

# Efforts to Assess the Status of the Tricolored Blackbird from 1931 to 2014

Robert J. Meese

*Department of Environmental Science & Policy, University of California,  
One Shields Avenue, Davis, CA 95616; [rjmeese@ucdavis.edu](mailto:rjmeese@ucdavis.edu)*

The Tricolored Blackbird (*Agelaius tricolor*; hereafter, also “tricolor”), is unique to California. Among its many salient traits, the tricolor is colonial, and often nests in large groups that place heavy demands upon the local biota. Globally, colonial species are believed to be highly vulnerable (Terborgh 1974), and many have become conservation priorities. The tricolor is among these, as it has over the past century suffered a steep population decline due to reductions in its native breeding and foraging habitats and several other factors (Beedy and Hamilton 1997). More recently, elevated rates of mortality of eggs and chicks have resulted from the destruction of breeding colonies during the harvest of their grain field nesting substrates (Meese 2009), and an unknown number of adults is shot in autumn when in mixed flocks foraging in ripening rice with red-winged and other blackbird species (USDA 2013, Meese unpub. data).

In December 2014 the tricolor was given emergency protection under the California Endangered Species Act as a result of its steep and accelerating population decline (Meese 2014). A petition for listing under the federal Endangered Species Act also has been submitted recently.

It is inherently difficult to assemble enough information on rare species to enable robust evidence-based recovery efforts. In some ways, tricolors pose particular problems in that they breed in a rather small number of large, somewhat ephemeral colonies that, over time, blink on and off across the landscape (Holyoak et al. 2014). As a result, classic random sampling is likely to miss even larger colonies, or to produce population estimates of unknown reliability. On the other hand, the future of the species may rest on the success or failure of a fairly small number of large and conspicuous colonies which are intensively monitored. Thus, the species’ unusual biology makes it a unique study subject, but at the same time provides special opportunities to demonstrate that science can greatly improve conservation outcomes.

In order to address these biology-induced sampling problems and to monitor the status of the species, since the 1990’s the primary means to estimate the number of tricolors in California has been the triennial Tricolored Blackbird Statewide Survey (Hamilton 2000; Holyoak et al. 2014). The purpose

of this report is to review and evaluate efforts to document the status of the species, to contrast prior efforts to those of the past three Tricolored Blackbird Statewide Surveys, and to examine the most recent trends in abundance and distribution. It excludes consideration of synthetic works (e.g., Graves et al. 2013, Holyoak et al. 2014).

## METHODS

I reviewed the scientific literature and other published and unpublished reports beginning with Neff (1937) until mid-2014 to summarize and characterize efforts to determine the status and estimate the size of the Tricolored Blackbird population in California. I used the comprehensive reports of the 2008, 2011, and 2014 Tricolored Blackbird Statewide Surveys, along with the standardized methods and data management support provided by the Tricolored Blackbird Portal (<http://tricolor.ice.ucdavis.edu>), to compare the results of these three Statewide Surveys and to contrast these with prior efforts to assess the conservation status of the species.

I also present results by “bioregions”—large parts of the state that are relatively ecologically homogeneous and distinct, to assess regional differences (Figure 1). Previous reports (Kelsey 2008, Kyle and Kelsey 2011) have also recognized bioregions, but their boundaries were somewhat different than those recognized here. I divided the state into five bioregions that include the majority of the breeding distribution of the Tricolored Blackbird:

1. Southern California: the entire region south of the Transverse Range; includes southern Kern County, and all of Ventura, Los Angeles, San Bernardino, Orange, Riverside, San Diego, and Imperial counties.
2. San Joaquin Valley: the portions of northern Kern, Tulare, Fresno, Madera, and Stanislaus counties below 100 m elevation and all of Kings, Merced, and San Joaquin counties.
3. Central Coast: Alameda, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, San Benito, Monterey, San Luis Obispo, and Santa Barbara counties.
4. Central Sierra Foothills: portions of Placer, El Dorado, Amador, Calaveras, and Stanislaus counties between 100-500 m elevation.
5. Sacramento Valley: Sacramento, Yolo, Sutter, Yuba, Colusa, Glenn, and portions of Butte and Tehama counties below 100 m elevation.

