



Mark Crosse / The Fresno Bee

A flock of tricolored blackbirds ascends from a thistle patch in the Merced National Wildlife Refuge, a habitat that serves as an alternative to farmers' fields.

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Birds of a feather

Farmers and preservationists become allies on behalf of the tricolored blackbird.

By Mark Grossi / The Fresno Bee

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Scientists estimate 140,000 tricolored blackbirds -- perhaps half of the species' world population -- descended last year on a Kern County field of hybrid wheat and rice.

To the chagrin of the farmer, the 75-acre field became an avian mega-nursery. Instead of harvesting the crop as silage for dairy cows, he sold it to the government for its market value of about \$85,000, averting a wildlife disaster and a public relations nightmare.

If harvest machines had gone through the crop, they would have left a bloody killing field for tricolored blackbird chicks. It would have been a stunning setback for this closely watched species.

The near miss illustrates a nervous turf conflict between these California-based songbirds and farmers -- specifically, dairy farmers.

Once numbering in the millions, tricolored blackbirds have dwindled to a population of about 250,000 to 300,000. Their historic breeding grounds, the coastal wetlands and the inland marshes of Central California, have largely disappeared as development and agriculture spread over the past century.

They still nest in the Central Valley's remaining freshwater marshes among the cattails when they can find them. But now they find attractive grain fields to breed, alfalfa fields with lots of bugs to eat and dairy grain stockpiles to fill other dietary needs. They do not generally nest in cities.

Tricolored blackbirds are among the most colonial birds in North America, which means they breed in groups of thousands of birds. It is not unusual to see 30,000 in a single farm field.

Nowhere is this farm-bird conflict more apparent than in the San Joaquin Valley, where mom-and-pop dairies have grown into a multibillion-dollar industry.

"You can understand why the birds might be considered a pest by dairy owners," said tricolored blackbird researcher Robert Meese of the University of California at Davis.

Still, farmers are trying to be friends of the blackbird. They do not want to see this bird's population sag low enough to

trigger Endangered Species Act protections, which might force expensive farming restrictions.

Farmers and environmentalists -- often adversaries over wildlife issues -- have joined in an unusual alliance with government wildlife agencies and scientists to work on the blackbird problem.

A San Francisco-based environmental group called Sustainable Conservation is credited with organizing the effort in the past few years to come up with a protection plan.

"It's a pretty powerful idea to intervene now and preserve our management options," said Susan Kester, project manager for the nonprofit Sustainable Conservation. "There's a lot more chance of success when people are working together voluntarily."

Officials with the California Farm Bureau Federation, the state's largest farm organization with 92,000 members, agree the approach makes more sense than invoking the Endangered Species Act.

"This is a great example to show that [Endangered Species Act] listing wasn't going to help this bird," said Noelle Cremers, director of national resources and commodities for the state Farm Bureau. "Now everyone is working together to ensure its health."

Refuge away from the farm

The desperate cries of young tricolored birds in mid-May at the Merced National Wildlife Refuge make it sound like the species is surely dying off. In reality, the youngsters are freaking out over nothing. They're hungry.

Researcher Meese chuckles as he watches through his binoculars: "They're acting so pathetic, like they're going to starve if they don't get that next caterpillar. They're doing just fine."

This refuge, south of Merced, may be the most successful breeding ground for tricolored blackbirds this year. Numbers are down after the dry winter because the ecosystem does not produce as much insect life -- food for blackbirds.

Meese travels thousands of miles following the breeding trail of blackbirds, which breed more than once each year. Early in spring, they breed in Southern California, later moving through Kern and Tulare counties. They eventually breed in Merced County and then the Sacramento Valley.

The males arrive first in each new area and pick out a place for nests, Meese said. The females appear later, sometimes rejecting the location and moving to another place that suits them.

"Many people would be surprised to find out the male stays around the nest and takes care of the chicks while the female takes off," Meese said.

Half of tricolored blackbird breeding is done on refuges, such as the one near Merced. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the rest takes place in silage fields for dairies.

