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Rodents Romeos

Berkeley Marina's fecund ground squirrels have a date with the birth-control man

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(06-04) 04:00 PDT Berkeley -- The legions of ground squirrels at the Berkeley Marina have it made: succulent grass, a smorgasbord of handouts and romantic views of the bay.

But city and county health officials are taking steps to ensure that all the cavorting doesn't result in more of these frisky rodents. How? Critter contraception.

The squirrels have taken over Shorebird Park, undermining concrete paths and building foundations, creating tripping hazards with their holes everywhere and plundering more picnics than Yogi Bear.

So before the fall mating season, Alameda County vector control workers plan to make these squirrels sterile by injecting them with a drug that reduces their sex hormone levels.

"They're going to be shooting blanks during mating season," said Bill Pitcher, chief of vector control, a branch of the county Environmental Health Services Department.

At first blush, the plan may seem a little nuts. But in a liberal, animal-loving city like Berkeley, birth control may be the most humane way to reduce the squirrel population.

"Logistically, Berkeley is a tough area to do anything with animals," Pitcher said. "People think the squirrels are kind of cute."

And wouldn't you know it, the first time vector control gave birth control a shot, it wasn't that great. A drug they injected into female squirrels last year didn't work, as evidenced by a fresh batch of babies this spring.

In the next several weeks, vector control workers will get an exact count at the marina to establish a base for comparing the number of squirrels next year.

Groundskeepers say the fewer, the better.

"In terms of user interaction and damage to the park, you have to try to do something," said Cliff Marchetti, manager of the Berkeley waterfront. "They're pretty industrious creatures."

In addition, because squirrels attract fleas that carry the bacteria that causes bubonic plague, vector controllers want to muffle the marina's baby boom -- and the drug they're using this year is an experimental vaccine for the plague.

Right now, biologist David James is designing the plan. Sometime in late summer, baited cages slightly longer than shoe boxes will be placed throughout the park in hopes of catching 100 squirrels -- either male or female.

Then they will be sedated and injected with gonadotropin-releasing hormones,

which should lower the level of testosterone and estrogen and render the squirrels infertile.

The United States Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Research Center is supplying the drug for testing on Berkeley's squirrels and deer in other states.

The Berkeley project will not cost much because the USDA will donate the drug, and vector control already has the equipment. James also plans to inject the drug into squirrels at Crown Beach in Alameda.

Chemical contraception on animals has been practiced elsewhere in the Bay Area. In 1997, staff biologists at Point Reyes began injecting tule elk with a drug that disrupted the fertilization process.

The elk there had overpopulated their grassy range. In Berkeley, the squirrels are becoming bolder -- and fatter.

"The squirrels will come right up to you and tug on your pant leg," James said. "People can't sit down and have a picnic without being harassed by ground squirrels."

Decades ago, Santa Clara County hired squirrel hunters to deal with a similar problem. More recently, San Leandro poisoned the growing number of squirrels at its marina, James said.

But the Berkeley City Council passed a resolution several years ago that pooh-poohs poisoning wildlife.

Some fans of Shorebird Park at the southwest tip of the marina say the ground squirrels should be left alone because they're cute and harmless and were there first.

"They've been here a lot longer than the Ohlone Indians," said Phoenix Gabriel, a Berkeley artists

who unwinds at the park almost every morning. "This is some kind of federally funded yuck program."

Park workers disagree. They aren't exactly crazed like the gopher-obsessed greenskeeper in the movie "Caddyshack." It's more of a love-hate relationship.

"I saw a squirrel on a birthday cake one day, before it was lit," said naturalist Denise Brown. "As a naturalist it's kind of tough. But when you see 10,000 of them everyday, it's like, 'Man, enough already!'"

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