

Accessing museum specimens for research

Natural science collections and colonialism

Natural science collections can tell us a lot about biodiversity around the world, how it has changed over time, and how to help conserve it. One of the legacies of colonialism is that museums around the world contain specimens collected from once-colonised countries. Unfortunately, these collections are not always accessible to people in the countries they were taken from. This can impact upon environmental conservation in previously colonised countries.




The type specimen of Pribby (*Rondeletia buxifolia*), endemic to Montserrat, and critically endangered. Specimen BM000927806. © The Trustees of the Natural History Museum, London (licensed under <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

Accessing museum data and specimens

There are thousands of museums over the world, many of which have not completely documented or digitised their collections. Some museum material has been well documented internally, but their associated data may not be accessible externally.

Most museum curators will try their hardest to help if you require access to material in their museums. However, there have been cuts to funding in UK museums and elsewhere, which have reduced the number of natural science curators employed by museums. Many museums have one curator to care for all collections, who may lack specialist knowledge. With the exception of larger national collections, many curators also have roles to fulfil beyond collections management. If you contact a curator and do not receive a response, please persist. It is the duty of museum curators to facilitate access to the collections they house, and most natural science curators are particularly keen for this material to be beneficial for biodiversity conservation.



Extinct species: Cayman Thrush

The Cayman Thrush (*Turdus ravidus*) is the national bird of the Cayman Islands, and was endemic. It was common on Grand Cayman before the twentieth century, but the last sighting was in 1938, and they are now extinct. After the species was discovered, it was popular with specimen collectors, and Cayman Thrushes were sent to museums in North America and Europe.

Despite being the national bird, preserved remains of Cayman Thrushes cannot be seen in the Cayman Islands. A legacy of colonialism means that they can only be seen in overseas institutions, meaning it is difficult for Caymanians to learn about and from this part of their natural heritage.

A specimen of the Grand Cayman Thrush (*Turdus ravidus*), an extinct endemic species, and the Cayman Islands' national bird. Specimen number 1925.12.27.5 / NHMUK ecatalogue 3457673.
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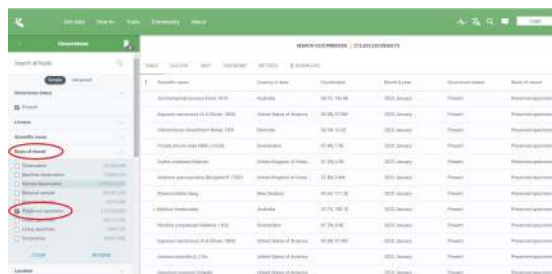
GBIF: Global Biodiversity Information Facility

A key barrier to accessing museum specimens is finding out where they exist. A good place to start is [GBIF](https://www.gbif.org). This provides data on millions of biological records, including specimens in museums. However, not all museums have shared their data on GBIF, and many have only shared some of their data. You can limit your search by geography, taxonomy and record type. **To find museum specimens using GBIF:**

1. Go to [gbif.org](https://www.gbif.org); click on 'occurrences'



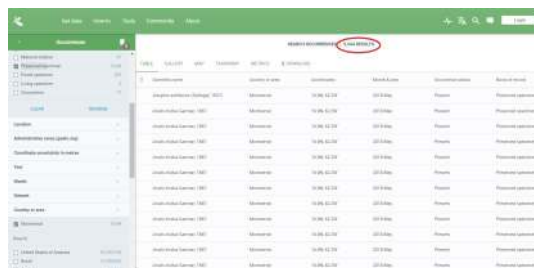
2. In 'basis of record' menu, choose 'preserved specimen'



3. In 'country or area', search for your territory

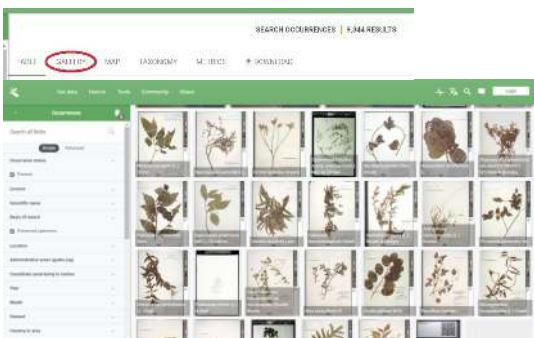


4. This will give you a table of results, and specimen total

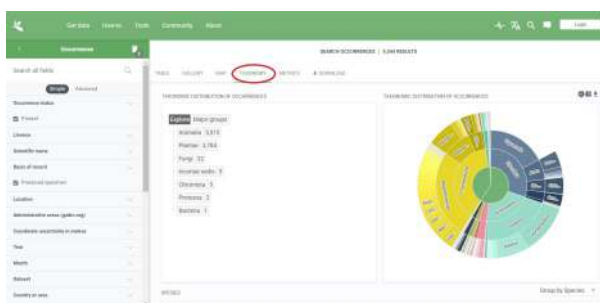


From here you can explore further:

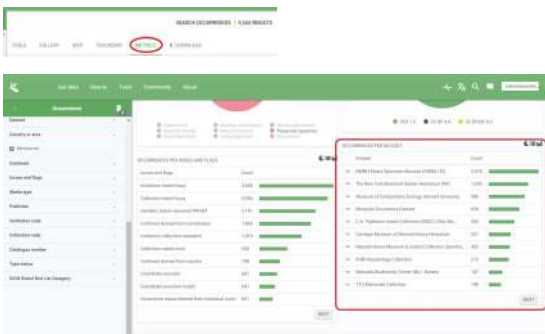
The 'gallery' view shows specimens with photos



The 'taxonomy' view shows the range of species collected



The 'metrics' view show where specimens are stored



Following links to institutions allows you to contact them to find out more about their collections.

Many institutions allow free use of images; citation and copyright information are provided.