Meese and government biologists routinely knock on farmers' doors to ask whether they can check their fields for tricolored blackbirds, which are a lustrous bluish-black with red and white markings on their wings.

The blackbirds at the Merced refuge this year settled into a field of tall thorny weeds, called milk thistle. The weeds provide protection -- like "breeding behind barbed wire," says Dennis Woolington, federal supervising wildlife biologist for the San Luis National Wildlife Refuge Complex. There are a wide variety of predators, including raccoons and coyotes.

But breeding in the neighboring dairy owner's field, as the blackbirds did last year, might pose a bigger threat. Fortunately, the dairy owner, who preferred not to comment, sold his crop to Merced wildlife officials.

Such crop harvests around the Valley usually come within a few days of the young birds' departure from the nests, Meese said. Many harvests have happened while the chicks were in the nest.

"If the harvesting combines come in to cut before the young have left the nest, an entire breeding effort is lost," Meese said. "The chicks die. The adults are left confused and upset. After a day or two, they move on to breed again somewhere else."

Not endangered yet

Despite the dairy conflict, there is not enough evidence to show the tricolored blackbird is on the edge of extinction, federal officials have said.

In December, they declined a petition to protect the bird under the Endangered Species Act. The Center for Biological Diversity, an Arizona-based nonprofit environmental watchdog, had sought the listing.

It was the second time since 1991 that the government has been petitioned to protect the bird. The first one was withdrawn because conservationists thought the population was increasing.

But experts and officials know the bird's numbers are down, and it needs attention, according to both state and federal wildlife agencies. The agencies have managed public wetlands for many years to protect the birds in such places as Merced, Tulare and Kern counties.

Aside from buying crops to protect nesting blackbirds from harvests, the agencies also have paid growers to delay harvesting until the chicks leave the nests. The money covers the cost of an extra round of irrigation.

This year, Meese and the federal Fish and Wildlife agency experimented by providing piles of corn silage on the Merced refuge for the birds, thus keeping them away from the neighboring dairy.

Federal biologist Woolington said fire crews probably will burn the milk thistle weeds later this year to promote new vegetation next year. Experts believe tricolored blackbirds prefer new growth to breed.

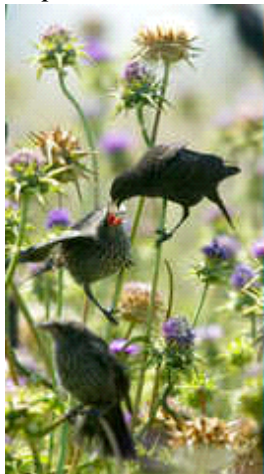
There is a lot to learn about the blackbirds, said Graham Chisholm, director of conservation at the nonprofit Audubon California. The number of birds and their location must be closely tracked in the next few years.

"That's the value of the work Bob Meese is doing," Chisholm said. "He is making the connections with private land owners and amassing important data."

The goal of the research and the work on the Merced refuge is keeping blackbirds away from dairies.

"If you're just buying a farmer's crop or paying him to irrigate one more time so you can delay the harvest, you're not getting rid of the problem," said Kester of Sustainable Conservation. "You want to create habitat on public or private land where the birds are not threatened."

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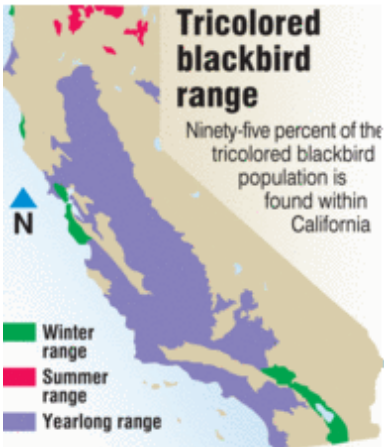
A tricolored blackbird feeds a juvenile at the Merced refuge, the heart of the birds' range.



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UC Davis professor Robert Meese, left, and Dennis Woolington, wildlife biologist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, watch flocks of tricolored blackbirds near Merced.



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The Fresno Bee (Source: California Dept. of Fish and Game)