



Sensitive Species of the Santa Ana River Watershed

Tricolored Blackbird (*Agelaius tricolor*)



Photo by Don DesJardin

Tricolored blackbirds are highly social, marsh-nesting birds that live in flocks numbering from less than one hundred to many thousands. Estimates of flock numbers reached 100,000 and 250,000 birds in the first half of the twentieth century in central California (Bent 1965). The density of those flocks almost defies our imaginations only 50-60 years later. In 1934, in a 6-acre marsh near Sacramento, one observer estimated one nest every five square feet. In 1933 tens of thousands of birds were observed building nests in cattails; the observer gave up trying to count after only three days, writing that 250,000 was a "ridiculously low" count (Bent 1965). When agriculture came to the Central Valley, marshes were drained to make croplands. These birds became treated as pests and were poisoned to prevent their roosting, feeding, and nesting in the grain fields. In 1932, one colony covered 30-40 acres of marsh. The roosting population was estimated at almost 500,000 birds and the nests numbered 100,000. By 1935 "dredgers had so changed the terrain that only 2,000 - 3,000 returned to this place; the feeding area was too far away. In 1936 this locality was deserted..." (Bent 1965).

Tricolored blackbirds are medium sized birds measuring between 18-24 cm in length and weighing between 40-70g. Males are slightly larger than females. Males are black with a bluish sheen and have bright red to brownish-red wing coverts and median coverts buffy white to pure white. While males are all black, females have grayish streaks over the entire body with mostly a whitish chin and throat and small patches of reddish on shoulder (Beedy and Hamilton 1999).

Habitat

Because tricolored blackbirds live in large colonies, they have special habitat requirements. Tricolored blackbirds prefer open accessible water, a protected nesting substrate such as flooded, thorny or spiny vegetation, and a suitable foraging space providing insect prey within a few miles of nesting colonies. Nesting habitat includes cattails and bulrushes or ungrazed grasslands containing tall grasses. Other plant species that are used for nesting include young willow thickets and wild rose.

Breeding

Before the breeding season, tricolored blackbirds can be found foraging in dairies for high-energy livestock food like cracked corn. During the breeding season, adults feed primarily on insects such as grasshoppers, beetles, and weevils that are also feed to the nestlings. Tricolored blackbird nest in colonies and are polygamous, with two females to every male. Nesting starts around mid-March and continues into late April. The females build the nests 2 meters or less above the ground or over water. Typical clutch sizes range between 3 and 4 eggs. Nesting efforts take approximately 45 days. The male and female both participate in the feeding of young (Campbell 2004).

Status and Distribution

Currently both the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) list the tricolored blackbird as a species of special concern. These birds are largely endemic to California, but also breed in parts of Oregon, Washington, Nevada, and western coastal Baja California, Mexico. Over 99% of the tricolored blackbird population can be found in California residing mostly in the Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys, but flocks are also found from Humboldt and Shasta Counties south to extreme southwestern San Bernardino Co., western Riverside Co. and San Diego Co., even in southeastern deserts (Beedy and Hamilton, 1999). The tricolored blackbird has been recorded along the Santa Ana River, along the Interstate 15 corridor, within the Badlands and Mystic Lake area, and in a few other scattered locations in Riverside County (MSHCP 2003).

Threats

The biggest threat to the tricolored blackbird is loss of habitat. Historically, tricolored blackbird nested in marshland, riparian woodland, or perennial grasslands, but due to human activities such as agriculture and urbanization, most of the suitable nesting sites have disappeared. Because of the lack of natural nesting sites, tricolors will nest in cereal crops and silage. Entire nesting colonies can be destroyed when the grains are harvested. Other problems that tricolored blackbirds face are shooting, trapping, and poisoning. Since the early 1930's, agricultural industries have poisoned the blackbirds to reduce crop damage in the Central Valley (Beedy and Hamilton 1999).

Research and Management Needs

Although there is no current widespread management of these birds, USFWS and CDFG are working on management guidelines. These guidelines are to include ways of avoiding habitat loss, increasing breeding populations, and public awareness. In addition, research on the dynamics of habitat selection and population regulation is needed for further enhancement of management strategies (Audubon 2004). SAWA is interested in tracking and protecting the remaining colonies of tricolored blackbirds. We are working to identify incentives for encouraging the retention and expansion of nesting colonies on private lands. If you sight one or several of these birds please contact us. SAWA biologists have observed tricolored blackbirds in San Timoteo Canyon, Temescal Canyon, and along the Santa Ana River.

SAWA Contact

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Photo credit

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