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Live-Trapping California Ground Squirrels is for the Birds

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ABSTRACT: California ground squirrels are known to inhabit different landscapes and terrains. Farms and ranches with ground squirrels are often at an advantage over other types of locations such as schools and public parks, where squirrel control options are more limited. Many private companies and public agencies dealing with squirrel problems experience public opposition to the use of poisons in public areas and must find other workable solutions. Live-trapping California ground squirrels is one control method that is being considered by many agencies. City and county parks, public and private schools, horse boarding stables, and organic farms are some of the locations appropriate for use in this type of program. The use of live-traps for safety and target-specific reasons, and the use of CO₂ as the most humane method of euthanasia for rodents, are widely accepted by most people, even when the trapping is done openly in public. Live trapped ground squirrels can have a benefit beyond the reduction of squirrel damage. Using trapped squirrels as a natural food source for hawks, owls, and eagles at raptor rehabilitation facilities makes this approach an effective, safe, and acceptable control method in specific places.

KEY WORDS: California ground squirrel, CO₂, euthanasia, live-trapping, raptor, rodent control, safety, *Spermophilus beecheyi*

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INTRODUCTION

Whenever California ground squirrels (*Spermophilus beecheyi*) live in close association with people, their daily activities become a cause of concern for human health, agricultural crop loss, or property damage. In many of these situations, there is a pressing need to regain a point of balance between the squirrel population and the human use of the area. For as long as squirrel and human conflicts have existed, some method of squirrel control has been used or considered. Our capacity to invent and develop new and better ways to manage areas of excessive and damaging numbers of ground squirrels has led to having many choices and types of tools and products to use.

Many times, Integrated Pest Management to deal with a squirrel problem could be used, but some available options are overlooked because of past practices and habits. Depending on season of the year, elevation, and location, some methods are proven to be more effective than others. But, no one tool is necessarily the right one for a given location. In California, there are several methods for ground squirrel control. The need for a license and or a permit to use some of these method means homeowners and others are limited in their options. But there are also control methods that can be used without a permit or license.

Grain-based and pelleted rodent bait (poisons) have been a common control method used for years. These products are relatively easy to use, effective, and of fairly low cost per acre for labor and material. Some bait products come in different potencies, depending on if you are buying it as a retail consumer or a commercial applicator. The different methods available for applying baits include spot bating, broadcasting, and the many styles of bait stations found on the manufactured market. Bait stations can also be built easily with materials purchased and plans retrieved from the internet.

Fumigation is a control method that takes place within a burrow, once the fumigant product has been

placed and the burrow opening sealed. Aluminum phosphide is a restricted-use product that reacts with the humidity in the burrow to change the tablet into a gas that will euthanize squirrels breathing the poisonous fumes. A similar method is a gas cartridge which, when lit and placed in the tunnel, produces a suffocating smoke.

Many people in more rural parts of the state would include shooting as a control method. Different calibers of rifles, shotguns, and pellet guns are, in certain locations, effective and practical. A fairly new tool on the market is a burrow exploding device. The idea is that the device puts a mixture of propane and oxygen into the burrow and, when ignited, causes a concussive force to euthanize the animal instantly and humanely. This is an alternative to the use of poisons or burrow fumigants.

A skilled trapper can use conibear traps as an effective control tool. They are placed right over the opening of the squirrel tunnel and are tripped when the squirrel comes out. Live-trapping squirrels is another important tool that is often overlooked. This paper focuses on using live-traps to control squirrels in a highly urbanized area. The reasons why and when to live trap ground squirrels are discussed as follows:

1. Safety around people, domestic animals, and other wildlife.
2. Target-specific qualities
3. Highly beneficial

THE PROBLEM

In October 2005, the park superintendent for the city of Santa Monica, CA, contacted me after my inquiry about their ground squirrel problems, which had been reported in the news. For several years, the city parks department had been using a commercial pest control company to reduce the high population of ground squirrels with poison baits. Earlier that year, the city had been cited by the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services for harboring too many California ground squirrels in one of their parks, in close proximity to

humans, and thus being out of compliance. High populations of ground squirrels have the potential to spread plague from infected fleas living on the squirrels. It was and still is the County's plan and job to help prevent such an outbreak by keeping squirrel numbers low within the county, at sites where human-squirrel contact is high. Active plague has been found in Los Angeles County as recent as July 2007, so the threat is quite real.

