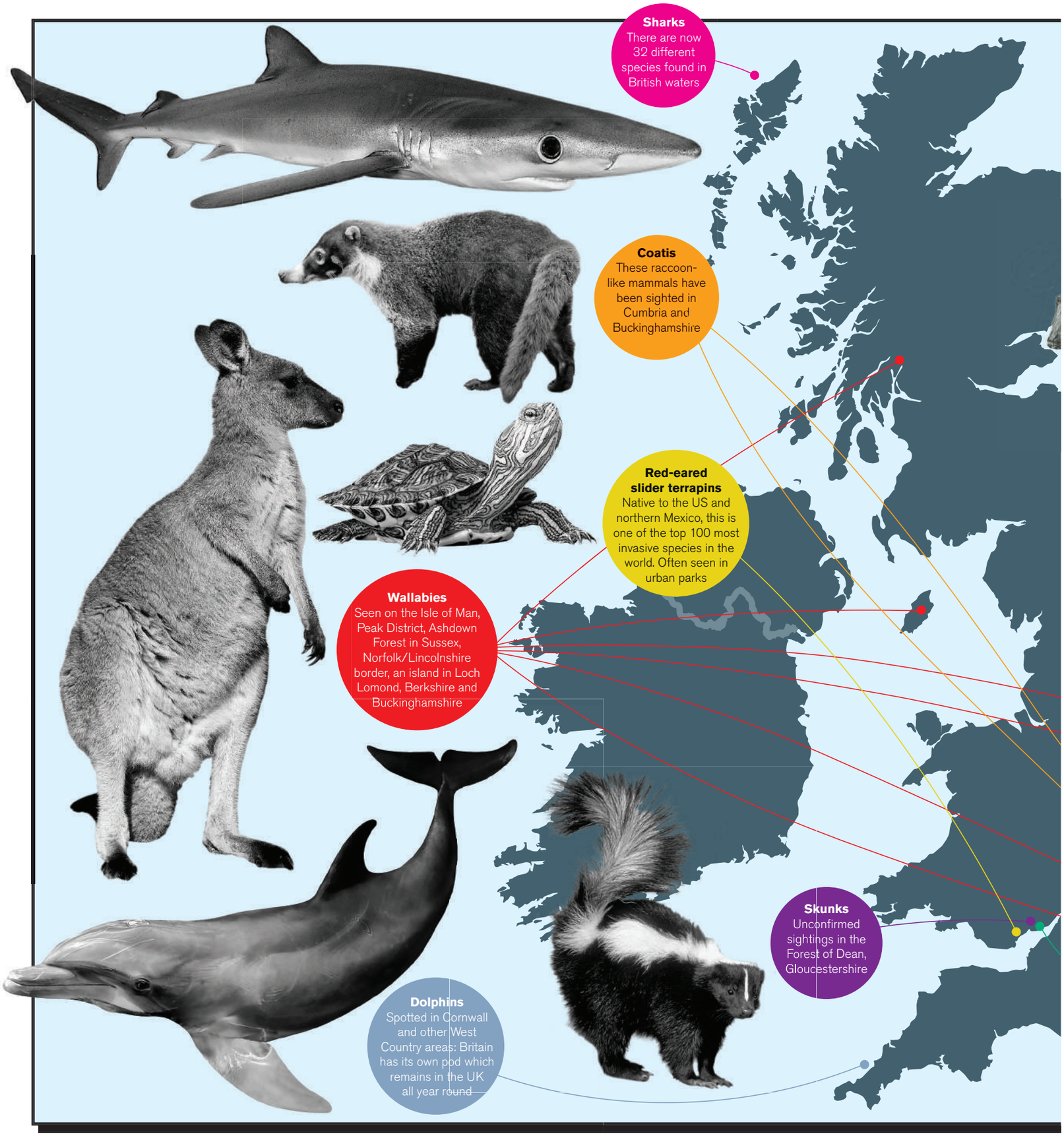
