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Friday, January 19, 2007

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## Conservation efforts seem to work

*Songbird escapes endangered listing*

Julia Hollister  
Freelance Writer

California agricultural, conservation, nonprofits and governmental groups are applauding the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's decision not to list the tricolored blackbird as endangered.

"There is a significant cooperative conservation movement underway to restore and protect the bird's habitat," said U.S. Fish and Wildlife spokesman Jim Nickles. "We thought moving ahead with a listing now would not be of benefit to the species."

The tricolored blackbird is a medium-sized bird, 7 to 9 inches long, mostly a glistening black but with distinctive red and white stripes on its wings.

Another strong factor that influenced the non-listing status is that recent population surveys by U.S. Fish and Wildlife indicate the blackbird's numbers have increased from 154,000 in 2000 to 260,000 in 2005.

About 95 percent of the birds live in California, mostly in the Central Valley, but they have been found in 46 counties. In addition, several colonies live in Oregon, Washington, Baja California and Nevada.

"In the past few years, things have been happening on the ground to improve habitat, and we are working with farmers to protect the birds during nesting," Nickles said.

As available natural marshlands declined, blackbirds moved to another environment. Currently, about half the blackbirds nest in remaining cattail marshlands and half nest in silage crops grown to support California's dairies. However, silage crops often are harvested before blackbird chicks fledge, which can cause nesting failures. U.S. Fish and Wildlife is purchasing silage crops where large flocks of blackbirds are nesting. The silage is allowed to stand until the birds depart, reducing its value as cattle feed but saving the chicks.

Noelle Cremers, director of natural resources and commodities with the California Farm Bureau Federation, said the Farm Bureau has been against the listing of the tricolored blackbird since early 1990s when the population was found to be widespread and doing well.

"Two years ago, the Center for Biological Diversity petitioned to have the species listed again," she said. "We put together experts from University of California-Davis, and agricultural and wildlife conservation groups to find a solution to the blackbird's survival."

The adult birds have found it easier to feast upon a ready supply of grain in the dairy silage and other irrigated crops, which provide a wealth of insects for their young.

Dairies cannot legally harvest the silage if the birds are nesting and this can be an inconvenience to the dairy farmers. Cremers said dairy farmers are not that excited about having the birds take over their property.

"We are trying to come up with long-term solution to attract the blackbirds away from the dairies and back to their natural habitat," she said. "An announcement of a plan should be forthcoming in a few months."

Sustainable Conservation in San Francisco is spearheading the conservation alliance.

"The tricolored has been a species of concern for quite a while and several groups wanted to do something productive," Susan Kester said. "The group is starting to gel and meeting to formulate strategy and a memorandum of agreement. The main focus is habitat research and monitoring and education and outreach."

Kester said all the participants came to the table with the same goal - to build populations of the tricolored blackbird - but for different reasons. She said farmers don't want the bird to be listed because the listing would restrict them from doing work on their property.

"Fish and Wildlife officials want to make sure the population is healthy but listing puts them in a difficult place and raises the threat of lawsuits," Kester said. "Nonprofit groups want healthy populations and they are looking after other wildlife species too."

"It's interesting there is no strategy now to build populations, but the most important is getting a plan," Kester said. "Ours is a new approach and an effective way to build populations of imperiled wildlife without listing. It's also a way that governmental agencies can work with private property owners. There are lots of reasons why it is promising."

- Friday, December 29, 2006