The Alarming Decline in Abundance of California’s Blackbird, the Tricolor

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California Department of Fish and Wildlife
February 26, 2015
Acknowledgements

- U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
- California Department of Fish & Wildlife
- JiJi Foundation
- Audubon California
- Sacramento Audubon
- Geyer and Associates
- Landowners
- Agency staff and volunteer observers
- Agency staff and volunteer banders
Overview of Presentation

I. Natural history and field identification
II. What makes tricolors special?
III. Trends over past century
   1. Abundance
   2. Distribution
III. Factors producing trends
IV. Legal Status
V. Recovering the tricolor
VI. The future
Natural History

• Largely endemic to California
  > 99% of individuals within state
• Sexually dimorphic in size, plumage, behavior
  ◦ Males ca. 65 g, females ca. 40 g
  ◦ Males glossy black w/red epaulet, white wing bar
  ◦ Females dull brown/grey, heavily streaked ventrally, lesser amounts of color in wings
  ◦ Males attract settling females, typically mate with 2 females, do not help to build nest nor incubate eggs, but do help to feed young
Field Identification

Adult male Tricolored Blackbird

Adult male Red-wing Blackbird
What is the best way to discriminate between red-wings and tricolors?

Behavior!!!
Comparison to Red-winged Blackbird: Distribution

Red-winged Blackbird

Tricolored Blackbird
Comparison to Red-winged Blackbird: Natural History

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Red-winged Blackbird</th>
<th>Tricolored Blackbird</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>♂</strong> 50-100g</td>
<td><strong>♂</strong> 60-70g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>♀</strong> 30-60g</td>
<td><strong>♀</strong> 30-45g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 subspecies</td>
<td>0 subspecies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Territorial</td>
<td>Highly colonial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widespread</td>
<td>Nearly endemic to CA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Super-abundant</td>
<td>Much reduced abundance</td>
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Natural History

• Nest-building takes 3-4 days
• Females typically lay 3 or 4 eggs
• Nests built in a wide variety of substrates
  ◦ Cattail/bulrush marsh, Himalayan blackberries, nettles, milk thistle, triticale, mustard, mallow, *Arundo donax*
• Incubation ca. 12 days
• Fledging takes 10-14 days
• Brood Reducers
• Itinerant Breeding
Natural History: Breeding Colony Requirements

1. Nesting substrate
2. Open water
3. Food
   1. Require insects and other invertebrates for egg formation and to feed young
   2. Otherwise eat primarily seeds and grains
   3. Very often found in association with livestock due to provisioning of ad libitum grains, Sacramento Valley birds often in association with rice
Natural History: Foraging

- Vast majority of foraging occurs within a 6 km radius from colony
- Insects frequently derived from relatively small, highly-productive habitats
  - Agricultural landscapes: alfalfa, sunflowers
  - Remnant shrublands (when caterpillars abundant)
- Exceptions: colonies in grasslands, rice
  - Birds forage widely, may not concentrate on small habitat patches
  - “grasshopper followers”
- Utilize wide range of foraging tactics
What makes tricolors special?

- Colonial
  - Form largest colonies of any North American passerine
- Restricted Range
  - Nearly all individuals in California
  - < 1,000 birds outside California
- Insectivorous during breeding season
  - Females require insects to form eggs
  - Nestlings require insects for first 9 days of life
- Itinerant Breeders
  - Most breed once and then again in a different location (most Central Valley birds)
- Highly diverse foraging tactics
Population Trend

- Pre-Columbian abundance unknown, but certainly in the millions
- Johnson Neff worked with tricolors in 1930’s, extrapolation from Central Valley segment: likely 2-3 million birds in 1930s
- “Statewide” Surveys between 1994 and 2005 yielded a wide range of population estimates from 150,000 to 400,000 birds
- Comparing estimates difficult due to differences in completeness, methodology, level of effort, data management, and knowledge
Population Trend

- Statewide Survey methodology changed and Tricolored Blackbird Portal developed in 2008
- 2008, 2011, and 2014 Statewide Surveys **ARE** directly comparable

Recent Trend in Abundance

Down 44% in 3 years, 64% in 6 years
Relative Survey Completeness

Number of Counties Surveyed
- 2001: 13
- 2005: 24
- 2008: 35
- 2011: 29
- 2014: 41
Legal Status

- Tricolored Blackbird listed as Endangered under California Endangered Species Act in December, 2014 due to alarming decline documented in the 2008 – 2014 Statewide Surveys and persistent threats to the species
- CBD petitioned for listing under ESA Feb. 3, 2015
  - Is protected under the MBTA
  - Federal species of conservation concern
Distribution Trend

- Almost or entirely eliminated from former coastal marshes in central and southern California
  - Formerly most abundant bird in LA/San Diego region (Unitt 2004)
  - Absent from Orange and Ventura counties
  - 91% reduction in abundance in 6 coastal counties from 2008-2014 (< 700 birds seen in 2014)

- Gaps in distribution in Central Valley
  - Eliminated or nearly eliminated as breeding species from entire counties: San Joaquin, Kings (1)
  - 78% reduction in abundance in San Joaquin Valley from 2008 - 2014
Factors Causing Decline

