

Tracing sea otter killer to its source



SUN BULLETIN PHOTOS BY STAN THOMPSON

Researcher Haydee Dabritz checks out a freshly-caught squirrel.

Some unlucky squirrels at Morro Rock discovered handouts that looked too good to be true, and realized too late that the entrance to a feast of goodies had a one-way door. No exit.

UC Davis researcher Haydee Dabritz set out 20 wire mesh traps last Thursday to catch the furry critters. She's testing their blood to see if they are carrying *Toxoplasma gondii*, a parasite that's been killing sea otters.

In fact, for the past two years, Morro Bay has been a hot spot for dead sea otters washing up on shores.

It's thought that sea otters ingest the deadly parasite by eating contaminated shellfish.

So far, cats are the only animals known to shed the parasite in its feces. Kitty litter and waste from cats travel by way of toilets, storm drains and streams to the bay bottom where the deadly parasite can end up in shellfish, a favorite sea otter meal.

It's not clear where cats in the Morro Bay area are getting the parasite.

"We're testing ground squirrels and small rodents to find out if they are infected with *Toxoplasma*," Dabritz says, "and to determine if wild rodents are a source of infection for cats in the Morro Bay area."

It's part of UC Davis' overall program that's investigating ecological links to trace the sea otter killer to its source.

The testing — which extends to local state parks — is funded by a new grant from the National Science Foundation, and National Institute of Health, with support from the Morro Bay National Estuary Program.

— Stan Thompson