The primary park of concern for the county is Pacific Palisades Park in Santa Monica. This park overlooks the Pacific Ocean. It is just over 1.5 miles long and on average less than 100 feet wide. The park consists of walking/jogging paths, lawns, and plenty of landscaping, within the confines of a city street on one side and a bordering rail fence along the top edge of a hundred-foot bluff down to the sea. California ground squirrels within the park burrow mostly outside the fence, along the ledge and over the side of the bluff. Yet, it is within the lawns and landscapes areas that they find abundant food. The well-maintained lawns provide an adequate food source that more than sustains the squirrels. However, with the hundreds of people visiting the park daily, the diet of the squirrels is supplemented by handouts and discarded food, varying from peanuts and french fries to vegetable party trays.

What the park needed was a plan that would address the issue of safety for visitors, including children and pets. Another consideration was the safety of a year-round homeless population that uses the area during open hours. The plan also had to target ground squirrels while posing no danger to the feral cats that live in the park, or to raptors hunting over the bluffs. The plan needed to address concerns of people about humane treatment of the squirrels. These issues caused people to be apprehensive about the killing of any squirrels at all, much less using poisons. The use of poison was the main subject of public concern that was addressed by my proposal to the city.

THE PROGRAM

The following proposal was given to the city's park department (some changes are included here for clarity and issues of privacy):

*To: Open Space Management Division
c/o Parks Operations Superintendent
2600 Ocean Park Blvd.
Santa Monica, CA 90405*

Dear Sir:

This is a summary of a Proposal for Service in regard to your interest in additional control and management of ground squirrels and fleas in Palisades Park in the City of Santa Monica.

Treatment Location: *You have indicated that there is an extensive infestation of squirrels within the public use and landscaped areas of Palisades Park.*

Proposed Treatment: *Squirrels will be humanely live-trapped, euthanized with USDA-approved guidelines for CO₂ method and transported to a state licensed raptor rehabilitation facility where they will be utilized in the*

recovery and the rehabilitation of birds of prey, including Eagles, Hawks, Owls, Ravens, Osprey, Turkey Vulture, and Peregrine Falcon, as a natural food source.

The trap mechanism we are planning to use has two one-way doors with multiple-catch capabilities. The traps will contain a bait/food container and water for the squirrels during their confinement period. Adequate space is allowed for air ventilation and non-crowding. The traps will also be covered to keep the squirrels out of the direct sunlight until the traps are checked. In accordance with state laws, all traps must be checked at least once during each 24-hour period. I will be at the park for at least nine hours a day to be sure of the greatest possibility for success for trapping and will check all traps at least twice a day.

Transporting Squirrels:

After being captured, the live squirrels will be transported in the cages they are already in, preventing any chance of animals escaping. In accordance with state laws concerning transporting nuisance wildlife, they will be taken to a City of Santa Monica facility, a few minutes away from the park, to be out of view of the public to commence CO₂ euthanasia procedures. According to California Department of Fish and Game instructions, the euthanized squirrels will then immediately be put into plastic bags to keep fleas isolated, and then placed in an ice chest with dry ice to kill all fleas, insuring they will not be spread to any other location. The squirrels will be delivered to:

California State University, Bakersfield, Facility for Animal Care and Treatment, Biology Department, 9001 Stockdale Highway, Bakersfield, CA 93311-1099, Telephone (661) 654-xxxx, Fax (661) 654-xxxx, Bird Rescue Hotline (661) 654-xxxx.

The director of this facility is Ms. Marlene Benton, in the Raptor Rehabilitation Program. Other State-approved raptor programs closer to Santa Monica will be used if they are located and want to accept ground squirrels. Ms. Benton has sent me a letter stating her willingness to except the squirrels:

Dear Lefty,

Per our conversation, the Facility for Animal Care and Treatment (FACT), located at California State University, Bakersfield, agrees to accept ground squirrels trapped during pest control management jobs. The FACT facility cares for wild birds of prey through a wildlife rehabilitation program that is permitted by the California Department of Fish and Game. The squirrels will be used as food for birds of prey as a training tool for pre-release conditioning. Feeding the birds natural food, squirrels, prior to release aids in their rehabilitation and preparation to returning to life in the wild.

Thank you for considering FACT as an outlet and facility that can use the squirrels to benefit wildlife.

