

Tricolored Blackbird status update

In September 1997, William J. Hamilton, III, and I prepared a report, *Tricolored Blackbird Status Update and Management Guidelines*, for the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service and California Department of Fish and Game. This report was based primarily on our own rangewide surveys and volunteer surveys conducted since 1991.

Tricolored Blackbirds are the most highly colonial North American passerines. They have three basic requirements for breeding colony sites: open, accessible water; protected nesting substrate, typically flooded or thorny/spiny vegetation; and suitable foraging space providing adequate insect prey within a few kilometers of the colony. Historically, most colonies were in freshwater marshes dominated by cattails and bulrushes. In recent years, the use of Himalaya blackberries and nettles as nesting substrates has increased.

Largely endemic to California, Tricolors occur most numerous in the Central Valley and vicinity. The population has declined significantly from historic levels, and surveys in 1997 documented 37% fewer birds than comparable counts in 1994. Declines were documented within portions of the historical stronghold of the species' range in the Central Valley, including Fresno, Kern, Merced, and Sacramento counties. Rangewide declines have followed the continuing and widespread loss of nesting and foraging habitats, as wetlands, grasslands, irrigated pastures, and rangelands are converted to vineyards, orchards, and cotton fields. Currently, most of the breeding population of the species is comprised of a few, large colonies. Concentration of such a high proportion of known population in a few sites increases the risk of continued population declines due to nesting failure or nest destruction. In 1992, the California Department of Fish and Game identified the Tricolored Blackbird as a state species of special concern, and, in 1995, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service classified it a nongame bird species of management concern.

Our recent studies indicate that approximately 70% of Tricolored Blackbird nesting colonies and most foraging occur on private agricultural lands. Consequently, a proactive approach to protecting Tricolors on private lands is critical to maintaining viable populations. Conservation measures on public lands should continue to focus on maintaining and enhancing habitat suitable for nesting and foraging, creating and acquiring additional habitat,



and improving reproductive success of established colonies.

For further information or copies of our report, contact Kevin Hunting of the California Department of Fish and Game (phone: 916-657-4436, or e-mail: Khunting@compuserve.com).

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Monitoring Swainson's Hawks by satellite

Members of the Swainson's Hawk Technical Advisory Committee (SWHTAC), in cooperation with the Department of Water Resources (DWR), are currently involved in a Swainson's Hawk migration study. The study was designed to help identify migration routes and over-wintering grounds of the Central Valley population, which are as yet unknown. California's populations of this species, listed as Threatened by the Fish and Game Commission, are the only Swainson's Hawks to receive such protection.

The need for the study was identified in 1995, when Brian Woodbridge and others discovered mass poisonings of Swainson's Hawks in Argentina while attempting to identify the over-wintering grounds of a Great Basin study population. The migration study became SWHTAC's priority in protecting the Central Valley population in the immediate future, but resources to complete the work were limited. DWR became involved by proposing to help finance the study as mitigation for a South Delta project which had the potential to adversely affect nesting Swainson's Hawks.

During the 1997 nesting season six Swainson's hawks were fitted with PTTs (satellite transmitters); four in Yolo County, one in Solano County, and one in San Joaquin County. The subject bird from San Joaquin County (south Delta) is the sole male of the group, as he was the only trapped male large enough to be fitted with the 33 gram transmitter.

Although transmitter failure and transmission processing problems have plagued the study from the start, we have gathered enough location data from 4 of 6 birds to follow their migration (at least to date). Most traveled down the west coast of Mexico, but one bird took a significantly different route and is far ahead of the others; it is now in Columbia. Unfortunately it is not the sole male, as documentation of differing migration behavior based on gender would have been interesting. Currently, the other birds (4, perhaps all 5) are in middle to southern Mexico, and have not made a significant move south for over a month.

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