The Sacramento Valley is included in the analysis of bioregions although tricolors are itinerant breeders and most birds arrive to breed in this portion of their range only after having first bred in the San Joaquin Valley (Hamilton 1998, Meese unpub. data). Thus, the Statewide Survey, which occurs in the second half of April, provides an estimate of the number of tricolors in the Sacramento Valley at this time but does not provide an estimate of the total number of birds that breed there. Similarly, the Modoc Plateau is not included in this analysis because birds breed in this part of California after April, so are

not recorded during the Statewide Survey, the results of which form the data sets upon which this analysis is based.

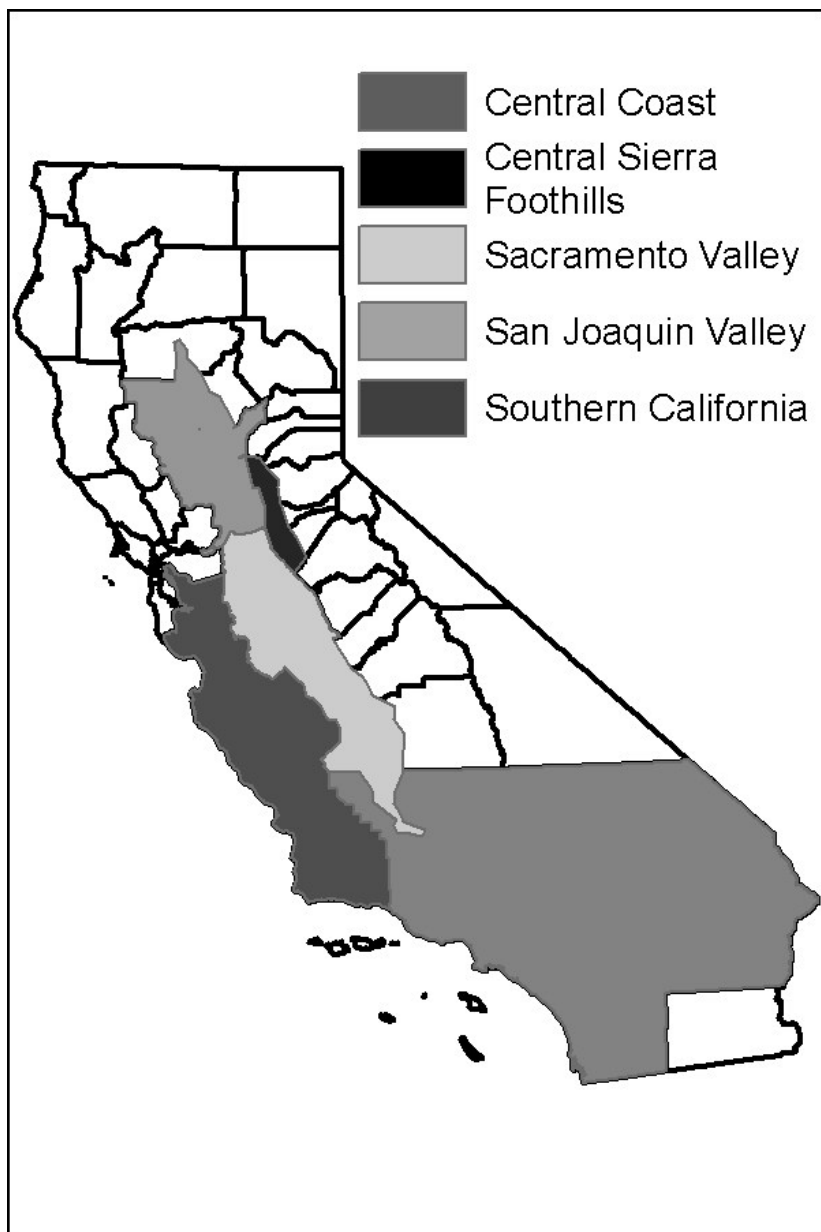


Figure 1. Bioregions used in this paper to discuss Tricolored Blackbird Status in California.