Sincerely,

*Marlene Benton
CSU, Bakersfield
Coordinator, ESA/FACT*

Recommended Service: *For effective ground squirrel management results, we recommend that the initial treatment include the entire infested areas of the western edge of Palisades Park in order to control any burrowing ground squirrel colonies. We expect that this treatment will reduce the ground squirrel population to an accepted number by Los Angeles County.*

License and Monitoring: *For the safety of all concerned, we are monitored by the L.A. County Agriculture Commissioner, the California Department of Fish and Game, and California Department of Pesticide Regulation. We are fully licensed and insured, and proof of these will be provided in person before commencement of work. We will comply with all applicable California laws and regulations.*

Thank you for your confidence in this proposal and the opportunity for me to help you in this large project. I will do my best to ensure that all animals I handle are treated humanely and to be sensitive to other people that have a point of view different than mine concerning the operation of my duties in this controversial treatment of ground squirrels.

*Sincerely
Lawrence "Lefty" Ayers
Owner, Heritage Wildlife Management*

IMPLEMENTING THE PLAN

Probably, the number one reason the city decided to use a live-trapping plan was because of complaints and protests through letters, emails, and phone calls, and in city council meetings, about the use of poisons. City officials wanting to maintain order and safety in regard to this plan decided it was in the best interest of everyone to have 4 law enforcement officers present to patrol the area where traps were set out each day. Even with police presence in the area, traps were damaged, squirrels were let go, and a few people confronted me about the killing of the squirrels. When people were told that the euthanized squirrels would be taken to the raptor rehabilitation facility, many agreed it was a great idea. Over the trapping period, I was encouraged about this program by numerous people visiting the park.

This contract required a total of 6 weeks of trapping. The size of the park and logistics for monitoring the traps at all times made it unfeasible to set traps out in more than 2 city blocks at a time. One day of prebaiting with the doors wired open, in each location, was sufficient, due to the high human activity and the squirrels' being habituated to their presence. Also, humans meant food, and the traps were not that "unusual" in the high-traffic areas of the control program. For each 2-block section, actual trapping took place 4 to 5 days, depending on the activity shown at each trap. On average, 20 to 25 traps were placed in the 2-block area each day. Because of the free food handouts, these squirrels were reluctant to travel more than 30 feet for food, necessitating the traps to be placed within 10 feet of visible burrows. Trap bait consisted of a mixture of horse feed with oats, corn, barley, and molasses as a base mix, with more rolled corn

and whole peanuts added, after seeing these were the items the squirrels preferred.

When picking up the traps with squirrels in them, both doors were wired closed to prevent squirrels from escaping. A black, fitted cover was placed over the trap to calm the squirrels, keeping them from any additional stress. Its impact was evident instantly. The cover also kept people watching me taking the traps to my truck from actually seeing the squirrels in the traps, hopefully preventing any added stress for those watching. It was our plan to keep this situation from creating any more tension for people upset with the control program by taking the squirrels off site to euthanize them. What my critics didn't know when they accused me of building a "home made-death chamber" was that before I started my pest control business, I was welding for a company that built commercial fumigation chambers. I did build it at home, but with the skill and knowledge needed to make it right. The procedure I used followed the format laid out by the USDA to euthanize rodents with CO₂. The chamber lid has a window on top, to see when enough time has elapsed, and there is a top vent valve to release air out as CO₂ comes in the bottom. Once the squirrels are taken out of the trap, they are placed into a plastic bag, then set on dry ice in an ice chest and delivered to FACT.

OTHER PLACES

The first year (2006), we removed 165 squirrels from the park in Santa Monica. Last year (2007), we trapped but for only for 3 weeks, because of a much smaller ground squirrel population. Both times, this program has been able to get the city back in compliance with Los Angeles County Department of Health Services. Since I have started this live-trapping program, other people have shown much interest in it. Over the last 2 years, I have done ground squirrel live-trapping for public and private schools, horse boarding stables, dairies, and organic citrus farms. In spring 2008, I will be starting a new trapping program at California State University, Bakersfield on and around 52 acres of baseball and soccer fields on campus and near the FACT.

DISCUSSION

The use of live-traps in certain locations can be a safe, target-specific, and beneficial method for the removal of California ground squirrels. CO₂ is a humane euthanizing agent and has been readily accepted by people that might otherwise be reluctant to agree with the controlling of ground squirrels in public places. The option for utilizing ground squirrels for feeding raptors in rehabilitation facilities cannot present itself with most other control methods available. When the safety for humans, pets, and other wildlife are the predominant factor in deciding how to manage excessive populations of ground squirrels, using live-traps, CO₂, and raptors is not just "for the birds", anymore.