

Inland nesting bird won't be protected

TRICOLORED BLACKBIRD: Environmentalists want it included under the Endangered Species Act.

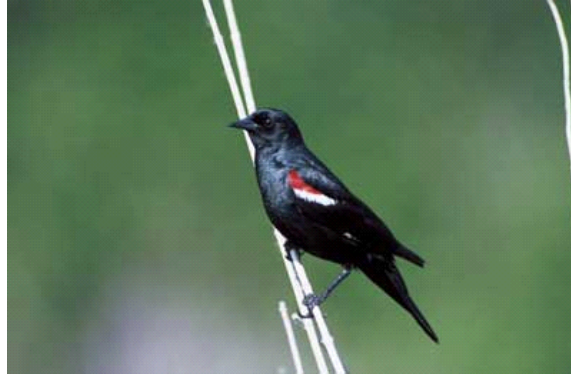
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By JENNIFER BOWLES

The Press-Enterprise

Federal wildlife officials Tuesday denied a petition seeking protection for the tricolored blackbird under the U.S. Endangered Species Act, saying the species' numbers have increased recently and conservation efforts are already under way.

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Special to The Press-Enterprise

The Center for Biological Diversity had a petition to protect the tricolored blackbird denied Tuesday.

Peter Galvin, conservation director with the Center for Biological Diversity, said the jump in the number of birds -- from 154,000 in 2000 to 260,000 in 2004, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service -- is still low considering the bird once numbered in the tens of millions in California.

The Center, which has an office in Joshua Tree, filed the petition in 2004 seeking protection for the glistening black birds with distinct red and white stripes on their wings. They are known to establish nesting colonies in western Riverside County and southwestern San Bernardino County.

Galvin said the group would consider further legal action.

The decline of tricolored blackbirds has gone hand-in-hand with the loss of 90 percent of the state's wetlands, their main nesting grounds, to development or farmland. Some birds have adapted to building nests in silage crops at dairies, but they can be chewed up by harvesting machines before the chicks can leave the nest, said Al Donner, a spokesman for the federal wildlife agency.

Donner said the agency has worked since 1993 with dairy farmers and others to protect those nesting colonies. Galvin said those efforts aren't enough and there is no guarantee they'll continue.

The tricolored blackbird was the subject of such a deal earlier this year when a flock landed at a nearby dairy instead of the San Jacinto Wildlife Area. Audubon California and its Inland chapter paid a dairy farmer \$13,000 to delay harvesting by a month. Developer and landowner groups later reimbursed Audubon.

Reach Jennifer Bowles at 951-368-9548 or jbowles@PE.com