## RESULTS

Neff (1937) was the first to attempt to assess the status of the Tricolored Blackbird in California. Neff's work was stimulated by anecdotal observations of absences of tricolors from locations where they had previously been common and focused on nest counts in primarily very large colonies during the breeding season and on visual counts of roosting birds at a few locations in the non-breeding season. Neff's (1937) work, conducted from 1931 until 1936, did not attempt to provide a comprehensive survey of the entire range of the species because "such a survey was humanly impossible", and he did not attempt to estimate the number of birds in a brief interval of time. He concluded that the species had likely undergone a serious population decline in response to widespread habitat losses associated with the drainage and filling-in of marshes in the early 20th century. This, he believed, was followed by a population increase due to the development of irrigated agriculture and he found that the species was still quite common in many areas. Although Neff (1937) did not attempt to estimate the total number of birds in California, he provided what he described as a conservative estimate of 491,000 nests within 46 colonies in only eight counties in 1934, which would be about 736,500 birds (assuming that each male breeds, on average, with two females; Beedy and Hamilton 1999).

DeHaven et al. (1975) were the next to attempt to survey a large portion of the tricolor's breeding range. They surveyed much the same region as did Neff and his collaborators over three decades earlier. Their work, conducted from 1969 to 1972, emphasized the Central Valley, although in 1971 they attempted to survey the entire breeding range. Although they, too, studied colonies throughout the breeding season, they concluded that the number of tricolors had declined by at least 50% in the 35 years since Neff's work.

The concept of a Statewide Survey, an effort to estimate the total number of breeding birds in the entire state, was developed by Edward C. (Ted) Beedy and William J. Hamilton III in 1993 (Beedy, pers. comm., Beedy and Hamilton 1997) in response to previous, more limited surveys that suggested an ongoing decline in abundance. The Statewide Survey was proposed as a voluntary effort with numerous participants that was centrally coordinated, and conducted within a 3-day interval every three years beginning in 1994. Statewide Surveys were conducted in 1994, 1997, 2000, and 2005, but due to differences in methodology, duration, level of effort, geographic completeness, inadequate data management, and incomplete documentation, the results of these surveys are not directly comparable (Hamilton 2000).

Table 1. Comparison of the first four statewide surveys. Sources: Beedy and Hamilton 1997, Hamilton 2000, EDAW 2005. Sources: Beedy and Hamilton 1997, Hamilton 2000, EDAW 2005.

| Year | Duration               | Participants | Counties Surveyed | Sites Surveyed | Occupied Sites |            | Birds Observed                    | Comments |
|------|------------------------|--------------|-------------------|----------------|----------------|------------|-----------------------------------|----------|
|      |                        |              |                   |                | Surveyed       | Identified |                                   |          |
| 1994 | Not reported (3 days?) | 68           | 32                | Not reported   | 28             | 369,359    | follow-up survey results included |          |
| 1997 | Not reported (3 days?) | 55           | 34                | Not reported   | 71             | 237,928    | follow-up survey results included |          |
| 2000 | 4 days                 | 81           | 33                | Not reported   | 71             | 162,000    | pre-survey workshop held          |          |
| 2005 | 3 days                 | 65           | 24                | Not reported   | 121            | 257,802    | No report submitted               |          |

The Statewide Survey methodology was revised in 2008 by: 1) adding county coordinators to transfer the coordination of the participants from the statewide to the county level, 2) providing training sessions for survey participants, and 3) developing and deploying a web-based Tricolored Blackbird Portal. A level of survey coordination at the county level was added to improve colony detection and geographic completeness by taking greater advantage of local knowledge (Hamilton 2000), and to share the burden of the coordination of a statewide effort among several individuals. In many cases, county coordinators were environmental consultants with extensive local experience with the species and a large pool of qualified persons from which to draw to serve as survey participants.

The Tricolored Blackbird Portal was developed to:

- enhance the management of existing data on colony locations and observations of birds at breeding colonies and in non-breeding aggregations,
- improve communication by providing controlled vocabularies that enabled Portal users to standardize on colony location and nesting substrate names,
- enhance citizen participation by providing online data entry capabilities for records of colony locations and observations of birds (including support for the Statewide Surveys),
- provide reliable natural history information,
- provide access to numerous reports and publications, and
- provide news and links to news reports.

The Portal was developed as a secure, public resource and is password-protected: a user account is required to enter records so as to reduce spam and unwanted spurious records. A small staff of content managers with extensive Tricolored Blackbird and data management experience edits records and assures quality control.