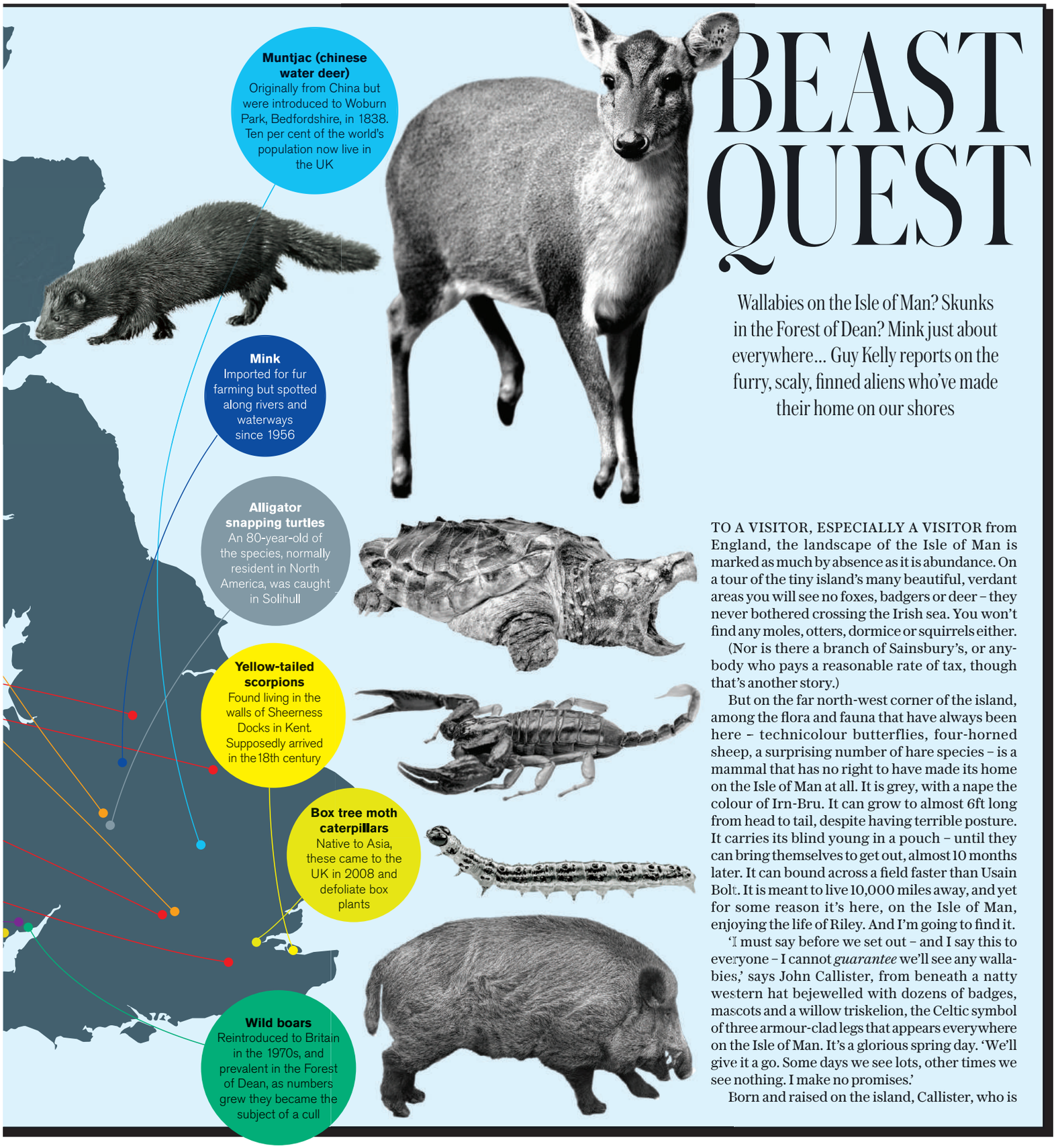


