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sea birds on Farallones, study says

Peter Fimrite

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This 2011 file photo shows a house mouse on the Farallon Islands off the coast of San Francisco, Ca.

Photo: Michael Macor / The Chronicle

The proposed extermination of hordes of house mice on the Farallon Islands would protect a fast-diminishing population of rare sea birds by halting rampant, unnatural predation by owls, a study released Monday concludes.

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“While in recent years we suspected that the burrowing owls were having a significant impact on the petrel population, this is the first time we’ve been able to demonstrate how serious those impacts are,” said Nadav Nur, the lead author of the study, which was published Monday in the scientific journal Ecosphere.

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It is the latest ammunition in an ongoing battle over what to do about the tens of thousands of Eurasian house mice swarming over the rocky archipelago 27 miles off the coast of San Francisco. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service wants to move forward with a highly controversial plan to blanket the 10 rocky islands and islets known as the South Farallon Islands with pellets laced with rodenticide.

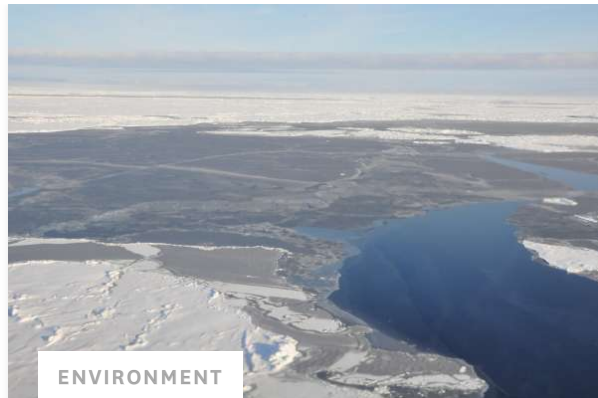
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The report by Point Blue, which has scientists stationed year-round on the archipelago, said burrowing owls stop to rest on the islands every year during their fall migration. They are now greeted by a throng of mice — at their peak in the fall there are more than 1,200 per acre.

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which are just then arriving on the islands in large numbers. The Farallones are home to half of the world's population of 8,000 or so Ashy storm petrels, which are listed as endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and a species of special concern in California.

The researchers tracked color-banded owls and reported a marked increase in their abundance on the islands since 2007. The increase in owls coincided with a major uptick in the number of petrel carcasses.

It takes only a few owls to kill large numbers of the nesting sea birds, according to the report. Researchers say at least 225 of the rare petrels are killed each year by burrowing owls, about 40% of the total number of deaths.

Getting rid of the mice, which are the last remaining nonnative mammals on the islands, would reduce owl predation enough for the petrel population to stabilize and maybe even grow, the study said.

It is believed the Eurasian house mice escaped from 19th century seal-hunting ships visiting the rugged 120-acre island chain, a place so treacherous that American Indians called them "Islands of the Dead" and European mariners dubbed them the "Devil's Teeth." The rodents multiplied at a feverish pace over the last century.

Researchers say their densities are now the highest of any island in the world. It's so bad that the ground sometimes appears to be moving around the 130-year-old Victorian house on Southeast Farallon Island, which scientists use to study the island ecosystem.

Besides enticing the owls, the teeming hordes of mice are devouring the islands' insects and spiders, the same food that the endemic Farallon arboreal salamander needs to survive. The mice have also been blamed for spreading invasive plant seeds, which stick to their fur, according to island biologists.

The mice eradication campaign, which still needs final approval from the various state and federal agencies, is to make two helicopter drops two to three weeks apart of food pellets laced with brodifacoum, an anticoagulant that causes rodents to bleed to death.

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causing the inadvertent poisoning of gulls and other species.

Animal rights groups have opposed air drops since the idea was first considered six years ago, arguing that it is irresponsible to simply dump poison on the islands and hope the right species are killed. The conservation group WildCare has long been fighting the use of rat poison, which is notorious for killing nontarget animals that feed on poisoned rodents.

Several other conservation groups, including California Audubon, the American Bird Conservancy and Point Blue support the plan, saying it is in the long-term best interest of the islands and the many native species that live on them. The California Coastal Commission staff has said the eradication plan is consistent with its coastal management program.

Poison has succeeded in eradicating rodents on islands in Mexico, the Caribbean, the South Pacific, the Aleutians and the Galapagos chain, wildlife officials said. Rats were removed from Anacapa Island, in Channel Islands National Park, about 15 years ago using an aerial drop. House mice have been eradicated from more than 50 islands worldwide, officials said.

“Results of this study, and eradications on other islands, indicate the potential positive and significant population response by storm petrels and other native species to the removal of invasive rodents,” the report said.

A 300-page environmental document produced by federal researchers analyzed and dismissed dozens of other possible mouse control methods, including feral cats, snakes, trapping and sterilization. Cats and snakes were eliminated because they would pose an even bigger threat to birds. Trapping and rodenticide bait stations were ruled out because inaccessible terrain would make it impossible to get all the mice.

There are no known mice diseases or pathogens that could be introduced, and nobody has ever effectively used fertility drugs, sterilization or genetic modification in a rodent eradication effort.

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