All of the Statewide Surveys since 2008 (i.e. 2008, 2011, and 2014) have used the three levels of coordination (statewide coordinator, county coordinator, participant), are more thoroughly standardized by data entry via the Portal, and are more completely documented by comprehensive reports, so the results of these three surveys are more directly comparable than are those from previous surveys. Table 2 provides a comparison of the results of the three most recent Statewide Surveys.

The results of the three most recent Statewide Surveys showed a rapid decline in abundance, from just under 395,000 birds to 145,000 birds in 6 years, a decline of 63% (Meese 2014). The rate of decline appears to be increasing: from 2008 to 2011 the number of tricolors dropped by 35%, from

395,000 to 258,000 birds (Kyle and Kelsey 2011), but from 2011 to 2014 the number of birds dropped by 44%, from 258,000 to 145,000 birds (Figure 2).

Table 2. Comparison of 2008, 2011, and 2014 Statewide Surveys. Sources: Kelsey 2008, Kyle and Kelsey 2011, Meese 2014.

| Year | Duration (days) | Participants | Counties Surveyed | Sites Surveyed | Occupied Sites Identified | Statewide Population Estimate |
|------|-----------------|--------------|-------------------|----------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 2008 | 3               | 155          | 38                | 361            | 155                       | 394,858                       |
| 2011 | 3               | 100          | 29                | 608            | 138                       | 258,000                       |
| 2014 | 3               | 143          | 41                | 802            | 143                       | 145,000                       |

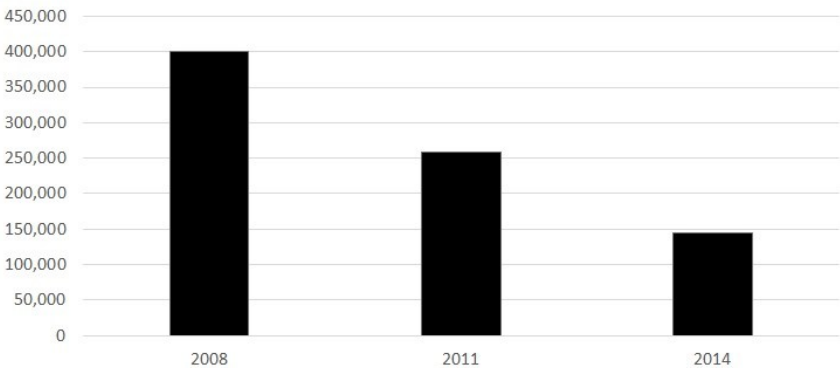


Figure 2. Estimates of the number of Tricolored Blackbirds in California in 2008, 2011, and 2014.

The decline in the statewide estimate of the number of birds occurred despite a rapid increase in knowledge of where the birds breed, as data entry via the Tricolored Blackbird Portal has allowed 77 different Portal users to enter 249 new colony location records since 2008 (Figure 3).

The 2014 Statewide Survey was the most comprehensive: 802 known locations were surveyed versus only 361 locations surveyed in 2008 (Table 2). Hence, the recorded decline cannot be attributed to a decline in the thoroughness of the surveys.

### New Tricolored Blackbird Colony Locations Documented from 2005-2014

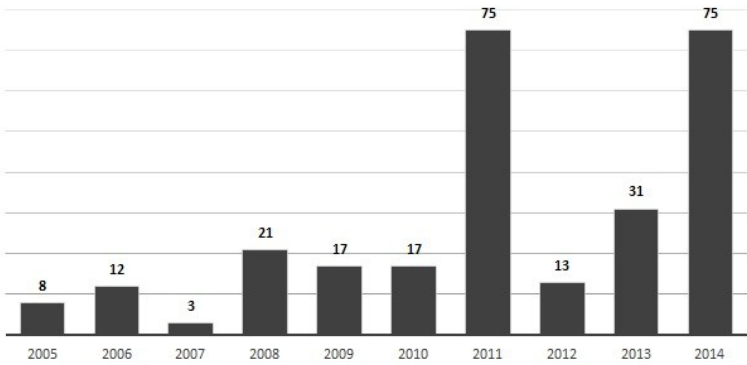


Figure 3. Number of previously unreported Tricolored Blackbird colony locations reported each year from 2005-2014.

