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Long live cockroaches, man's uninvited fellow travellers - Ed Baker

Posted by [Rose](#) on 23-Sep-2010 14:16:20

Ed Baker is one of the Museum's entomology researchers working in the Darwin Centre. One of his special interests is cockroaches. Ed will be at the Past and Present Insects Station in Fossil Way on Science Uncovered night, with a selection of cockroaches and insects.

Among the insects I'll be showcasing at the Science Uncovered night will be a collection of live cockroaches and rare ancient cockroach fossils. Why some may ask, when out of all insects, cockroaches are unique in the level of disgust and hatred they can provoke?

P.B. Cornwell actually started his 2-volume work on cockroaches with "The Cockroach is probably the most obnoxious insect known to man." Many would agree.

There is, however, more to cockroaches than being a pest in our homes and workplaces. The truth is that less than 1% of all cockroach species can be considered pests.

The rest live mainly in the tropical and subtropical regions of the world and have no association with humans. They may be metallic green, be active during the day or have spots that glow in the dark. Some leave their egg case (ootheca) loose on the soil for the young to fend for themselves. Others incubate it internally in a special pouch. In a few species the young nymphs live on their mother's back. There are even a few species that pair for life and spend 2 years caring for a single brood. This is an incredible diversity.



Therea petiveriana, the Domino Cockroach (pictured above) is one of the live cockroaches Ed will showcase at Science Uncovered. It can be kept as a pet.



The oldest known cockroaches lived over 300 million years ago. They have survived several mass extinctions, although reports of them surviving nuclear attack are almost always exaggerated (compared to many insects they are very poor at surviving in highly radioactive environments).

At Science Uncovered I'll be bringing this fossil specimen of mine, a **cockroach in Baltic amber that is 44 million years old**. On the night, I'll be joined by palaeontologist David Nicholson, who will also present some 100-million-year-old insect fossil specimens.

A few cockroaches have adapted to life alongside humans. The German Cockroach, *Blattella germanica*, didn't originate from Germany but from North Africa. It probably first came to Europe on Greek or Phoenician trade ships, and survived for

centuries in southern Russia. With an increase in trade between this region and Western Europe following the Thirty Years War, its range began to increase. Large scale international commerce has facilitated its spread across the globe.

Just when cockroaches first became associated with humanity is currently unknown. But since then our worlds have been linked – often in a state of physical and chemical warfare.

Throughout the world they play important and fascinating roles in a variety of different ecosystems. Perhaps it is time to review our relationship with these incredible insects – man's uninvited fellow traveller.

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