- Habitat Loss
  - Land conversions
    - Agriculture
    - Urbanization
  - Water Diversions and Overdrafts
    - Loss of extensive Central Valley as well as coastal marsh habitats
- Deliberate poisoning
  - Agricultural pests; strychnine (banned in 1972)
- Shooting
  - Market hunting
  - Agricultural pests (supposed to have stopped when added to list of birds protected under MBTA in 1989 but continues today)
- Destruction of Colonies During Silage Harvest
- Pesticides?
Central Valley

Central Valley Facts:

- 20,000 square miles
- More than 250 different crops with an estimated value of $17 billion /year
- Approximately 25% of the table food consumed in the US is grown in the Central Valley
- Approximately 17% of the Nation’s irrigated land is in the Central Valley
- Approximately 20% of the Nation’s groundwater pumpage is from the Central Valley aquifer system

USGS
Loss of Habitats

Central Valley land cover

Pre-1900 Land Cover
- Alkali Desert Scrub
- Aquatic
- Chaparral
- Grassland
- Upland Forested Habitat
- Riparian
- Valley/Fluvial & Hardwood
- Wetland

Current Land Cover
- Native Veg
- Crops
- Fields
- Urban
- Other
Nut Orchards - Almonds

**STANISLAUS ALMOND ACREAGE**
Stanislaus County acres on which almonds were harvested, by year:

- **1950**: 6,018 acres
- **2013**: 160,200 acres

Source: Stanislaus County crop reports from 1950 through 2013

Laurie McAdam | lmadam@modbee.com
Nut Orchards - Pistachios
Vineyards

Central Valley California
Dairies
Rice
Harvest of Grain Fields used by Birds

Plainsburg Road, Merced County

Tricolored Blackbird Colony Destruction

May 19, 2006
Autumnal Shooting in Ripening Rice

- In autumn, tricolors flock with other blackbird species and European starlings in the Sacramento Valley and feed on ripening rice.
- These other species are exempted from protections under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act when causing or are about to cause depredations to ripening rice, may be legally shot.
- In autumn, an unknown number of birds is shot when in multi-species flocks in ripening rice.
- New reporting requirements may help, but any tricolor shot may bring penalties under CESA.
Recovering the Tricolor

- Recovering the Tricolored Blackbird will be exceedingly difficult
  - Primary driver of decline: habitat loss
  - Colonial nesting habit + insect-dependence means intense demands on nearby landscapes
  - In nearly the entire Central Valley floor, foraging habitats are either anthropogenic and unproductive or semi-natural remnants and too small
  - Insecticides reduce insect populations further

- Strategic Choices in Strategic Locations
  - In San Joaquin Valley
    - Private duck club (nesting habitat + water) adjacent to large (160 acres+) amounts of unsprayed alfalfa
    - National Wildlife Refuge (nesting habitat + water) adjacent to rangelands
    - Sympathetic dairyman (nesting habitat) adjacent to rangelands
Recovering the Tricolor

- **Sacramento Valley**
  - National Wildlife Refuges and State Wildlife Areas are nesting habitat islands in a sea of rice – where are birds to forage?
  - Conservation Easements on strategic properties where adequate foraging habitat exists
    - Conaway Ranch, Yolo County
      - Organic rice, nearby alfalfa and sunflowers
    - Yuba County
      - Ranches with ponds and Himalayan blackberries plus irrigated pasture

- **Southern California**
  - Protected areas for nesting but severely limited foraging
  - Man-made wetlands
    - water treatment facilities (artificial wetlands)
    - flood protection
    - alfalfa for foraging?

- **Coast**
  - 91% reduction in abundance 2008-2014
  - Work with private landowners to conserve and enhance existing wetlands
  - Foraging in grasslands, coast live oaks for caterpillars?
Recovering the Tricolor

- **Central Sierra Foothills**
  - Population up 25% in 6 years (2008-2014)
  - Extensive foraging in rangelands – grasshoppers
  - Livestock + tricolors mutually beneficial
  - Expand nesting habitats?

- **Education and outreach**
  - Ranchers, dairymen, RCDs, county ag commissioners

- **Administrative + Legal**
  - Modify MBTA to prohibit shooting in autumn?
    - Eliminate mortality to post-breeding adults foraging with other blackbird species in ripening rice
  - Review County General Plans, HCPs for tricolor-specific provisions
The Future

• Near-term outlook bleak
  ◦ Decline will continue - we’re not at the bottom
  ◦ Habitat losses continue – options few
  ◦ 2012-2014 worst 3 years of breeding ever recorded
  ◦ On-going drought intensifying effects
  ◦ No stable age distribution: population aging

• We’re getting started very (too?) late

• On-the-ground actions must start now

• All man-caused mortality must cease
  ◦ Killing of eggs and nestlings during harvest
  ◦ Shooting of adults in autumn

• Productivity must increase
  ◦ Foraging habitats/insect availability key to productivity
The Future

- We must get started now with strategically-chosen actions in strategically-chosen locations.
- Focus on southern California and San Joaquin Valley where birds were recently the most abundant.
- We need an “all hands on deck” approach that includes industry, land owners, county, state, and federal agencies, experts and public and private protected areas including DOD properties, State Wildlife Areas, National Wildlife Refuges, private ranches.
Tricolored Blackbird Portal: http://tricolor.ice.ucdavis.edu
The End...