Associated with the decline in the number of birds was a dramatic decline in the sizes of the largest colonies (Figure 4).

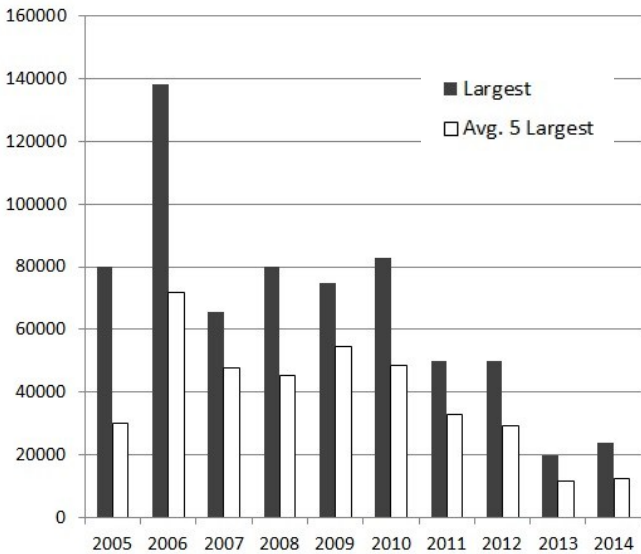


Figure 4. Ten year trend in the sizes of the largest Tricolored Blackbird colonies and averages of the five largest colonies.

The rate and intensity of the decline between 2008 and 2014 varied among bioregions. The Central Coast had the greatest proportionate decline, dropping 91%, from 7,014 birds in 2008 to 652 birds in 2014. The San Joaquin Valley had the second highest proportionate decline, dropping 78% from 340,703 birds in 2008 to 73,482 birds in 2014. The number of birds in southern California increased by 126%, from 5,487 birds in 2008 to 12,386 birds in 2014, due primarily to a single large colony of 5,000 breeding birds in Los Angeles County (Meese 2014). The number of birds in the Central Sierra Foothills also increased, from 22,586 birds in 2008 to 28,281 birds in 2014. Figure 5 summarizes the results for the three most recent Statewide Surveys by bioregion.

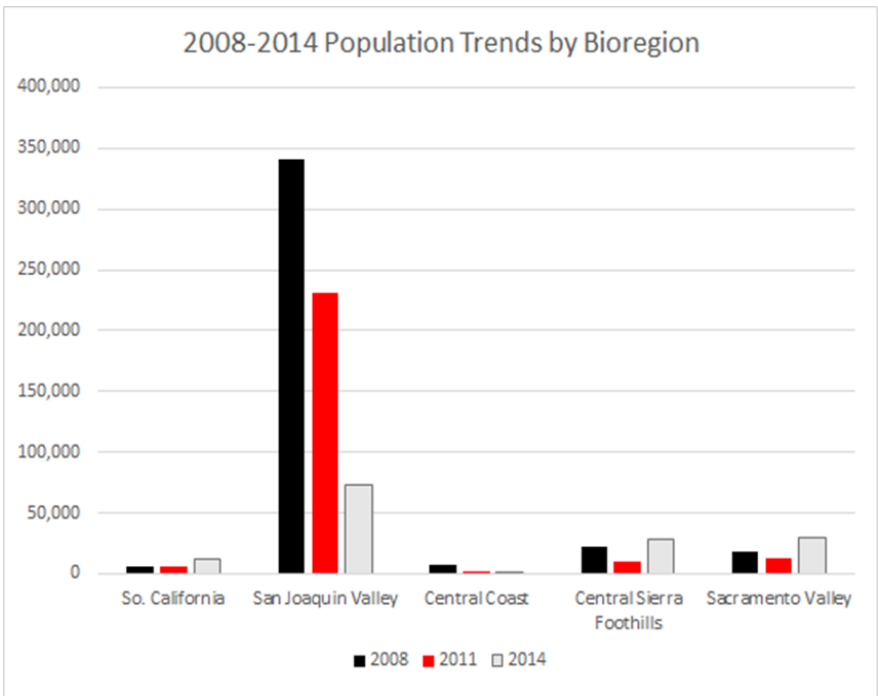


Figure 5. Results of 2008, 2011, and 2014 Statewide Surveys by Bioregion.

