

The Genesis and Program of Audubon Chapter Tricolored Blackbird Action Team

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It is fascinating how every now and then all of the pieces of a big puzzle fall into place. In this instance, I refer to the genesis of Audubon Chapter Tricolored Blackbird Action Team. I offer this story to inform people of our program to take action to protect and enhance the population of the Tricolored Blackbird (*Agelaius tricolor*), enlist others in the effort, and encourage others to adopt similar active and practical approaches to assist other imperiled species.

This project began improbably in 2005 when I was asked to participate in the triennial statewide Tricolored Blackbird survey. I had no idea what was involved but signed up anyway out of curiosity. I talked three friends, Len McKenzie, Joe Frank, and Paul Oldale, into attending a training seminar with me. After the seminar, we were excited and enlisted the help of the Yosemite Area Audubon Society (YAAS).

We had a great, yet frustrating time doing the survey. We drove virtually every road in Merced County checking every site where tricolors were known to have nested in the past, checking out every dairy that we could find, and looking for potential nesting habitat. We didn't see a single Tricolored Blackbird. We had the same results in 2008, but in 2011 we hit pay dirt—a 60,000-bird nesting colony in an agricultural field near the intersection of Childs and Cunningham roads in Merced County. We immediately called Keiller Kyle of Audubon California. The next day, Keiller began negotiating with the property owner to delay the crop's harvest until after all the nestlings had fledged. But the efforts were to no avail, the field was harvested before the birds had fledged. The killing of all those nestlings irritated me. I wanted to do something about it, but what? I didn't have the foggiest idea of what to do or how to do it.

In 2008, I learned that Ed Pandolfino and Zach Smith were putting together the first-ever survey of winter raptors in California's Central Valley (Pandolfino et al. 2011). I established a route that began in the grasslands of Merced County and ended in the foothills of Mariposa County. The survey was done in December, January, and February and ran for three years. We had the time of our lives doing the raptor surveys, we call them Raptor Runs, and didn't want to stop doing them at the end of the three years. I called Ed and Zack and told them that we wanted to continue doing our survey, do it all year

and keep sending the data to them if they wanted. Their response was an enthusiastic, “go for it!”

In May 2011, during a Raptor Run survey, Bill Ralph, and I found small numbers of Tricolored Blackbirds in five different locations along a two-mile stretch of Preston Road in the Mariposa County foothills. About then, the Sierra Nevada Conservancy asked YAAS to sign a letter of support for a grant proposal to restore meadows in the High Sierra. They proposed to fence and restore creeks and provide watering troughs outside the creek zone for the cows. Those two events got me to thinking, why couldn't we do the same thing in the foothills and provide nesting habitat for tricolors that would be out of harm's way? I talked to many people about the idea, and nearly everyone I shared it with dismissed it as unworkable or unrealistic. The exceptions were Ed Pandolfino, and Mike Sutton and Garry George of Audubon California. I was not dissuaded.

At the October 2011 YAAS meeting. Steve Simmons talked about his extensive and impressive local nest box program for Barn Owls (*Tyto alba*) and American Kestrels (*Falco sparverius*). Steve accompanied us on one of our Raptor Runs and banded most of the American Kestrels that we saw. It wasn't long before Bill Ralph had YAAS involved in developing a nest-box program for kestrels.

Another piece of the puzzle was about to fall into place. Several months later on another Raptor Run, we were stopped while looking at a distant raptor trying to identify it. A pickup truck pulled up alongside ours and asked what we were doing. I told him about the survey and added, “We're also looking for places to put kestrel nest boxes.”

I quickly told the rancher about the benefits of us putting up nest boxes on his property. I hardly had the words, “They eat grasshoppers” out of my mouth when he said, “How many and how soon can you get them on my place?” We now knew a rancher who wanted to work with us. He also introduced us to other ranchers, all of whom have placed nest boxes on their property. We now have over 400 nest boxes for kestrels, owls, and other cavity-nesting birds in areas where there are few if any trees for them to nest.

All of the pieces of the puzzle were coming together. We now had property owners who wanted to work with us and put up kestrel nest boxes. I was confident that they would also work with us with tricolors. Then on September 3, 2014 as we were starting a Raptor Run, a rancher pulled up and asked, “Are you the guys who are putting up the nest boxes?” Len McKenzie told him with great enthusiasm, “We sure are, why?” “Well, my brother and I would like some on our place.” he replied. While we were talking, I happened to mention what we were doing with Tricolored Blackbirds and about our plans to enhance and create safe nesting and foraging habitat for them. He looked at me intently for a moment and said, “What do they look like?” After I had described the species to him he smiled and said, “We have them nesting

on our place and we'll work with you with them too." I was thrilled. Another piece of the puzzle had fallen into place. I now knew that many property owners would work with us once they understood the benefits they would derive from being bird friendly, and one had just volunteered to do so. Now, there were just two critical pieces of the puzzle that I hadn't found. Where would we get the money and the help that would be needed?

