WILDLIFE AND LAND MANAGEMENT EXPERTS ARE DISCOVERING A COOPERATIVE CONSERVATION APPROACH TO HABITAT PROTECTION. THE STRATEGY ALLOWS LANDOWNERS, ENVIRONMENTALISTS AND GOVERNMENT THE FLEXIBITY TO FIND WORKABLE SOLUTIONS THAT PROTECT AT-RISK SPECIES AND HABITAT.

Finding the Perfect Balance

Story by Stephanie O'Neill

When University of California, Davis biologist Bob Meese located nearly a third of the world's population of Tricolored Blackbirds nesting in a silage field on a Tulare dairy farm last year, he considered it a mixed blessing.

The positive side reflected that the huge colony of 80,000 birds had built their nests, and had hatched a new generation of fledglings vital to the survival of what once was the most abundant native bird in California. On the other side, the discovery of the mega colony on private land worried Meese.

Concerns grew from the birds' ultimate survival being dependent upon the farmer agreeing to delay harvest of the silage crops he needed to feed his cattle. Without his participation, the entire colony of baby birds, unable yet to fly, might have been mown down with the grain.

Despite its at-risk status, the Tricolored Blackbird isn't protected by the California Endangered Species Act (CESA) or its federal equivalent. Instead, the bird is at the forefront of a new approach to wildlife conservation that employs flexibility and cooperation in lieu of rigid regulations. Often called, "cooperative conservation," this new strategy focuses on input and agreement from private landowners, environmentalists, government officials and scientists, like Meese, to protect at-risk species and habitats.

"What we're trying to do here is

Despite its at-risk status, the Tricolored Blackbird isn't protected by the California Endangered Species Act or its federal equivalent. In one case, a farmer agreed to delay harvest of his field to spare a coloney of birds too young to fly. The decision by the landowner reflects a new approach that employs flexibility and cooperation in lieu of rigid regulations.

Photo by Dave Menke, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

figure out a way where everyone comes out feeling okay. The birds are raising their young; farmers get, maybe not 100 percent of what they want for their crop, but 90 percent; and a crisis is averted," says Meese.

Less conflict is another benefit for residents of affected communities, Meese suggests. "When you pass each other on the street you're not enemies," he says.

In the case of the Tulare colony offspring, the farmer not only agreed to delay harvest of his grain crops to save the fledgling blackbirds, he also declined any government reimbursements he could have commanded. "Essentially all of those birds fledged, and he didn't want a dime. But it runs the gamut," Meese says.

Sometimes saving the birds costs nothing. Other times, Meese must dip into California's federally-funded Landowner Incentive Program, designed to assist state agencies with conserving at-risk species and their habitats on private land. Crop delays of six to 10 days can cost the incentive program fund thousands of dollars, he says, while total crop buyouts can run into the tens of thousands of dollars. In the worst cases, some landowners have refused, with impunity, to participate in the conservation efforts.

And for the blackbird—which typically nests in large colonies—that's especially problematic, says John Gustafson, a former staff environmental scientist for the California Department of Fish and Game.