## DISCUSSION

Early efforts to determine the status of the Tricolored Blackbird depended upon the work of a small number of individuals who tried to survey an immense geographic area and, due to logistical and time constraints, had to focus on locations concentrated in the Sacramento Valley (Neff 1937,

DeHaven et al. 1975). Neither Neff (1937) nor DeHaven et al. (1975) attempted to estimate the statewide population of the species but rather attempted to survey breeding birds during the entire breeding season. DeHaven et al. (1975) surveyed the region studied by Neff (1937) to try to determine whether the species had changed in abundance in this portion of its range. They found far fewer colonies and far fewer birds at the largest colonies than did Neff (1937) and concluded that the number of tricolors in the Sacramento Valley had declined by more than 50% in about 35 years.

Efforts to estimate the statewide population of tricolors began in 1994 with work coordinated by Beedy and Hamilton (1997) and continue to this day. Unlike previous efforts to assess the status of the species, Statewide Surveys were conducted in 3-day intervals, from Friday to Sunday, in late April. Non-breeding birds tend to be highly mobile and difficult to find and thus to count, so the Statewide Survey was designed to be conducted in the second half of April, when the maximum number of birds are breeding (Beedy and Hamilton 1999), and are thus more reliably found and easier to count. Conducting a Statewide Survey during a 3-day interval minimizes the risk of double-counting birds that have moved following first breeding attempts (Hamilton 1998). Increasing the number of persons surveying allows a much larger geographical area to be covered and enables a statewide estimate of the number of birds.

Although the 1994 Statewide Survey included only 32 counties and found only 28 occupied sites, the estimate of the number of birds seen exceed 369,000 (Hamilton et al. 1995). The 2014 Statewide Survey covered 41 counties and found birds at 143 locations yet the estimate of the number of birds in California dropped to 145,000 (Meese 2014). Thus, despite substantial increases in geographical coverage and in knowledge of where the birds nest, the estimate of the number of birds seen dropped by 61%. In the 2008-2014 interval, when the Statewide Surveys were far more directly comparable due to more standardized methodology, the estimate of the number of tricolors dropped by 63%, from 395,000 to 145,000. Unfortunately, given the differences in methods, level of effort, data management, and data documentation, it is not possible to directly compare the results of the Statewide Surveys from 1994 to those of 2014, but the small number of colonies identified and the relatively large number of birds observed in 1994 compared to 2014 suggests a serious statewide reduction in abundance during this 20 year interval, and that the extent of the decline would be greater than that estimated if the 1994 survey had been as complete as was that of 2014.

The number of birds seen during the three most recent Statewide Surveys differed greatly by bioregion, with the largest number of birds seen in all three surveys concentrated in the San Joaquin Valley (Figure 5), where the

majority of breeding birds have been seen since the 1980s (Hamilton et al. 1995). A comparable survey of breeding birds in the Sacramento Valley would best occur in early June, when most of the birds have finished breeding in the San Joaquin Valley and moved north to breed again (Hamilton 1998, Beedy and Hamilton 1999, Meese unpub. data). As the tricolors that breed in the Sacramento Valley are in most cases the same birds that bred earlier in the San Joaquin Valley (Hamilton 1998, Meese unpub. data), any reduction in abundance documented in April in the San Joaquin Valley would be expected to be mirrored by a reduction in abundance of breeding birds in the Sacramento Valley the following June.

Because the vast majority of breeding birds occur in the San Joaquin Valley, the sharp drop in abundance documented there is of particular concern, as efforts to restore the species will depend disproportionately upon the results of breeding efforts at the largest colonies. Recent research has shown that reproductive success is positively correlated with both colony size and insect abundance (Meese 2013), and the results of the three most recent Statewide Surveys showed a sharp drop in total abundance and size of the largest colonies. This period coincided with a period of chronically low reproductive success (Meese 2013). A lack of insects along with the destruction of breeding colonies adjacent to dairies by the harvest of their nesting substrates (Meese 2009) are believed to be the two most important causes for the recent population decline.