In October 2013, Mike Sutton, Vice President of the Pacific Flyway for National Audubon, was YAAS's guest speaker. Len McKenzie and I told Mike about my idea for Tricolored Blackbirds. He agreed it had merit and said he had access to money for these types of projects. Now all I needed was people to help find willing property owners and to get the projects going.

I began a campaign to get other Audubon Chapters involved to collaborate with YAAS to work with the owners of property in the Sierra foothills to protect, enhance, and restore Tricolored Blackbird nesting habitat in the Sierra foothills. Garry George, was able to find money for three grants for Tricolored projects. As a result of his efforts, Kern Audubon & Kerncrest Audubon are working together to restore three wetland sites in the Kern River Valley where tricolors previously nested. They are digging a well and installing a solar pump in one wetland and enhancing the existing habitat at the other two. San Bernardino Valley Audubon also is restoring a wetland site on Riverside Conservancy property adjacent to the San Jacinto Wildlife Area in Riverside County.

In early 2014, I learned that Dr. Robert "Bob" Meese, wildlife professor at UC Davis, was leading the 2014 Tricolored Blackbird Statewide Surveys. Due to time limitations, I only surveyed Mariposa County. When I went through the well-organized survey preparation materials that Bob sent out, I was surprised there wasn't a single previous tricolored sighting shown for Mariposa County, because I knew that there had been some sightings. By going through various listserves and eBird, I found more than 30 locations where tricolors had been seen by credible birders in Mariposa County. All of these locations are now entered into the Tricolored Blackbird Portal, a centralized database maintained by Bob at UC Davis (tricolor.ice.ucdavis.edu).

Jim Ticer, Len McKenzie, and I surveyed each of the sites twice in mid-April 2014. Due to the drought conditions, the nesting habitat conditions at all but one site were horrible. At the one suitable site on Mt Gains Rd., we saw Tricolored Blackbirds carrying full bills of insects into what was obviously a small nesting colony.

I then called Bob Meese to report our results and to discuss my ideas about and desire to enhance, restore, and create nesting habitat in the foothills. Bob said that he thought it would be worth looking into doing so. He then informed me that the Statewide Survey results had shown that breeding populations in the state had declined by 64% over the last six years, and that nesting populations had nearly disappeared from a number of southern San

Joaquin Valley and Central Coast areas, but had increased in the Sierra foothills.

A short time later, Bob sent me a copy of *Results of the 2014 Tricolored Blackbird Statewide Survey* (Meese 2014). I had known the numbers were not good, but I had no idea of how bad they actually were. According to the report, the number of tricolors was down steeply statewide, but the decline was not uniform across different regions of the state. The decline was most pronounced in the San Joaquin Valley and along the Central Coast. The numbers in the San Joaquin Valley plummeted 78% in six years, from 340,700 to 73,500 birds, and the decline was especially alarming in Kern and Merced Counties. Along the Central Coast, the number of birds was down 91% in six years, from 7,014 to 627 birds. The report noted that unlike the San Joaquin Valley and along the Central Coast, during the same six-year interval the number of tricolors in the Sierra Nevada foothills and Sacramento County increased by about 145%, from about 22,500 birds to about 54,000 birds. These numbers suggest either that tricolors were either moving into the foothills from other regions or were breeding more successfully in the Sierra Nevada foothills than they were in the San Joaquin Valley or the Central Coast, or perhaps both.

After reading the report, I called Bob and reiterated my belief that restoring and creating habitat in the foothills was going to be a major part of saving our tricolors. He agreed that the idea was worthwhile, and suggested I talk to Dan Airola, who was working on tricolors in the central Sierra foothills.

Dan told me that he was conducting nesting surveys in seven counties in 2014 and was finding large numbers of nesting tricolors. Ultimately, he estimated the minimum nesting population for the foothill region between Placer and Stanislaus county to be nearly 43,000 nesting birds, or 30% of the statewide nesting population recorded in the 2014 Statewide Survey (Airola et al. 2015). As we discussed the vast population differences between the central and southern Sierra foothill Tricolored Blackbird populations, it appeared that there were two key habitat differences. First, overall the central region is wetter, and has more irrigated pasture lands and stream flow that can support nesting habitat in Himalayan blackberries (*Rubus armeniacus*), cattails (*Typha latifolia*), and tules (*Bolboschoenus californicus*). Second, despite the continuing drought, the central foothills had good spring rains in 2014 (120% of monthly average during Feb-Apr) that resulted in good growth of grasses, which may have resulted in good grasshopper production (Airola et.al. 2015) Grasshoppers, when present in abundance, serve as the key food item for tricolor nestlings.