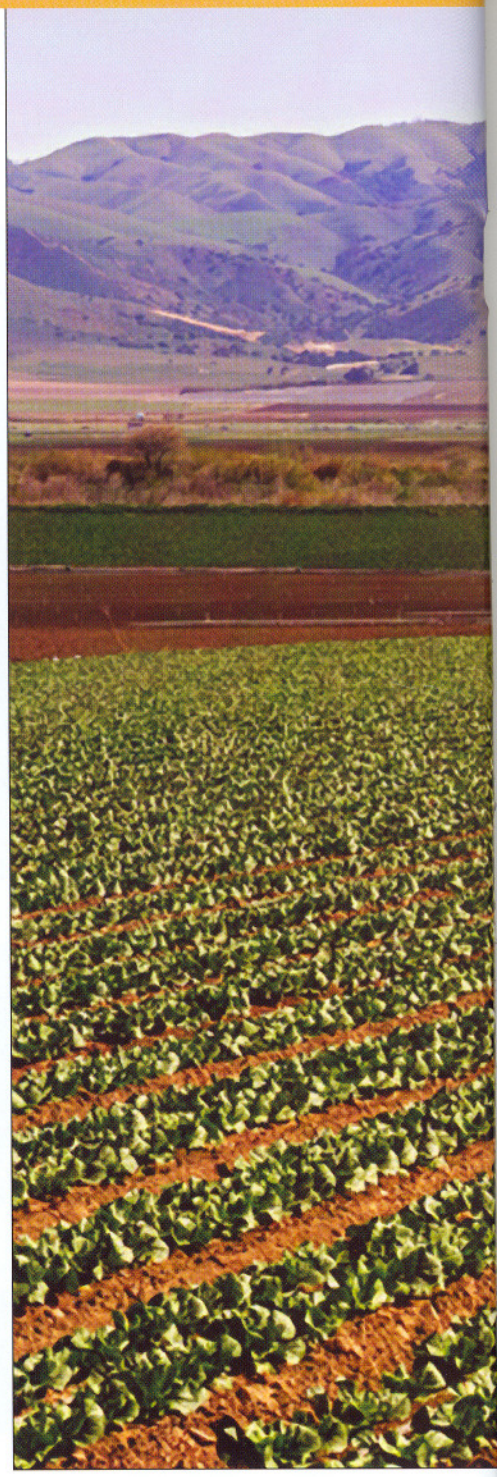
"It's critical to save those colonies because they contain the bulk of all the Tricolored Blackbirds in existence," Gustafson says. "A few years ago we had a colony with 90 percent of California's blackbird population. If that colony's (young) are lost, a whole year's production of young birds is lost. If that happened a second or third year in a row, the consequences would be dire."

Photo © D. Charles Smith

Should such ominous possibilities, then, become a justification for the heavy stick of government regulation? Not at all, say leading environmentalists.

"While it might seem satisfying to come in and yield a lawsuit or rely on regulatory action, which both have their places, sometimes it's not the most effective way to create long-range strategies," says Graham Chisholm, director of conservation for Audubon California.

Audubon California is a non-partisan, non-profit organization that is dedicated to the conservation and restoration of natural ecosystems. The group's Web site states it focuses on birds, wildlife, and habitats for the benefit of the earth's biological diversity. Chisholm says that while he believes the Tricolored Blackbird should qualify for federal and state endangered species listings, the regulatory route would be a less-effective way to its recovery. "To the extent agriculture is willing to be proactive, and work with conservation agencies like Audubon, I



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New strategies found in the Department of Fish and Game's wildlife action plan suggests a cooperative approach between those involved in protecting at-risk species. DFG's plan considers not only the species involved, such as the Tricolored Blackbird, previous page, but an entire ecosystem within a designated habitat. The approach opens more possibilities that each side, from the owners of farms, above, to environmentalists, can access more often.

think listing is not warranted," he says.

Chisholm points out that the burdensome regulatory approach often results in expensive, drawn-out legal battles; little protection to the species during litigation; and bans or restrictions on farming—even when it's the farmer who may have created the birds' habitat in the first place.

"So often the species is there because of what the land owner is doing, and then regulations come down and say stop doing that," says Noelle Cremers, director of natural resources and commodities for the California Farm Bureau. "It's really difficult because a farmer is going about his daily business, and growing crops for food, or fiber for clothes, and then you have a species come and inhabit the land, and the land gets listed under CESA."

The cooperative approach in most cases is endorsed by the Department of Fish and Game in its "California Wildlife: Conservation Challenges,"

a statewide action plan that explores methods to benefit wildlife and habitats, with an emphasis on species of greatest conservation need. Parts of the nearly 600-page plan speak directly at utilizing a regional, habitat, and multi-species approach when considering conservation issues. The idea is to approach the issues and needs from a regional landscape, habitat, and ecosystem level, rather than taking a species-by-species approach. "Nongovernmental conservation organizations ... are encouraging broad approaches to conservation, developing projects that benefit not just individual species but the full complement of species that make up ecological communities," the study states.