There are several reasons why insect abundances may be insufficient to support breeding by the colonial and insectivorous Tricolored Blackbird. The widespread and on-going conversion of native habitats to dairies, orchards, vineyards, rice, and other forms of agriculture (Beedy and Hamilton 1997) and the use of effective and persistent insecticides (Hallmann et al. 2014) may have created unsuitable breeding conditions in much of the core area of the species' range. The relatively small number of birds that have recently bred outside of the San Joaquin Valley is insufficient to sustain a population of 700,000 birds, the suggested population target for the recovery of the species (Meese et.al. 2015a). The apparent unsuitability of much of the San Joaquin Valley to support breeding by the species suggests that future conservation actions will have to occur in strategically chosen areas of the Central Valley that have previously or may be managed to support breeding by relatively large numbers of birds. The conservation effort will require both secure, permanent nesting habitats surrounded by secure, productive, foraging habitats that may provide the insect abundance that is associated with relatively high reproductive success (Meese 2013, Meese et al. 2015a). The rapid decline in the sizes of the largest colonies (Figure 4) complicates conservation planning and reduces the options available to stem the decline because even effective conservation actions will be expected to benefit a smaller number of breeding birds.

The conservation of breeding colonies in grain fields adjacent to dairies may be ensured by the recent listing of the Tricolored Blackbird as endangered under the California Endangered Species Act (CESA). Any loss of Tricolored Blackbird eggs or nestlings would be considered “take” and is prohibited under CESA, except with explicit permit approval. Recent voluntary efforts to conserve Tricolored Blackbird breeding colonies adjacent to dairies, by compensating farmers for their costs associated with delaying the harvest of their occupied grain fields, have been only partially successful (e.g., Meese 2009, Meese 2014). Effectively conserving the efforts of all breeding birds, and especially the largest colonies, which are usually situated in grain fields (Beedy and Hamilton 1999, Kelsey 2008), will be essential if the species is to recover. A far more robust education and outreach component must be developed and implemented with industry participation (see Arthur 2015), and intensive surveys and monitoring of “silage colonies” must occur annually. These silage colony conservation measures, however, are temporary emergency reactions to an on-going conflict, and a permanent solution will require the provision of alternative nesting substrates in the San Joaquin Valley and southern California that create safe, secure breeding conditions.

The triennial Tricolored Blackbird Statewide Survey has for 20 years played a prominent role in efforts to monitor the health of tricolors in California. Recent improvements in methodology and the addition of the Tricolored Blackbird Portal have rapidly increased our knowledge of where the birds breed by providing a mechanism for concerned citizens to become actively engaged in research and monitoring efforts. The resulting increase in the number of persons looking for and reporting breeding colony locations and observations of (occupied and unoccupied) breeding colony locations has aided efforts to monitor the health of the species.

The Tricolored Blackbird is increasingly conservation-dependent, and future monitoring efforts should expand beyond a triennial statewide population estimate to include the: 1) annual monitoring of the results of breeding efforts in a variety of habitats and bioregions, 2) effects of relative insect abundance on reproductive success, and 3) results of specific conservation actions. A useful addition to the triennial Statewide Survey would be an annual effort to estimate the population size through a statistically valid sample (see Meese et al. 2015b). This monitoring tool would provide an annual population estimate with a much smaller number of volunteers and require surveys of only a sample of the total number of colony locations each year. An annual sample survey would provide an additional means to monitor the health of the population and supplement more intensive efforts to monitor the results of tricolor breeding, thereby helping to more thoroughly document the status of California’s blackbird.