BEAST QUEST

Wallabies on the Isle of Man? Skunks in the Forest of Dean? Mink just about everywhere... Guy Kelly reports on the furry, scaly, finned aliens who've made their home on our shores



TO A VISITOR, ESPECIALLY A VISITOR from England, the landscape of the Isle of Man is marked as much by absence as it is abundance. On a tour of the tiny island's many beautiful, verdant areas you will see no foxes, badgers or deer – they never bothered crossing the Irish sea. You won't find any moles, otters, dormice or squirrels either.

(Nor is there a branch of Sainsbury's, or anybody who pays a reasonable rate of tax, though that's another story.)

But on the far north-west corner of the island, among the flora and fauna that have always been here – technicolour butterflies, four-horned sheep, a surprising number of hare species – is a mammal that has no right to have made its home on the Isle of Man at all. It is grey, with a nape the colour of Irn-Bru. It can grow to almost 6ft long from head to tail, despite having terrible posture. It carries its blind young in a pouch – until they can bring themselves to get out, almost 10 months later. It can bound across a field faster than Usain Bolt. It is meant to live 10,000 miles away, and yet for some reason it's here, on the Isle of Man, enjoying the life of Riley. And I'm going to find it.

'I must say before we set out – and I say this to everyone – I cannot *guarantee* we'll see any wallabies,' says John Callister, from beneath a natty western hat bejewelled with dozens of badges, mascots and a willow triskelion, the Celtic symbol of three armour-clad legs that appears everywhere on the Isle of Man. It's a glorious spring day. 'We'll give it a go. Some days we see lots, other times we see nothing. I make no promises.'

Born and raised on the island, Callister, who is

70, has a balding head under the hat, and a close white beard that surrounds a near permanent Tigger grin. He is himself an increasingly rare breed: a joiner and carpenter by trade, but with the auxiliary talents of a Swiss Army knife. Callister reckons he knows more about the Isle of Man's flowers than just about anybody on the planet, Latin names included – Latin names *especially*. He's also a poet, once serving as the official Manx Bard, and writes pub quizzes. He can weave just about anything from willow, but baskets and coffins are his speciality. Most people on the island know him or know of him, it seems, except they don't know him as John. Or Callister. They know him as Dog.

'It's because I can lick a certain part of my anatomy!' he shouts over the groan of his van's engine, after picking me up from Peel, the island's main fishing port, earlier in the day. A man of many talents indeed. 'No, not really. When I was at school I played a character called PC Bulldog in a play. Everyone called me Bulldog for a bit, then it became Dog and stuck. I figured I could resist it or go along with it.' Dog it is.

> They're one of around 3,000 invaders creeping and flying around these islands

As well as all his other pursuits, Dog leads nature walks in Ballaugh Curragh, an extraordinary wetland just north of Peel that's recognised by Unesco for its biodiversity. Once an ancient lake formed from an Ice Age depression, it is now a labyrinth of bog pools, marshy grassland, birch woodland and willow scrub, teeming with otherwise rare birds, butterflies and flora, and navigated by a lattice of natural and subtly man-made paths that Dog knows inside out.

It is also wallaby country. In 1965, when a wildlife park opened nearby, a red-necked wallaby named Wanda escaped from her enclosure and bounded around the island for almost a year before she was returned 'home'. The park evidently didn't improve its security and Wanda blazed a trail: numerous other escapes followed, and at some point a wild population was established. Now, the Isle of Man is the unlikely home to the largest wallaby population (somewhere between 80 and 100) in the northern hemisphere.

In the hours before meeting Dog, every person I encountered – admittedly just two taxi drivers and a hotel owner – had heard stories of the wallabies but hadn't ever actually seen one. With this and Dog's prior warning of disappointment in mind, I delicately (Dog has told us to keep our voices down, lest we spook them) pad into the Curragh. Will today be our day? Will we get a glimpse of this majestic Antipodean immigrant? Will I, a speculative visitor with an inflexible easyJet return booked for the next day, manage to overcome…

'There's one.'

Christ. Already?

'Shhh!'

Frantically whisper-shouting behind us, our photographer points into a dense patch of bog myrtle just off the path. There, staring directly back at us with an expression of almost weaponised indifference, is a wallaby. It seems we have come on a good day. A few feet further up the path are four more, sunning themselves in a clearing. Normally solitary, fully grown adults are surprisingly large and, being mainly active in the crepuscular hours, lazy in the mid-afternoon. We sit and watch the group for a while, before a blur of grey shapes crash past us at terrifying speed. It's another three or four on the move. I can see now why the collective noun is a mob.

Dog, who spotted his first wallaby when he began walking in the area to discover the flora decades ago, tells me they've flourished in this corner of the Isle of Man (other, much smaller colonies of escapees have been documented in Staffordshire, Sussex and on an island in Loch Lomond) thanks to a constellation of good fortune. There's a plentiful food supply – grass, moss, weeds – a healthy habitat and, as is the key with most non-native species, a distinct lack of predators. In southern and eastern Australia, where red-necked wallabies are native, jackals, foxes, crocodiles and snakes make life stressful for them. Here, the primary means of becoming an ex-wallaby is death by peat bog or an encounter with a car bumper.

Last year, the BBC reported that local police had been called to traffic accidents involving the creatures eight times since 2013, including one incident in which a couple were so taken by surprise that they swerved into a wall.

'This lot have probably adapted over the last 50 years, given it's colder here. Thicker fur maybe,' Dog says, before distracting himself with an orchid. 'Nobody even knows how many there are, but I've seen a lot of blind ones, which could be a by-product of inbreeding. It might also explain why they misjudge distances clearing the trenches.' (Later we discover four wallaby skeletons lodged in the sticky banks of one particularly wide ditch. Poor old Skip.)

