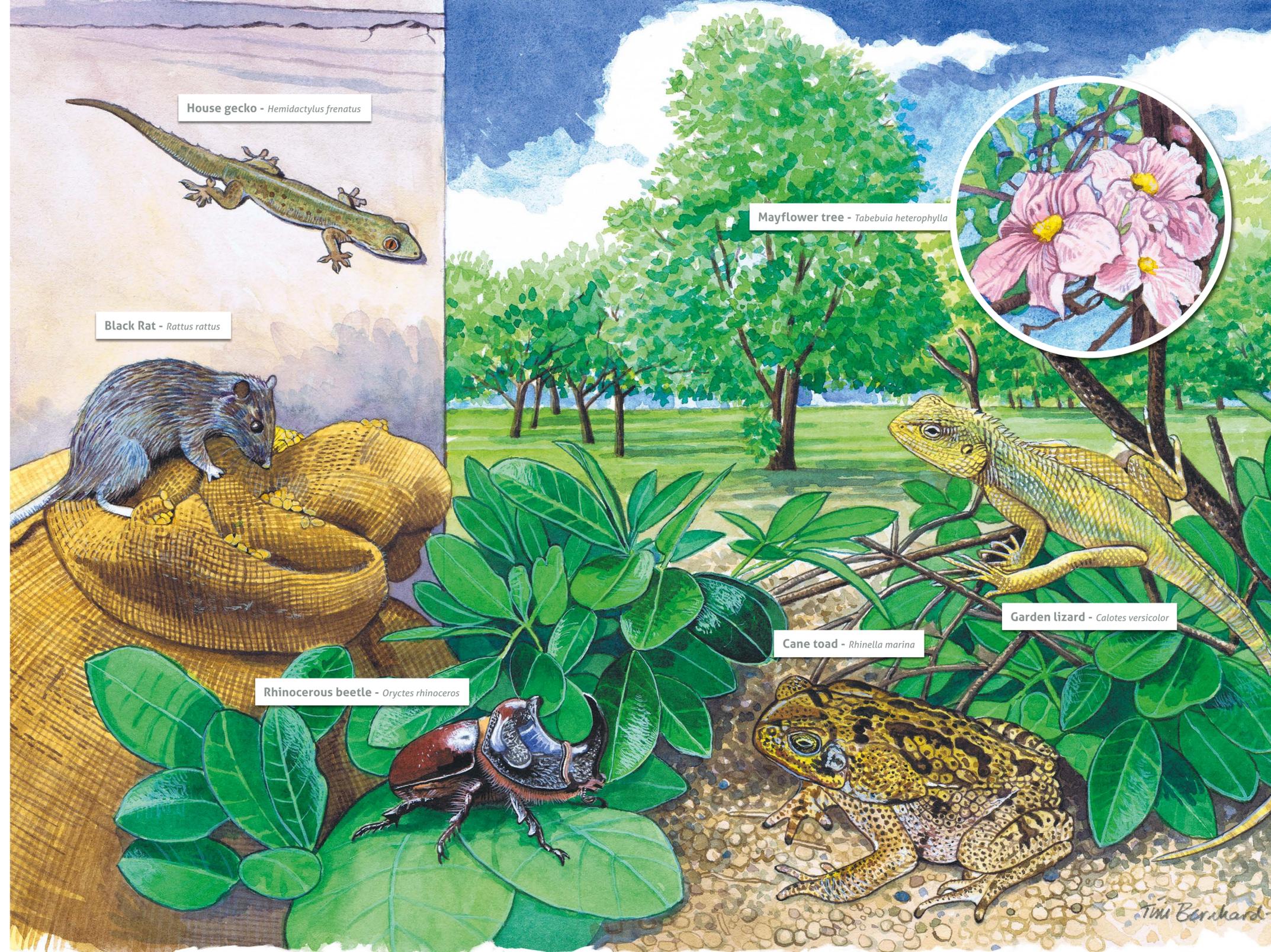


Invasive Species

Islands which are isolated from the mainland by surrounding oceans can only be naturally colonised by species which can either fly or swim, or be transported by the wind or ocean currents. The larger animals, including mammals, cannot traverse the intervening seas and are so are not naturally found on isolated coral islands like those of BIOT. In their absence, the natural colonisers, such as birds, insects and plants, are able to develop life strategies which are unconfined by predators. For example, many of BIOT's bird species prefer to nest on the ground, or even, in the case of wedge-tailed shearwaters, burrowing into the soil to create underground nests.

The introduction of rats to BIOT, which eat eggs, chicks and native seeds, has therefore had an enormous impact – densely packed seabird colonies are now only found on islands without rats, such as those in the mouth of the Diego Garcia lagoon. Introduced cane toads, which are commonly seen around Downtown on Diego Garcia during damp or wet evenings, may also eat native wildlife such as small reptiles and even chicks and as cane toads are poisonous at all life stages (eggs, tadpoles and adult) there are no predators to control their numbers. It is in this type of situation, where a new, non-native species lacks any natural predators or competitors, that its population may explode and outcompete native wildlife. When this happens, the non-native species is described as 'invasive' and conservation control measures may have to be taken to protect the native species. This may be seen with plants – some of the introduced trees in BIOT, such as the mayflower tree, tend to smother the other vegetation around them unless heavily pruned. Even insects such as the introduced coconut rhinoceros beetle can be problematic - this species has devastated coconut and oil palm plantations in other parts of the world, by boring into the growing stalks of these trees.

A great many species have been introduced to BIOT, for example whilst the number of native plants was originally thought to be about 45, this figure had increased to over 280 by 1996. Several of BIOT's most commonly seen birds are actually introduced, for example the diminutive red fody originally came from Madagascar, but has been here for over 130 years, as well as the more recently introduced mynah, zebra doves and egrets. Reducing this number, for example through eradication programmes of invasive species and preventing any further introductions through careful monitoring and control of all transport routes onto the islands is therefore extremely important, to ensure that BIOT's native wildlife can flourish.



House gecko - *Hemidactylus frenatus*

Black Rat - *Rattus rattus*

Rhinoceros beetle - *Oryctes rhinoceros*

Mayflower tree - *Tabebuia heterophylla*

Cane toad - *Rhinella marina*

Garden lizard - *Calotes versicolor*

Tim Bernhard



BEST VOLUNTARY SCHEME FOR BIODIVERSITY AND ECOSYSTEM SERVICES IN TERRITORIES OF EUROPEAN OVERSEAS