## LITERATURE CITED

- Arthur, S. 2015. Protecting, restoring, and enhancing Tricolored Blackbird habitat on agricultural lands through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program. *Central Valley Bird Club Bulletin* 17:122–125.
- Beedy, E.C. and W.J. Hamilton III. 1997. Tricolored Blackbird Status Update and Management Guidelines. Report prepared for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Sacramento CA and California Department of Fish and Game, Sacramento, CA. Available from the Tricolored Blackbird Portal at: <http://tricolor.ice.ucdavis.edu/reports>.
- Beedy, E.C. and W.J. Hamilton III. 1999. Tricolored Blackbird (*Agelaius tricolor*). A. Poole and F. Gill (eds.), *In: The Birds of North America*, No. 423. Philadelphia, PA: Academy of Natural Sciences and Washington, DC: American Ornithologists Union.
- DeHaven, R.W., F.T. Crase, and P.D. Woronecki. 1975. Breeding status of the Tricolored Blackbird, 1969-1972. *Calif. Dept. Fish and Game* 61:1661–80.
- EDAW. 2005. 2005 TRBL data. Unpublished Excel spreadsheet. Available from the author.
- Graves E.E., M. Holyoak, T.R. Kelsey, and R.J. Meese. 2013. Understanding the contribution of habitats and regional variation to long-term population trends in Tricolored Blackbirds. *Ecology and Evolution*. doi:10.1002/ece3.681
- Hallmann, C.A., R.P.B. Foppen, C.A.M. van Turnhout, H. de Kroon, and E. Jongejans. 2014. Declines in insectivorous birds are associated with high neonicotinoid concentrations. *Nature* doi:10.1038/nature13531.
- Hamilton, W.J. III. 1998. Tricolored Blackbird itinerant breeding in California. *Condor* 100:218–226.
- Hamilton, W.J. III. 2000. Tricolored Blackbird 2000 Breeding Season Census and Survey-Observations and Recommendations. Unpublished report available from the Tricolored Blackbird Portal at: <http://tricolor.ice.ucdavis.edu/reports>.
- Hamilton, W.J. III, L. Cook, and R. Grey. 1995. Tricolored Blackbird Project 1994. Unpublished report available from the Tricolored Blackbird Portal at: <http://tricolor.ice.ucdavis.edu/reports>.
- Holyoak, M., R.J. Meese, and E.E. Graves. 2014. Combining site occupancy, breeding population sizes and reproductive success to calculate time-averaged reproductive output of different habitat types: an application to Tricolored Blackbirds. *PLoS ONE* 9(5):e96980.doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0096980.

Kelsey, R. 2008. Results of the Tricolored Blackbird 2008 Census. Report available from the Tricolored Blackbird Portal at: <http://tricolor.ice.ucdavis.edu/reports>.

Kyle, K. and R. Kelsey. 2011. Results of the 2011 Tricolored Blackbird Statewide Survey. Report available at the Tricolored Blackbird Portal at: <http://tricolor.ice.ucdavis.edu/reports>.

Meese, R.J. 2009. Contribution of the Conservation of Silage Colonies to Tricolored Blackbird Conservation from 2005-2009. Report submitted to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Sacramento Fish and Wildlife Office, Sacramento, CA. Report available at the Tricolored Blackbird Portal at: <http://tricolor.ice.ucdavis.edu/reports>.

Meese, R.J. 2013. Chronic low reproductive success of the colonial Tricolored Blackbird from 2006 to 2011. *Western Birds* 44: 98-113.

Meese, R.J. 2014. Results of the 2014 Tricolored Blackbird Statewide Survey. Report available from the Tricolored Blackbird Portal at: <http://tricolor.ice.ucdavis.edu/reports>.

Meese, R.J., E.C. Beedy, D.A. Airola, and R. Cook. 2015a. Recovering the Tricolored Blackbird in California. *Central Valley Bird Club Bulletin* 17:97-109.

Meese, R.J., J.L. Yee, and M. Holyoak. 2015b. Sampling to estimate population size and detect trends in Tricolored Blackbirds. *Central Valley Bird Club Bulletin* 17:51-56.

Neff, J.A. 1937. Nesting distribution of the Tricolored Red-wing. *Condor* 39:61-81.

Terborgh, J. 1974. Preservation of natural diversity: The problem of extinction prone species. *BioScience* 24:715-722.

Tricolored Blackbird Working Group. 2007. Conservation Plan for the Tricolored Blackbird. (*Agelaius tricolor*). Susan Kester (Ed.). Sustainable Conservation. San Francisco, CA. Document available from the Tricolored Blackbird Portal at: <http://tricolor.ice.ucdavis.edu/reports>.

U.S. Department of Agriculture. 2013. California Wildlife Services Annual Report Required by 50 CFR 21.43: Depredation Order for Blackbirds, Cowbirds, Grackles, Crows, and Magpies.