Volunteers from all over California are gathering from April 25 to 27 to help Audubon California and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service conduct a statewide survey of Tricolored Blackbirds. In order to get an accurate count of this declining bird species, these volunteers are visiting past breeding sites and surveying other areas around their counties. This survey will provide critical information on the status of Tricolored Blackbird populations in California, which will support a variety of conservation efforts.

What’s a Tricolored Blackbird?

The Tricolored Blackbird is a uniquely Californian species – more than 95 percent of the world’s population resides in this state. They were once so common that they occurred in flocks of over 200,000 and were said to darken the sky when flying near their colonies. Tricolored Blackbirds are small birds, about 8 inches long, and are almost entirely black, except for their bright red shoulder patch prominently bordered by white. They are very similar to a closely related species, the Red-winged Blackbird that has a red shoulder patch bordered in yellow.

Why is the survey being conducted?

Tricolored Blackbird populations have declined tremendously in the past century, dropping from well over 1.5 million in the early 20th Century to an estimated 300,000 today. Counting the surviving birds is an important step in our conservation efforts.

Why have Tricolored Blackbirds declined?

Over the last 150 years, their natural marshland habitat has rapidly declined so that there is very little native habitat left for this species. With the loss of natural habitat, Tricolored Blackbirds have begun to use agricultural areas, particularly silage fields. Unfortunately, silage harvest overlaps with the bird’s breeding season, and thereby puts their nests at risk. Given the birds’ tendency to breed in large colonies, a significant percentage of the world’s Tricolored Blackbirds can be lost if one of these crops is harvested before the young are able to fly.

Joining together to protect Tricolored Blackbirds

State and federal wildlife agencies, conservation groups, and farmers have joined together to form the Tricolored Blackbird Working Group, which is working to improve the future for these birds through collaborative, non-regulatory action. Cooperative agreements between landowners and public agencies or Audubon California have resulted in agreements to pay farmers to postpone their harvest in order to allow the young blackbirds to fledge and leave the

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nest. While this has been successful in preventing some large losses, the partners are continuing to work closely with landowners to find ways to restore natural habitat for Tricolored Blackbirds in order to reduce the chance of nesting in agricultural fields.

**What does this mean for a landowner?**

Tricolored Blackbirds are not listed as a threatened or endangered species, therefore there is a premium on voluntary and collaborative approaches. This collaborative strategy will provide a model for future management and protection of wildlife species without resorting to regulatory restrictions.

**Additional information**

- For more information about Tricolored Blackbirds from Audubon California, please visit: www.ca.audubon.org.
- To learn more and to report observations, visit: tricolor.ice.ucdavis.edu