Bob, Dan, and I talked over the next few days, and now I had the final pieces of the puzzle. They knew about tricolors and were also concerned, anxious, and motivated to get something done. And they had ties in the worlds of ornithological science and environmental regulation. They were

frustrated that there had been a long history of talk about saving our Tricolored Blackbirds, but little action to do so. So we agreed to organize a group dedicated to implementing actions to help the tricolors. We set a date for an organization meeting to develop a program to enhance the status of the Tricolored Blackbird. On 20 August 2014, 27 people attended, including concerned individuals representing seven Audubon Chapters from the foothills and Central Valley and the Central Valley Bird Club. Audubon California's Conservation Project Manager, Samantha Arthur, and their Chapter Network Director, Garry George also attended the meeting, as did Tricolored experts Bob Meese and Ted Beedy.

Audubon California is a strong supporter of our program, working closely with us to develop and complete a number of the 16 projects we identified at the workshop. They are assisting to get the projects ready for funding, and they have helped us identify sources of funding and write the grants to obtain funds for the projects. Several Audubon chapters have also stepped forward with other projects and funding. Audubon California also set up and is sponsoring our Tricolor Action Team list-serve, which makes it a lot easier to communicate with each other and keep everyone informed.

We ranked the priorities for the 16 identified projects based on several factors, which helped us determine which had the greatest possibility of being ready as soon as possible, including the 2015 nesting season. The highest priority projects are:

- *Yosemite Lake, Merced County.* Chris Swarth of YAAS is responsible for this project. Here four different property owners and a rancher, who leases some of the property, are cooperating to make this project possible. Bob Meese brought in Reyn Akiona of the USFWS to help develop a scope of work. We will excavate lands along the lake shoreline, and thereby expand and enhance the growth of emergent vegetation for nesting habitat. We will also fence potential nesting habitat in the north arm of Yosemite Lake to exclude livestock.
- *Merced National Wildlife Refuge.* Jane Manning, of Fresno Audubon Society, initiated this project, which involved three options to create a total of 175 acres of nesting habitat and 90 acres of foraging habitat at a cost of \$57,000. We were hoping to get just one of the options funded, but Samantha Arthur and Meghan Hertel of Audubon California stepped up and all three projects should be ready for the 2015 nesting season.
- *Mendota Wildlife Area/Producer's Dairy.* Robert Snow and Jane Manning of Fresno Audubon developed this project, a cooperative partnership between these two entities. Once again, Audubon California is assisting us in bringing this project to fruition by building on what Jane and Robert proposed. The project will develop nesting and foraging habitat at both locations to give the partners the flexibility they need to protect any nesting birds and also provide the silage the dairies needs. This project

could be a model for future cooperative arrangements between governmental and private interests to protect tricolor habitats, meet other environment needs, and provide benefits to public and private economic interests.

- *San Joaquin River Parkway*. Robert Snow asked me to present a program on the Audubon Chapter Tricolored Blackbird Action Team to Fresno Audubon at their general meeting. After the program, George Folsom, President of the Board of Directors for the San Joaquin River Parkway and Conservation Trust, Inc., invited me to tour the Parkway. There are opportunities to develop multiple nesting sites using several different substrates. Jeff Davis of Colibri Ecological Consulting and Fresno Audubon are doing the scoping work for this project.
- *Sierra Foothill Nesting Habitat Protection Program*. Dan Airola and I have developed a program to enter into short-term contracts to pay landowners to protect existing and recent nesting colonies on private ranch lands (see Airola and Young 2015).

Thanks to Garry George of Audubon California, we have also obtained some funding to pay for a scope of work for several projects that will give us the information we need to acquire funding to make them happen.

We are not an exclusive group. Anyone who is concerned about the plight of Tricolored Blackbirds and all the other species that share their nesting and foraging habitats, is welcome to join and participate in our team. If you know of a potential project, let us know. If you want to help in any way, we welcome the opportunity to work with you. For more information, contact me (see contact information above). I will do my best to answer your questions or direct you to those who can. If you want to join our conversations, you can do so by joining our listserv at: www.yosemiteaudubon.org/.

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