

# World's Biggest Rat Hunt

By Rodney Joyce

WELLINGTON (Reuters) - New Zealand conservation officials have dropped 120 tonnes of bait and a team of 20 rat hunters onto a remote sub-Antarctic island in what they say is the largest rodent eradication project the world has ever seen.

They aim to wipe out up to 200,000 Norway rats probably introduced to Campbell Island, 438 miles south of New Zealand's South Island, by 19th century whalers and sealers.

The \$1.1 million kill is designed to restore the 11,300 hectare island to its natural state and allow the return of a flightless teal duck and a species of wading bird found only on the island.

A small population of Campbell Island teal has been preserved in captivity while Campbell Island snipes were discovered still surviving on a nearby islet free of rodents.

"This newly discovered bird was found on a tiny rock stack on the coast of Campbell Island in 1997," Conservation Minister Sandra Lee said in a statement.

Lee said the project eclipsed in size an earlier eradication program -- on 3,100 hectare Langara Island in British Columbia, Canada.

The Department of Conservation said it would be two years before it knew if rats had gone from the island -- reported to have the highest concentration of rats in the world -- but already most of the bait had been carried to burrows by hungry rats.

"Radio transmitters were attached to several live rats at the start of the operation and all have since been found dead," the department said.

"The rats have removed most of the bait from the surface of the ground and cached it in their burrows."

New Zealand has had success in eliminating rats from smaller islands, including Kapiti Island near Wellington which is now a bird sanctuary.

The Campbell Island program got off to an embarrassing start in May when 18 tonnes of poison bound for the island spilled into the sea after a truck crash near a whale breeding site around 125 miles north of Christchurch.

But no environmental damage resulted.

Norway rats are prodigious breeders, with females capable of producing up to seven litters of a dozen pups each year. The gestation period is just 22 days, and females mate when they are as young as three months old.

