

Late nesting Tricolored Blackbirds in western Marin County, California

— Since my earliest actual surveys of Tricolored Blackbirds (*Agelaius tricolor*) on outermost Point Reyes in 1982, the winter population has ranged from 4,500 to 11,000 individuals. In most years the number has been in the 9,000 to 11,000 range, perhaps 8-10% of the world population. Winter birds forage at dairy ranches on the outer point and roost in freshwater cattail (*Typhus* spp.) marshes and introduced Monterey Cypress (*Cupressus macrocarpa*) groves. Numbers begin to dwindle by late February and by early April the species is virtually absent. There are none present for most of April and May.

In late May small groups begin to arrive joining to form larger forces by mid-July. There is singing and pairing, but breeding initiation seems to be delayed until the last Red-winged Blackbirds (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) fledge. Tricolored nesting typically begins in late July and adults are often still feeding young in late September. These, the many family groups, form the core of the large wintering population.

Habitat selection for colonies varies opportunistically. Most years, the colonies are in freshwater marshes (usually at the large pond behind Drake's Beach parking lot) but other habitats have been used. In 1989 about 1,800 pairs successfully fledged chicks in a dense forest of old stalks (left over from the previous year) of Milk Thistle (*Silybum marianum*) on the Hall Ranch less than .5 mi from the Drake's Beach marsh. Into the early 1990s another colony (about 300 pairs) were present at the Cypress Grove Preserve in Marshall on the eastern shore of Tomales Bay. Most nests were in blackberry (*Rubus* spp.) brambles with others in short, dense willows (*Salix* spp.).

Nesting from July to September is contrary to what is known for Tricolored Blackbirds elsewhere. Because west Marin breeders do not begin to arrive until the last week of May, it seems likely that they have nested elsewhere (or attempted to do so) in April and early May. Tricolored Blackbirds often choose crop fields as colonial nesting sites in parts of the Central Valley. Sadly, these crops usually mature before the young birds and (unless there is human intervention), the pre-fledglings are mowed. Possibly, the Point Reyes birds are refugees from such failed attempts elsewhere.

Most foraging for parent birds from the Drake's Beach marsh colony (1982-2001) took place at nearby Holstein dairies (Figure 1). In descending order of importance those were: the Spaletta Dairy (C Ranch); the Hall/Horick Dairy (D Ranch); the Mendoza Dairy (B Ranch) and the Nunes Dairy (A Ranch).

In the fall of 2000 the Hall/Horick Dairy folded, the land went to Point Reyes National Seashore, the cows were removed and the dairy shut down.

This significant reduction in foraging opportunities may have and have had a serious impact on the size of the colony which has dropped from about 1,500 nests in 2000 to less than 650 in 2003. This change may also be within the range of natural fluctuation. If the breeding colony continues to decline it will not be a surprise to see proportional drops in the wintering population. — *Rich Stallcup, Box 36, Inverness, California 9493.*

[ADDENDUM: For the first time in many years, Tricolored Blackbirds are not now (August 2004) nesting in Point Reyes National Seashore. This condition is probably due to reduced foraging opportunities. —RS]



Figure 1. Tricolored Blackbirds (*Agelaius Tricolor*) from a breeding colony at Drake's Beach marsh foraging near a dairy cow on the Mendoza Ranch, Point Reyes, Marin Co., September 2002.

photo by Rich Stallcup

