

## Invasions from North America by **Dr Owen K Wilby**



**The Canada goose**, introduced to England around 1660, possibly by King Charles II, was rapidly adopted by landed gentry with country estates, from where it inevitably escaped. In America it migrates hundreds of miles between winter and summer territories, here the birds fly no more than a few miles. Our local flocks in Eye breed around the fishponds by King's Bridge and over-winter in the far north of Redgrave lakes! The bird has a prodigious appetite (3 geese = 1 sheep), crops plants to ground level, competes with native wildfowl for food and defecates at five-minute intervals all day long! The government's 1950's solution to this pest was to round up the wild flocks whilst in moult and relocate them to various Council-run lakes and parks. Protected from predators, given ample nesting areas and regular food handouts, there was a rapid population explosion! Naturally

aggressive, their faeces foul lawns, parks and lakesides, cause the deoxygenation of lakes and ponds and may spread bacteria and viruses in children. London parks are attempting to control the problem by culling moulting birds, destroying eggs or replacing them with dummies.



**The Grey Squirrel** was first introduced from Carolina in 1876 to Henbury Park, Cheshire, then to other English "great houses", direct from the USA up to the late 1920's and translocations within the UK thereafter. It rapidly became a serious pest, damaging broad-leaved woodlands, coniferous forests, orchards, garden crops, roofs, electrical cables, birds' eggs and nestlings. In 1937 the Government banned further releases and transport without a licence. The general public, however, found it an attractive and charismatic creature and many people, myself included, enjoy watching their acrobatic antics. However, there is a much darker side to the Grey. Not only does it eat everything that our native Red Squirrel would, often before it is ripe enough for the Red to eat, but it carries a para-pox virus, harmless to itself but causing extensive skin lesions in the Red and death within a few days from secondary infections. As a consequence the Red Squirrel is a dying species, in retreat every-where except where the Greys are kept at bay by natural barriers or direct human intervention.



**The American Mink**, a voracious predator, was introduced at the beginning of the 20th Century and extensively farmed for its fur (£15 per pelt on the Russian fur market). There was a large mink farm just to the north of Eye, the buildings are still there but the animals are long gone. Over the years a few mink managed to escape but, in a series of monumentally stupid raids in the late 90's, members of various "animal rights" organisations released tens of thousands of domesticated mink into the British countryside. Thousands were shot, died on the roads or simply starved to death. Some were recaptured, but enough survived to colonise our streams and riverbanks and pose a serious threat to water voles and all ground nesting and water birds. "Dear good

old Ratty" used to be a common site in local streams and ponds. When I first started cycling to work from Eye in the late 70's there was a thriving colony in the pond opposite Occold Hall, but I've only seen one in the last 10 years and that was dead. Fortunately recent studies have shown that the reintroduction of otters causes a rapid decline in the mink population which, combined with trapping and vole captive-breeding

programs, may eventually restore the balance of our aquatic wildlife.



**The Signal Crayfish**, introduced from the USA in the 1970's as a delicacy and kept in ponds like the one behind what was the Oaksmere Hotel in Brome. Many escaped during floods or were "rescued" and released by well-meaning people into local streams, unaware of the impact they would have on our native white-clawed crayfish. This invader eats crustaceans, small fish, fish eggs and water weed, tunnels up to eight feet into river banks making them unstable and, worst of all, carries the fungal disease "crayfish plague", lethal to the natives. Trappers say it will take years to eradicate them completely; as an example, in one 130m

stretch of the River Lark near Bury St Edmunds, over 600 were caught in one week.