles as well as insects – are still discovered. Some of this forest is owned and protected by Rob Sinke, a Dutchman married to a local. It was to his eco-friendly Weda Resort that we headed.

Weda Resort's handful of houses are built just as Wallace describes his own Halmaheira home – a base of stone followed by bamboo and sago palm. We spent three days doing much as Wallace did, watching spectacular birds and staring at extraordinary bugs. Some of us pushed through jungle unbreached for months or years. Rob's guides hacking out the way. George held up praying mantises and handed me huge stick insects. He and Jan found Technicolor spiders and vast day-flying moths that – to their delight – they could not immediately identify.

At Weda, the food was delicious, the mosquito nets effective and we were all in good health. Wallace was not so lucky, though you could say his illness was a boon to science. It was while confined to bed in Halmaheira that he had his epiphany; as soon as the fever lifted he wrote to Charles Darwin. It was this letter that prompted Darwin to publish his own theory – and the rest is history.

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