In California, home to 95 percent of the world's Tricolored Blackbird population, it's estimated only 250,000 to 300,000 of the birds remain. Tricolored Blackbirds hold some similarities to that of a Red-winged Blackbird, but there are slight distinctions in shape and color. At about 14-inches, the wingspan of a Tricolored Blackbird is longer than that of a Red-winged. An average Tricolored weighs a little more than 2 ounces, and will grow to nearly 9 inches. The bill is also narrower. An adult male Tricolored Blackbird is black with a glossy bluish tint in sunlight. Its wing coverts or epaulets are dark red and whitish. A young male resembles the adult, but with duller black and gray plumage.

The loss of native wetlands in the state's Central Valley starting in the 1950s pushed the population to a dangerous low. And without those once-vast wetlands, the birds now rely mostly on farm-generated habitats. In the San Joaquin Valley, dairy farm silage fields and ditches are favorite nesting spots. Farther north, they settle in rice and alfalfa fields.

"To the extent that the Tricolored Blackbird is dependent on private land, agricultural land in particular, it's important for us to think how we can adopt strategies that engage the farming community and dairy community," Audubon California's Chisholm says.

Sustainable Conservation is a non-profit environmental organization that coordinated an alliance of 16 environmental, agriculture and government organizations to design protections for the Tricolored Blackbird. The group recently made headlines by authoring and signing an agreement that creates a blackbird conservation strategy that has become the model for cooperative conservation.

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Graham Chisholm, Audubon California

"What brings everyone together, while we all have different reasons for sitting at the table, is that it's in everyone's interest to prevent listing of a species," explains Susan Kester, project manager for Sustainable Conservation.

"In the case of agricultural groups, if a bird is listed then their members' land is going to be regulated; their cooperation is no longer voluntary," she says. "Wildlife agencies don't want to list because listing is expensive and contentious. And conservation organizations want to keep populations up before they hit rock bottom. So the reason for everyone's involvement is different. But it's in everyone's best interest to cooperate and come up with a voluntary approach. It's the carrot not the stick."

What's more, cooperative conservation allows flexibility in solutions. For instance, the less-restrictive "California Bird of Special Concern" list that includes the Tricolored Blackbird, and 73 other species, allows farmers to chase the birds away from their land before they start nesting.

"With the Tricolored Blackbird you can actually scare them away so they won't choose your field to nest, and hopefully that will push them to a native habitat," Cremers says. Under CESA, by contrast, that behavior would constitute illegal hazing.

Cremers says working with rather than in opposition to the interests of farmers and ranchers has sown a level of goodwill that's harvested more interest in wildlife and habitat protection overall. "Individually, many landowners get very attached to a species, and go out of their way to create habitat, and promote the species being there," says Cremers. "I've been at a meeting with a (farmer) member who brought pictures of California Condors that landed on his property. It's always great to see that."

"Cooperative conservation works for wildlife, and it works for family farmers and ranchers," says Doug Mosebar, California Farm Bureau President, one of the blackbird alliance members. He says collaboration rather than regulation works for his membership as it "recognizes the important role that productive farmland plays in providing habitat for the Tricolored Blackbird."

Lyann Comrack is a DFG scientist, and one of the lead biologists who updated and modified the California Bird Species of Special Concern list, first established in 1978. Since 2000, Comrack has witnessed first-hand the benefits of collaboration as a member of a group to save the endangered Least Tern.

Unlike the Tricolored Blackbird, the Least Tern is named on both the state and federal endangered species lists, Comrack says. Nevertheless, a group of private citizens, federal and state biologists, consultants, and environmental groups have met twice a year for decades to develop conservation strategies, and to share information about Least Tern recovery efforts. "It's a positive approach that's yielding benefits for the species," she says. "We can show their numbers are increasing through our efforts, so I'm optimistic about this kind of approach."

Sustainable Conservation's Kester agrees, saying the Tricolored Blackbird effort is now considered a successful model of cooperative conservation. "I've always believed environmentalists and farmers have a lot in common, but they're often at opposite ends of a particular issue," she says. "Working together to formulate a solution that represents a compromise is a win for everybody."

That's especially true in a state as large and ecologically diverse as California.

"California is going to grow from 37 million to 50 million people in the next two decades," Chisholm warns. "To be successful, from a conservation standpoint, we must be willing to use a whole series of strategies. Where we can, we must find opportunities to be proactive, protect what is most important, and to also recognize that our communities are going to grow, and those are legitimate interests ... we absolutely have to be willing to reach out and try to make that happen."

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