

Protecting, Restoring, and Enhancing Tricolored Blackbird Habitat on Agricultural Lands through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program

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The 2014 Statewide Tricolored Blackbird Survey, a volunteer-based triennial survey to monitor Tricolored Blackbird population trends and habitat associations, documented a 44% decline in the species' population since 2011 (Meese 2014). The population decline demonstrates the need to reduce Tricolored Blackbird mortality and provide secure nesting habitat. The 2014 Statewide Survey found 38% of Tricolored Blackbirds nesting in triticale, a wheat-rye hybrid grown for forage on dairies (Meese 2014).

The timing of triticale harvest conflicts with Tricolored Blackbird nesting, putting colonies in these fields at risk of destruction. Because a high proportion of the Tricolored Blackbird's population nests in a small number of colonies within agricultural fields, protection of these colonies is critical to the continued existence of the species. Efforts to protect Tricolored Blackbird populations in dairy silage fields from 2005—2009 contributed significantly to Tricolored Blackbird productivity (Meese 2009). While short-term protection of colonies in silage fields is necessary, the long-term survival of Tricolored Blackbirds requires creation of safe nesting sites that do not conflict with dairy operations (Meese et al. 2015).

In January 2015, the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) announced its selection of projects under its new Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). NRCS awarded the conservation-dairy industry partnership between Audubon California, California Farm Bureau Federation, Dairy Cares, Sustainable Conservation, and Western United Dairymen \$1.1 million over five years to protect, restore, and enhance Tricolored Blackbird habitat on agricultural lands. The Tricolored Blackbird RCPP grant seeks to contribute to the efforts to save the species by protecting colonies in silage fields and restoring or enhancing habitat that provides safe nesting sites on agricultural lands.

In addition to the \$1.1 million RCPP grant award, project partners committed matching in-kind and cash contributions to lift the investment in Tricolored Blackbird conservation to nearly \$2 million. With letters of support from eleven organizations and the NRCS State Conservationist, the Tricolored

Blackbird RCPP project was one of two projects selected for funding by NRCS in the Bay Delta Critical Conservation Area (BDCCA) and one of six projects selected in California. While the needs of Tricolored Blackbirds are numerous and widespread, Audubon California and its partners see this effort as an important piece of the larger effort needed to recover the population.

REGIONAL CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM

The RCPP was developed in the 2014 Farm Bill to promote coordination between the NRCS and its partners to deliver conservation assistance to agricultural producers and landowners. Roughly \$1.4 billion in RCPP applications were received but only \$370 million were awarded to projects that address water quality degradation, insufficient water supplies or inadequate habitat for fish and wildlife. National, state, and critical conservation area funding pools were designed by the United States Department of Agriculture to distribute RCPP funds. RCPP grants obligate up to five years of funding to be used in existing NRCS programs, with funding going directly to eligible landowners and producers. The Tricolored Blackbirds RCPP project utilizes the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program to distribute \$800,000 to \$900,000 directly to landowners as part of cost-shares for Tricolored Blackbird protection, restoration, and enhancement, with the remainder to go to NRCS and partner staff to carry out the grant goals.

TRICOLORED BLACKBIRD RCPP PROJECT GOALS

The Tricolored Blackbird RCPP goals were developed directly from the 2007 Conservation Plan for the Tricolored Blackbird (Tricolored Blackbird Working Group 2007), which was signed by sixteen cooperating organizations or joint ventures that represented collections of organizations. The Conservation Plan identifies two conservation and management goals: 1) protect, create, restore, and manage habitats needed to support viable, self-sustaining populations of tricolors; and 2) protect silage-nesting tricolors until sufficient, permanent breeding habitat is available to maintain viable self-sustaining populations. The plan also includes additional research, data management, and general outreach goals that were outside the scope of the RCPP application.

The Tricolored Blackbird RCPP partners developed four project goals that align with objectives and tasks described in the Conservation Plan and reflect the strengths and capacities of the partner organizations.

- Implement habitat restoration and enhancement projects on NRCS Wetland Reserve Program properties or private agricultural lands to provide safe nesting sites for Tricolored Blackbirds. (USDA Farm Bill programs administered by NRCS are designed for agricultural producers and funds are restricted to use on current or former agricultural lands.)

- Partially compensate farmers in the Central Valley for lost crop value from harvest delays when Tricolored Blackbirds nest in their fields. This continues the already successfully launched NRCS program in California that was critical over the last three years to the survival and successful reproduction of large Tricolored Blackbird colonies on dairy farms and forage operations in the Central Valley of California.
- Develop long-term solutions that can substitute for federal harvest management practices when farmers have Tricolored Blackbird colonies on their fields and avoid situations leading to the destruction of colonies on forage fields (i.e., crop insurance programs or silage banks).
- Establish an industry-led campaign for outreach to farmers on the importance of the Tricolored Blackbird and their role in saving the species.

GEOGRAPHIC FOCUS

The Secretary of Agriculture defined geographic areas across the country where RCPP funding could be applied for and used, one of which is the BDCCA. The geographic focus of this project is Tricolored Blackbird nesting habitat in the San Joaquin Valley of the BDCCA. Stanislaus, Merced, Fresno, Kings, Tulare, and Kern counties are included in the project area to address the areas where concentrated, large Tricolored Blackbird colonies occur on dairy farms and associated forage operations. Madera and Mariposa counties are also included to capture recently documented large colonies or potential restoration opportunities.

The RCPP project designates funds to its project goals and geographic area, but existing NRCS programs will continue to be available outside of the project area. The same practices, such as habitat restoration, that will be utilized in the San Joaquin Valley are available statewide and we hope projects will be developed across the entire Tricolored Blackbird range.

CONCLUSION

A Statewide Survey conducted in 2014 documented approximately 145,000 Tricolored Blackbirds in California, down 44% from 258,000 birds in 2011 and down 64% from 395,000 birds in 2008 (Meese 2014). The steep decline in Tricolored Blackbirds calls for an all-hands-on-deck approach to its recovery. The RCPP project is one piece of a larger effort that is needed through the Tricolored Blackbird's range and life cycle. We hope to see additional efforts and investments that address the many challenges faced by this unique California bird.

LITERATURE CITED

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Large mixed blackbird flock composed mainly of Tricolored Blackbirds, taken 28 October 2007 by *Robert J. Meese* outside Birds Landing, Solano County. Flocks of this size have not been reported in recent years, likely reflecting the species 63% statewide population decline from 2008-2014.