

Groups work together to save birds

DEAL: Organizations agree to pay an Inland farmer to delay harvesting.

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By JENNIFER BOWLES
The Press-Enterprise

A colony of tricolored blackbirds, a species dramatically on the decline, landed this spring on an Inland wheat field about to be harvested, weaved their nests into the stalks and laid some eggs.



Ken Graff, Director of Land Acquisition /
Special to The Press-Enterprise

Tricolored blackbirds laid eggs in a field in
the San Jacinto Valley.

With the threat of the nests being chewed by tractor blades, both conservation and developer groups came to the rescue to help save what's believed to be the largest tricolored colony in Southern California.

Audubon California and the Inland chapter of the birding group negotiated with the San Jacinto Valley dairy farmer and agreed to pay him \$13,000 if he would delay harvesting by a month to give the rare birds a chance to multiply, said Graham Chisolm, Audubon's deputy state director.

Developer and landowner groups, including Sacramento-based Resource Landowners Coalition, later reimbursed Audubon, said Ed Sauls, an Orange County consultant who pulled together the donations.

The farmer agreed to delay harvesting only if he could stay anonymous, said Tom Paulek, manager of the state-run San Jacinto Wildlife Area, where the birds have safely nested almost every spring since 1991.

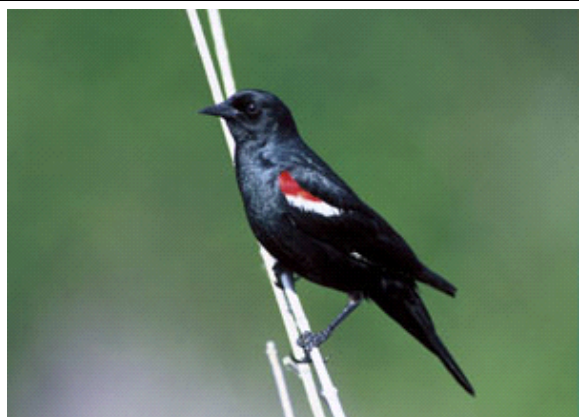
Only one year, in the late 1990s, did the tricoloreds set up shop on another wheat field north of the wildlife area, but harvesting went ahead with the birds' fate unknown, said Paulek, with the California Department of Fish and Game.

In this most recent case, the birds flourished. During a survey Friday of the 13-acre wheat field, Paulek said Monday that he found 5,400 nests built by 8,000 birds. In all, an estimated 2,500 to 7,500 birds were born.

Monica Bond, a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity, which sued the federal government earlier this year

seeking endangered-species protection for the bird, said she was thrilled that such an agreement was reached with the farmer.

"It would have been criminal to mow them down; it would have been a real shame," Bond said.



Dave Menke, U.S. Fish & Wildlife /
Special to The Press-Enterprise

Conservation and developer groups are trying to help save what's believed to be the largest colony of tricolored blackbirds in the San Jacinto Valley.

While once numbering in the millions, the native bird's numbers dwindled across California to 370,000 in 1994 and dropped again by more than 50 percent to 162,000 in 2000, according to statewide surveys.

The birds already are considered a species of special concern in California, and a working group of federal, state and university scientists, environmental groups and agricultural interests have been addressing how they can help.

In addition, the tricolored blackbird is covered under Riverside County's federally approved habitat plan aimed at protecting imperiled species while allowing development.

While this marks the first time such a deal was struck with a farmer in Southern California, it has happened before in Central California farming communities where the birds are more numerous, those involved said.

However, it raises the question of a long-term solution for preventing further declines in population of the species, which once nested in an extensive network of wetlands in the state, much of which has been farmed or developed.

Paulek said the birds started to build their nests earlier this year at the wildlife area, but left before laying eggs. So he went looking for the medium-sized birds with red and white patches on their shoulders. Finally, he saw them fluttering around the wheat field and so he contacted the farmer because the nesting process had already begun.

"I knew we needed at least 30 days," Paulek said. "We were in the position that if he harvests his crop, we're going to lose that, that could have been very significant, given this is the best population in Southern California."

With time running out, Paulek called everyone he knew might be able to help. In the meantime, Ken Graff, with the Western Riverside County Regional Conservation Authority, the regional agency charged with managing endangered species habitat, went to everyone he knew, including Sauls.

Sauls and the other developer groups were recognized for their efforts Monday at the board meeting of the Regional Conservation Authority, a joint-powers authority consisting of the county and its 14 cities.

"We're going to do everything we can to ensure availability of habitat for them," said Tom Mullen, the authority's interim executive director.

Paulek said dairies may offer more for the birds than the wildlife area, a dilemma that will have to be figured out. Wheat, he said, mimics cattails, the typical nesting habitat, and at the dairy, they already have a food source in the grain fed to the cows, and more protection from predators such as black-crowned night herons.

"Unbeknownst to the dairyman," Paulek said, "he's offered them more than we can."