

Place invaders

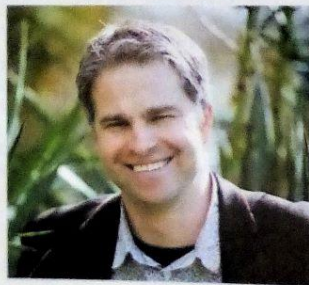
Wildlife columnist JAMES CHUBB meets a local writer who has recently published a natural history title sure to be of interest to many wildlife enthusiasts in Devon

Sitting across the ancient Devonian oak dropleaf table from me is Dan Eatherley; conservationist, consultant, writer and a chum I've known for many years.

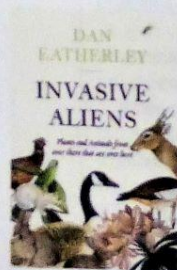
He has quite the academic air about him these days, as he has just published his second natural history book *Invasive Aliens, Plants and Animals from over there that are over here*.

His first venture into publishing concerned a remarkable zoologist, Raymond Ditmars, and the scientist's lifelong obsession with a giant tropical snake, the Bushmaster. The writing of that volume required several trips to the United States and, with a growing young family, Dan knew that his next book needed to focus a lot closer to home.

"I first dabbled with the idea of writing about the commonest species in the UK," explains Dan. "But a little investigation revealed that this subject was being worked on by another writer and so I came to the conclusion



Wildlife writer Dan Eatherley has gathered copious case studies to illustrate his book



LEFT: Dan Eatherley has just published his second natural history book *Invasive Aliens, Plants and Animals from over there that are over here*

that exploring the world of non-natives in this country was a thorny topic which had received little attention."

Dan was brave to tackle such

a divisive and controversial subject. But at a time when Lundy Island has recently published the encouraging news that nesting seabird numbers have trebled since the eradication of black and brown rats from the island 15 years ago, you might be forgiven for assuming that the case for invasive alien removal had been solidly made.

So what is a non-native? As ever with Dan's work he diligently researched his material and gathered copious case studies to illustrate his book.

"The UK has close to 3,000 plant or animal species which are established non-natives," explains Dan. "And I quickly developed a far longer list of examples than I could possibly feature within the pages of the book."

Ironically, a cull of Dan's list was needed before the serious work of writing could begin.

A non-native species is a plant or animal introduced by people, either deliberately or accidentally, which has subsequently gone on to breed, to naturalise and, in

many cases, to cause considerable ecological damage to native flora or fauna.

It's an area of conservation where feelings run high. The conservation officer who led on the original work on Lundy rats received communications urging him to think again about removing the last black rat population in Britain, as well as more sinister letters raging against the decision to kill or harm these intelligent animals in any way shape or form.

As mentioned, a decade on from the project's completion on Lundy Island Manx shearwater pairs are up from 297 to 5,504 and puffin numbers have risen from 13 birds in 2001 to 375 today. For the species of conservation concern, it has been a very successful move. While some mammalogists may rue the loss of the last black rat colony in UK, should the UK host a colony of this Asian rodent so adept at wiping out ground-nesting birds?

'I came to the conclusion that exploring the world of non-natives in this country was a thorny topic which had received little attention'

Away from this example, there are literally thousands of examples with far less satisfying conclusions, many of which are documented in Dan's book.

In the case of signal crayfish there was a 1970s grant administered by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food incentivising the release of North American signal crayfish to create a sustainable fishery of these large, delicious, crustacea in response to the decline of our native crayfish at that time.

But signal crayfish brought with them "crayfish plague" a highly virulent water mould which ripped through the remaining populations of the smaller, and now much rarer, white-clawed crayfish. Numbers have never recovered, and signal crayfish still abound in our streams, rivers and ponds throughout the country.

The most recent introduction of a non-native which will have catastrophic consequences on the Devon countryside is



Photo: Getty Images/Stockphoto

Hymenoscyphus fraxineus, or ash dieback, a fungus which was unwittingly brought to our English woodlands through the trade in tree saplings from Europe, which leads to leaf loss, crown dieback and limb loss in ash trees. While still relatively scattered in its Devon distribution, it has already had consequences for woodland managers in the county, such as myself, with a total revision of

ABOVE: Tree bumblebees, *Bombus hypnorum*, have spread rapidly since their first appearance twenty years ago

BELOW: Since the successful removal of rats on the island, puffin numbers have thrived on Lundy

woodland management and risk assessment of specimens.

As well as case studies of species which have colonised through a human vector, Dan has also included those which have apparently arrived here under their own steam, and the ethical and ecological conundrums which surround these new arrivals. The recent appearance in our skies of tree bumblebees and small red-eyed damselflies - both first recorded in the UK at the turn of the millennia - hint perhaps at animal movement prompted by climate change, but in these early stages it is hard to say with total clarity what has led to the movement north in range, or whether these are species which bring damaging ecological impacts or not.

As Dan regaled me with further anecdotes and natural histories, I was fast getting into the same predicament as he found himself in; with far more content than the restricted publishing space could fit! If, like me, you have an enthusiasm for learning about our natural world, bordering on obsession, then Dan's new book is a must-have addition to your library. ♦

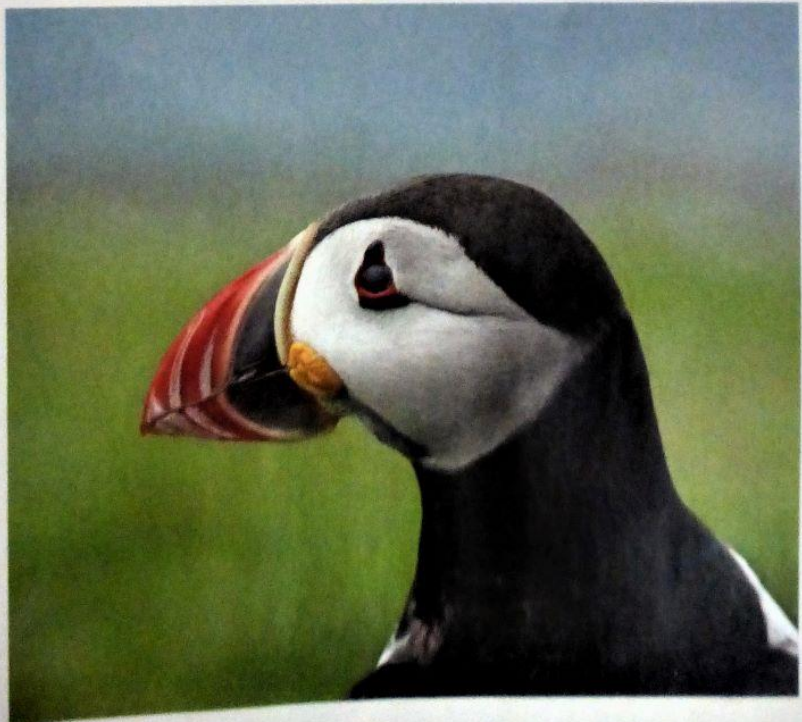


Photo: James Omb