

FieldNotes



Poison Control

New rodenticide regulations protect raptors and could save seabirds.
By Susan Cosier

In June the EPA announced that it will ban the sale of four particularly potent rodent poisons in retail stores because they've proven harmful to people, pets, and wildlife. Professional exterminators, farmers, and government agencies will still be able to use the rodenticides, which some 15,000 children a year are exposed to, poison control data shows.

The new regulations could help prevent "off-target" deaths while still allowing wildlife managers to employ the poisons as highly effective conservation tools. To safeguard species like great horned owls, red-tailed hawks, bobcats, and kit foxes, farmers must isolate the rodenticides in bait stations. Federal wildlife managers can continue using the poisons only for conservation efforts, such as protecting seabird nesting sites from invasive rodents.

"I think we have a broad contamination of the food chain," says Pierre Mineau, a pesticide ecotoxicologist at Environment Canada's National Wildlife Research Centre and a

leading expert in the field. In a study that examined 270 birds of prey, Mineau and his colleagues found that as many as 11 percent of great horned owls are at risk of being indirectly killed by these rodenticides. "Yes, they work like gangbusters," says Mineau, "but do we really need to use that much of a powerful tool?" The chemicals—brodifacoum, bromadiolone, difethialone, and difenacoum, which are found in products like D-Con—are second-generation anticoagulants that kill by causing fatal hemorrhaging. They are far more toxic than older poisons.

Ironically, for this reason, they've played a role in some of the most dramatic conservation successes in recent history, says Greg Butcher, Audubon's director of bird conservation. On New Zealand's Campbell Island, California's Anacapa Island, and more than 100 other islands worldwide, wildlife managers have resorted to the poisons to eliminate rats.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is considering using the rodenticides on California's mice-infested Farallon Islands, nesting grounds for more than half of the world's roughly 7,500 breeding ash storm-petrels. The California Department of Fish and Game lists the bird as a species of special concern because its limited range makes it susceptible to oil spills and predation by rodents, cats, and other animals. "We want to keep species off the endangered list," says Gerry McChesney, manager of the Farallon National Wildlife Refuge, adding that removing mice from the Farallon Islands will help do just that.

Barn owls that happen upon the islands during migration linger there because of the mice, likely introduced by sailors in the 1800s. The owls devour the rodents until their numbers naturally decline each winter, and then switch to embattled seabirds like the petrels. Wildlife managers have tried relocating some of the birds, but it's very labor intensive and hasn't solved the problem.

Now they're planning a mouse eradication project, and rodenticides will be an option in the environmental impact statement due this fall. "It's really important to have rodenticide available for bird conservation," says Butcher. "Getting rid of rodents on the Farallon Islands is probably the number one thing we can do to help that species. You can trap rodents until the cows come home without ever really getting rid of them."

Any rodenticides will be used with caution, says McChesney. For his part, Mineau hopes his findings will influence regulators, but also supports use of the chemicals for conservation: "It's one of those situations where you say, I'm going to accept some impact for the greater good."

HOLLYWOOD GOES BIRDING! EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH "THE BIG YEAR" STARS JACK BLACK, STEVE MARTIN, AND OWEN WILSON



Audubon

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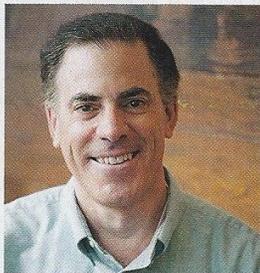
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Editor's *Note* BY DAVID SEIDEMAN



ONE OF THE INDELIBLE MYTHS about the type of people who read or work for *Audubon* is that we have neither a sense of humor nor a sense of hope. When Mark Obmascik wrote *The Big Year*, little did he expect it to become a best-seller, let alone a major motion picture ("The Big Screen," page 31). "I often had to assure people that this quirky tale of competitive birdwatching was really true," he writes. "After all, it's hard to imagine three otherwise sane men choosing to do one thing—and one thing only—for an entire year. They spent 270 days away from home, traveled 270,000 miles." One of his book's central characters "was hired

as a consultant for the film, and he taught the main actors how to act like real birders and not some cartoonish pith-helmeted Miss Jane Hathaway from *The Beverly Hillbillies*."

The three stars—Steve Martin, Jack Black, and Owen Wilson—would never be mistaken for Miss Hathaway. In "Lights! Binoculars! Action!" (page 30), articles editor Alisa Opar's exclusive interview with the three of them together, Martin allows that when he does his banjo shows he always mentions the movie to his audience: "I say 'competitive birdwatching' and they all laugh." In the interview, Martin accuses Black of mistaking a grizzly for a bird while shooting on location. Responds Black, with a chuckle, "I thought, that is a rare bird. A wingless brown beast of a bird." For his part, Wilson learned how common bald eagles are in the far north: "[They] were almost like seagulls, where they'd hang out at the dump. It's not what you want; you like to think of a bald eagle perched on a crooked snag."

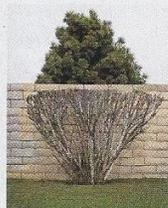
By contrast, Incite columnist Ted Williams paints a beautiful but disturbing picture of the lesser prairie chicken, a species seemingly doomed by the latest helter-skelter energy development in the West ("Free-Range Chicken," page 78). Nevertheless, federal conservation programs and well-managed cattle grazing are bolstering certain populations on public and private lands. Writes Williams, "In Texas I'd seen proof that the species is a survivor that can tough out horrific habitat destruction—provided humans give it a few chances like the ones I saw happening." As he points out, this means making sure that renewable energy is "green in more than just name."

Toward that end, in the West environmentalists, government agencies, and solar companies are collaborating to conserve critical desert ecosystems while allowing for appropriate solar energy projects on degraded lands, reports Judith Lewis Merinit ("Here Comes the Sun," page 70). A balance must be struck between cutting greenhouse gases and protecting critical habitat, she writes. Garry George, Audubon California's renewable energy project director, explains that "the two really have the same goal: to help species survive."

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The Artist's Lab
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Stately Trees
Simon Norfolk offers extra shots of some venerable English oaks at Blenheim Palace (audubonmagazine.org/web/oaks).

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