

Anacapa rat-kill to employ copters

■ **Eradication:** Park Service planning to drop poisoned food pellets

By ANN GRIFFITH
NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER
e-mail: agriffith@newspress.com

Helicopters will drop poison pellets on Anacapa Island this winter as part of the first U.S. effort to eradicate a species from an island by plane.

The National Park Service and other agencies want to kill off the aggressive black rat — imported by accident to the island in the 1800s — because it is the only land predator of the Xantus' murrelet and the ashy storm-petrel, two of the rarest birds in the world.

"With islands you have this opportunity to remove a species because you have this impenetrable fence of water," said Kate Faulkner, chief of restoration management for the Channel Islands National Park.

"We went through a very serious assessment, and if you look at the long term, there's only benefits."

A trial run last year on a section of Anacapa killed all black rats in the area. The effort, however, also killed all native deer mice. Park officials say it's likely the larger program would have the same effect and kill off the mice.

It is also possible that a few birds of prey could ingest enough poisoned mice or rats to kill them.

The Park Service is trying the airstrikes on two parts of the island through 2002 only after attempts to control the black rat by dropping poison by hand failed. The island's craggy cliffs made it difficult to reach all of the rodents.

The aerial drop is worth the effort, said Faulkner.

Introduced species are responsible for 39



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Small Xantus' murrelets, which nest on the ground, are threatened by non-native black rats.

■ ISLAND

Continued from Page B1

percent of all animal extinctions since 1600 for which a cause could be determined, and of all recorded extinctions, 75 percent have been island natives, according to Park Service data.

Some scientists say removing the aggressive rat from Anacapa is the only hope for restoring the numbers of birds there.

The Park Service and its consultant, Island Conservation in Santa Cruz, have devised tactics for minimizing damage to other wildlife.

The grain-based pellets will contain a new generation of brodifacoum, also found in over-the-counter rat poison, that requires one instead of multiple doses. The pellets will be bluish purple, which is usually an unappealing food color for birds. They will be dropped when the murrelets and petrels have migrated elsewhere.

And the work will be done in phases, starting with the East Anacapa islet, separated by water from the rest of the island. Once all rats — and possibly all deer mice — are killed and the poison is gone, deer mice will be moved from other islets and placed in the treated area.

The same approach will be used for all three islets that make up Anacapa, finishing in winter 2002 with the final area.

The mice, which are also food for

May 14, 2001
News-Press



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Marine biologist Gus van Vliet shows an intact Xantus' murrelet egg, left, and one that has been destroyed by black rats.

rats, are expected to thrive in the long run.

The project will cost \$700,000 and will be funded out of a settlement with three branches of British Petroleum for more than \$3 million. The company agreed to the fee to offset destruction of wild birds from its 1990 oil spill near Huntington Beach.

Island Conservation will test the area for two or three years after the aerial drops to see if the poison was

successful.

The Park Service will continue testing after that to ensure that there isn't an accidental infestation from a visiting boat. Rats often stow away, attracted by food. If a vessel runs aground — believed to have led to the black rat's introduction to Anacapa in the first place — a tactical alert team will be called out to prevent a new infestation.

Park officials compare this team to the type of work experts do immediately after an oil spill to prevent the spread of oil through the water.

And teams of researchers are counting the number of murrelet birds on the island today, believed to be roughly 200 pairs of breeding adults. They will compare these numbers to increases expected once the rats are killed.

It will be the first time there is enough funding to count the murrelet, the only bird being studied as part of the rat eradication program. And it may be the only time a thorough test has been done to quantify the effects on native animals of eradicating a non-native species, said Harry Carter, a faculty associate at Humboldt State University. Carter is part of the team counting the birds on Anacapa.

"It costs so much that it's hard to monitor," Carter said.

Advocates of the Anacapa program say that it takes an understanding of the birds and rats to comprehend the need to drop poison from the air.

Both the murrelet and petrel go to

Anacapa and other islands every year to nest away from predators. They are easy prey because their nests are on the ground, either in caves, under bushes or in crevices.

Because they lived for years without predators, they have evolved without aggressive behavior or defense mechanisms for fighting off rats.

The black rats, on the other hand, feed on eggs, grabbing them from under the bellies of the parents. The rats also will eat chicks and parents alive.

A single pair of rats could produce 5,000 offspring in a year, according to Park Service officials.

The rat has been a pest for decades and until only a few years ago, officials at Channel Islands National Park thought getting rid of it — or even getting its numbers down for long — was impossible.

But in New Zealand, scientists say they have started to prove that theory wrong. Islands there are being restored to their natural state by removing all non-native species. And New Zealanders have begun doing it by dropping poison by plane.

The news gave park officials in Ventura some hope that along with removing larger animals such as burros and cats from the Channel Islands to allow native species to thrive, the birds on Anacapa could be saved by getting rid of the rats.

"We don't want to do this if we're going to fail," Faulkner said.

May 14, 2001
News-Press