From top John Callister, aka Dog, an expert on Manx flora and fauna – wallabies included – in Ballaugh Curragh; a wallaby suns itself there last month

To the layman, the success of a few wallaby communities around the British Isles makes them one of the most curious and surprising alien species of recent decades – which is understandable given their size, and helped by the fact we all know where they're meant to live.

In reality, however, they're just one of around 3,000 foreign invaders creeping, crawling, swimming, slithering and flying around these islands in 2019 – and one of the more harmless. Wallabies have been the cause of a few disgruntled farmers over the years, who deem them over-grazers or possible vectors for disease, but they come in peace: a minority just minding their own business.

'There's always a bit of a debate about whether something is an invasive species or just non-native or introduced. Invasive species generally cause harm, either to other wildlife or to humans, be that in a direct way or by harming our economy,' says Dan Eatherley, an environmental consultant and author of the upcoming *Invasive Aliens: Plants and Animals From Over There That Are Over Here*. 'Basically, invasive species ruin our fun. And there are so many of them.'

In general, alien species fit into one of three categories. The first are the curious and extraordinary creatures that are unlikely to spread far and wide, which is normally a relief. A lot of escaped zoo animals or exotic pets might fit into this group – the wallabies, the periodic roaming 'big cat' that rarely is, the Forest of Dean's reported skunks, historic sightings of raccoon-like coatis in the Lake District – but so would the 15,000-strong colony of yellow-tailed scorpions (two inches long with a sting no worse than a bee: relax) that have lived in the cracks of walls in Sheerness Docks in Kent since arriving on merchant ships from Italy in the 18th century. It's at this end of the scale where things tend to be most fun, where urban legend can overtake real sightings; but it's also where everything starts.

While it might be exciting to think British wildlife is becoming more and more exotic, conservationists around the world believe the issue could be as important as climate change in threatening biodiversity. It's where the second group – recent invaders that are already here, and already causing trouble – come in. Grey squirrels are the famous example, having been introduced from North America in the 1870s and now outnumbering their native red counterparts by more than 15 to one, but that's nothing on the Harlequin ladybird: the fastest-invading species in UK history, which took just a decade to reach every corner of the country between 2004 and 2014, ahead of the muntjac deer and ring-necked parakeets.

American mink are also old-timers. They were imported in the 1920s for fur farms, but got out, stayed out, and haven't stopped killing birds and small mammals since, despite 'projects' to 'control' their numbers. They are now widespread

PREVIOUS PAGE: GETTY IMAGES, ALAMY. THIS PAGE: PETER KILLEY

across the UK. And then there's the bushy-tailed, eight-inch edible dormouse (or glis glis), which is terrorising well-to-do households in the Home Counties by gnawing through everything and scratching about in attics. They are believed to be descended from just six released by the 2nd Baron Rothschild on his land in Tring in 1902.

In more recent years, the Asian hornet (huge things accidentally shipped to France in 2004), Chinese mitten crab (with enormous claws covered in fluffy hair, like the world's most repulsive cheerleader), signal crayfish, box tree moth and killer shrimp (a large and aggressive crustacean, hitchhiked on the kit of fishermen and canoeists) have all either been spotted or have already arrived and outmuscled our native species, too.

If you see any of those creatures, and indeed any non-native species, you are urged to record details for the GB Invasive Non-Native Species Secretariat, which was established in 2008 to keep track of invaders. Especially important, they say, are any sightings of the five 'alert species': the invasive garden ant, the Asian hornet, the carpet sea squirt, quagga mussels, and the killer shrimp. Location, photo, description: you know what to do.

'ALERT LIST' INVADERS: IF YOU SEE THEM, REPORT THEM AT NONNATIVESPECIES.ORG

Asian hornet
Smaller than our native hornet, the Asian hornet arrived in France in 2004, where it spread rapidly; there have been 13 sightings in the UK. It is no threat to humans, but is a predator of insects, including honey bees and other beneficial species, and can cause significant losses to bee colonies.

Quagga mussel
The quagga mussel is a highly invasive freshwater variety from Eastern Europe, which was first spotted in Britain in 2014 in Surrey. It is fast-breeding and suffocates other mussel species. It can significantly alter whole ecosystems by filtering out large quantities of nutrients.

Killer shrimp
Up to 3cm in length, these are voracious predators that kill a range of native species, including young fish, and can have a major impact on ecosystems. They were first spotted in the UK in 2010, and there are known established infestations in Cambridgeshire and Wales.

Invasive garden ant
Native to south-eastern Europe, Turkey and Uzbekistan, the invasive garden ant was discovered in Gloucestershire in 2009. It is already a widespread pest in Europe and forms supercolonies that are a nuisance in buildings and impact on native invertebrates.

