

**California Wildlife Habitat Relationships System**  
**California Department of Fish and Wildlife**  
**California Interagency Wildlife Task Group**

---

TRICOLORED BLACKBIRD

*Agelaius tricolor*

Family: ICTERIDAE  
B520

Order: PASSERIFORMES

Class: AVES

Written by: S. Granholm

Reviewed by: L. Mewaldt

Edited by: R. Duke

Updated by: CWHR Program Staff, August 2008

#### DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

Mostly a resident in California. Common locally throughout Central Valley and in coastal districts from Sonoma Co. south. Breeds near fresh water, preferably in emergent wetland with tall, dense cattails or tules, but also in thickets of willow, blackberry, wild rose, tall herbs. Feeds in grassland and cropland habitats. Breeds locally in northeastern California. In winter, becomes more widespread along central coast and San Francisco Bay area (Grinnell and Miller 1944, McCaskie et al. 1979, Garrett and Dunn 1981) and is found in portions of the Colorado Desert. Numbers appear to be declining in California (DeHaven et al. 1975).

#### SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

**Feeding:** In California studies summarized by Skorupa et al. (1980), animal matter, mostly insects and spiders, made up 86-91% of nestling and fledgling diet, and 28-96% of adult diet in spring and summer. Insect consumption in Sacramento Valley reached a peak of 39% in summer (Crane and DeHaven 1978). Seeds and cultivated grains, such as rice and oats, are other major foods, composing most of fall and winter diet. Forages on ground in croplands, grassy fields, flooded land, and along edges of ponds.

**Cover:** Seeks cover in emergent wetland vegetation, especially cattails and tules; also in trees and shrubs. Roosts in large flocks in emergent wetland or in trees (Terres 1980).

**Reproduction:** Usually nests in dense cattails or tules; also nests in thickets of willow, blackberry, wild rose, tall herbs. Nest usually located a few ft over, or near, fresh water; also may be hidden on ground among low vegetation. Builds nest of mud and plant materials. Highly colonial; nesting area must be large enough to support a minimum colony of about 50 pairs (Grinnell and Miller 1944).

**Water:** Nest located over or near fresh water, especially in emergent wetland. Drinking water probably required, at least when seeds and grains are major foods.

**Pattern:** Frequents fresh emergent wetlands. Nest may be located up to 6.4 km (4 mi) from foraging areas (Orians 1961).

#### SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

**Activity Patterns:** Yearlong, diurnal activity.

**Seasonal Movements/Migration:** Not migratory over most of range, but leaves northeastern California in fall and winter, presumably migrating south. Flocks become nomadic in fall seeking food. In winter, flocks become more widespread from Marin to Santa Cruz cos. and in Sacramento River Delta.

**Home Range:** Breeders in Colusa and Yuba cos. traveled as far as 6.4 km (4 mi) from nest to feed; in each of 2 colonies, members foraged over more than 78 km<sup>2</sup> (80 mi<sup>2</sup>) (Orians 1961).

**Territory:** Breeding territory, which includes only vicinity of nest, usually about 3.3 m<sup>2</sup> (85 ft<sup>2</sup>), or less, in dense vegetation, but may be larger in less suitable cover (Orians 1961).

**Reproduction:** Usual breeding season mid-April into late July. Orians (1960) also reported active breeding in October and November in Sacramento Valley. Polygynous; each male may have several mates nesting in his small territory. A colony varies in size from a minimum of about 50 nests (Grinnell and Miller 1944) to over 20,000 in an area of 4 ha (10 ac), or less (DeHaven et al. 1975). Colonies were even larger in former decades. Apparently has highest nesting density of any blackbird in North America (Ehrlich et al. 1988). Clutch size usually 3 or 4 eggs, range 2-6; may raise 2 broods per yr (Terres 1980). Incubation lasts about 11 days; altricial young tended by female or by both parents. Young leave nest at about 13 days. Probably breeds first at 1 yr (Harrison 1978).

**Niche:** Highly gregarious in all seasons. Dense breeding colonies vulnerable to massive nest destruction by mammalian and avian predators, including Swainson's hawks (Bent 1958).

## REFERENCES

- Bent, A. C. 1958. Life histories of North American blackbirds, orioles, tanagers, and allies. U.S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 211. 549pp.
- Collier, G. 1968. Annual cycle and behavioral relationships in the red-winged and tricolored blackbirds of southern California. Ph.D. Thesis, Univ. California, Los Angeles. 374pp.
- Crane, F. T., and R. W. DeHaven. 1978. Food selection by five sympatric California blackbird species. Calif. Fish and Game 64:255-267.
- DeHaven, R. W., F. T. Crane, and P. P. Woronecki. 1975. Breeding status of the tricolored blackbird, 1969-1972. Calif. Fish and Game 61:166-180.
- Ehrlich, P. R., D. S. Dobkin, and D. Wheye. 1988. The birder's handbook. Simon and Schuster, New York. 785pp.
- Garrett, K., and J. Dunn. 1981. Birds of southern California. Los Angeles Audubon Soc. 408pp.
- Grinnell, J., and A. H. Miller. 1944. The distribution of the birds of California. Pac. Coast Avifauna No. 27. 608pp.
- Harrison, C. 1978. A field guide to the nests, eggs and nestlings of North American birds. W. Collins Sons and Co., Cleveland, OH. 416pp.
- Harrison, C. J. O., ed. 1978. Bird families of the world. Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York. 264pp.
- Lack, D., and J. T. Emlen, Jr. 1939. Observations on breeding behavior in tricolored red-wings. Condor 41:225-230.
- Martin, A. C., H. S. Zim, and A. L. Nelson. 1961. American wildlife and plants, a guide to wildlife food habits. Dover Publ., Inc., New York. 500pp.
- McCaskie, G., P. De Benedictis, R. Erickson, and J. Morlan. 1979. Birds of northern California, an annotated field list. 2nd ed. Golden Gate Audubon Soc., Berkeley. 84pp.
- Neff, J. A. 1937. Nesting distribution of the tri-colored red-wing. Condor 39:61-81.
- Orians, G. H. 1960. Autumnal breeding in the tricolored blackbird. Auk 77:379-398.
- Orians, G. H. 1961. The ecology of blackbird (*Agelaius*) social systems. Ecol. Monogr. 31:285-312.
- Payne, R. B. 1969. Breeding season and reproductive physiology of tricolored and red-winged blackbirds. Univ. Calif. Publ. Zool. 90:1-114.
- Skorupa, J. P., R. L. Hothem, and R. W. DeHaven. 1980. Foods of breeding tricolored blackbirds in agricultural areas of Merced County, California. Condor 82:465-467.
- Terres, J. K. 1980. The Audubon Society encyclopedia of North American birds. A. Knopf, New York. 1100pp.

---

Life history accounts for species in the California Wildlife Habitat Relationships (CWHR) System were originally published in: Zeiner, D.C., W.F.Laudenslayer, Jr., K.E. Mayer, and M. White, eds. 1988-1990. California's Wildlife. Vol. I-III. California Department of Fish and Game, Sacramento, California. Updates are noted in accounts that have been added or edited since original publication.