If there's a commonality between how non-native species arrive, it's human complacency rather than animal endeavour. Humans didn't secure Wanda's enclosure on the Isle of Man, humans thought grey squirrels would look nice up horse chestnut trees, humans caused the demand for mink coats. And humans, of course, are warming the climate.

'The routes in are called "pathways", and it's pretty rare to know for sure where something came from – like the wallabies – usually it's more than the one established story,' says Eatherley, who visited Tring for his book and found the glis glis had even invaded the museum there. 'There are a lot of euphemisms in this topic too. Like "control".'

'Control', it seems, means kill, while a 'project' means a concerted effort to kill. 'It's very hard to stamp anything out fully. There's a paradox involved meaning it costs more and more money to get the last few of something – until you're hunting for just one and spending loads on it.'

Perhaps the most extreme case of an individual causing chaos came in North America in 1890, when one Eugene Schieffelin decided it would be a great idea to introduce all the birds mentioned in the works of William Shakespeare. On a chilly winter's day he released 60 starlings in New York's Central Park, and then some more a few months later. To the detriment of a lot of native birds, there are now more than 200 million.

'These animals really wouldn't be invasive at all if it weren't for us humans, and trade has always played a very big part in introducing foreign species, be that black rats on ships or marine larvae contained in ships' ballast water, so conservationists are slightly up against free trade,' Eatherley says. Using cargo on boats, planes and lorries as a means of travel for small species is not something that can easily be stopped, especially in an increasingly connected world.

Nor can we discount the continued idiocy of humans, of course. We don't have eccentric Victorian gardeners any more, but people still buy exotic pets and release them thoughtlessly. One of the most notorious invasive species in Florida is the northern snakehead fish, aka the 'Frankenfish'. Native to the Far East but dumped in rivers by tropical-fish enthusiasts who bought them and regretted it, it is fast, tough and can kill most native fish, swiftly conquering whatever body of freshwater it's released in. It can grow to more than three feet, has been known to eat rats and waterfowl and can even 'walk', manoeuvring itself with its pectoral fins and surviving out of water for up to three days. Anyway, they're banned in the UK, but its cousin, the giant snakehead, was recently yours for less than £70 on tropicalfishfinder.co.uk.

> 'These animals really wouldn't be invasive at all if it weren't for us humans'

Which brings us to the third category: those not established yet. Which species should we worry about? Eatherley needs no thinking time. 'Oh, from a human point of view, definitely tiger mosquitoes; if they come here, they could carry some very nasty diseases with them,' he says. 'There is a theory that they're moving into Europe by the transportation of old tyres, which always have a small pool of stagnant water in them perfect for hosting their eggs.'

It's food for thought, but so is the question that looms over the whole subject: when does a non-native species shed its outsider status? After all, pheasants and chickens are technically Asian. Rabbits are only here because the Romans brought them as a snack. Sheep are from Anatolia. Canada Geese, well you know about them. In fact, if only truly 'native' animals were allowed in the British Isles, there wouldn't be half as much action in our fields and hedgerows. It's a little like how Nigel Farage has built a career on being 'British', but is descended from French Huguenot refugees and German immigrants. Political metaphors are very, very easy.

'Ah, well that's always the big philosophical debate,' Eatherley says, when I ask if there's a point at which a species can ever assimilate fully. 'It all depends how far you go back. In the last Ice Age there didn't tend to be many mammals here, apart from the odd reindeer and things that wouldn't survive now, so it's a bit arbitrary what's decided as native or non-native.

'The rabbits are an interesting one, because they were definitely introduced here, but 99 per cent of them got wiped out by myxomatosis in the 1950s. As a result, a lot of native animals that had come to rely on them for food – like buzzards, red kites, foxes – declined, then when rabbits came back they were seen as beneficial. Sheep are definitely invasive, too, but now the areas they have overgrazed are flourishing ecosystems in their own way. The story can change.'

In the Curragh, the sun is drooping to meet the bog myrtle and we are nearing the end of our wander. For two hours, Dog has pointed out the variety and splendour of the native flora in exacting detail, weaving botanical fact into local lore. He's also stopped the tour briefly in order to demonstrate that, at 70, he can still leap over any trench with a short run-up. And every few minutes, we've bumped into a friendly wallaby.

'This lot have been here so long, they wouldn't even know where Australia is,' Dog says, looking at one looking at him. He smiles – Dog, that is. 'They probably don't even have an accent. I bet they sound Manx by now, like me.'

They didn't mean to come here, but the Isle of Man's newest native is now part of the landscape. If only it were always so simple. ◆

ALAMY, JTA DICK