

# 2007 Nest Colony Monitoring Of Tricolored Blackbirds in Southern California

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## **Introduction**

We sought to monitor Tricolored Blackbird nesting colonies in southern California during the 2007 nesting season. Our survey objectives were to first locate nesting colonies then monitor the colonies until the conclusion of the nesting effort. Our search efforts in 2007 included Orange, Los Angeles, Riverside, and San Diego counties. Our efforts were only successful in locating one significant tricolor nesting colony in San Diego County. A summary of our southern California tricolor nesting colony survey efforts by county follows:

### **Orange County**

In October, 2006, Audubon California convened a meeting of persons interested in the conservation of tricolored blackbirds in southern California. A formal presentation of tricolor occurrence in Orange County was not given at the meeting. Subsequent meeting notes, however, indicated Laguna Niguel Regional Park was a remaining potential colony location. We surveyed this Regional Park for tricolors on March 29, 2007. No tricolors were observed but ample nesting habitat (cattails/bulrush) was seen to be present. While at the park we obtained the Checklist of Birds Laguna Niguel Regional Park compiled by Peyton Cook, Sea and Sage Audubon. We noted the checklist cover photograph was a tricolored blackbird. The checklist abundance code, however, indicated tricolors are uncommon at the Regional Park. A subsequent telephone conversation with Peyton Cook indicated a flock of less than 100 tricolors had previously been recorded at the Laguna Niguel Park. Peyton also indicated he had not previously observed a nesting colony at the Regional Park. Additional communications with Orange county birders (Nancy Kinen and Pete Bloom) did not result in the location of tricolor nesting colonies in Orange County.

### **Los Angeles County**

At the October, 2006 meeting, Kimball Garrett from the Los Angeles Natural History Museum indicated the stronghold for tricolor populations in Los Angeles County was the Antelope Valley (Lancaster/Palmdale area). In April 2007 we surveyed the following locations for tricolor activity: Gorman Post Road, Lake Palmdale, and Holiday Lake. In addition, we secured permission to enter Edwards Air Force Base to survey potential tricolor nesting activity at Piute Ponds and Branch Memorial Park. No tricolor blackbirds were observed at any of the above locations during the April 2007 efforts. In 2007 Los Angeles experienced its driest rainy season in 130 years of record keeping (Season: 3.21" / Normal: 15.14"). During our survey it was apparent the drought conditions had precluded spring germination of many of the wildland plant communities. Consequently, favorable foraging habitat for tricolored blackbirds was largely nonexistent. We concluded no significant tricolor nesting colonies occurred in Los Angeles County in 2007.

### **Riverside County**

In 2006, perhaps the largest remaining tricolored population in southern California nested in the San Jacinto Valley of Riverside County. That year, nesting failure was narrowly averted when the dairy wheat crop the birds chose to nest in was purchased by conservation groups. This allowed the 6000 to 8000 breeding birds to complete the nesting cycle. During our survey efforts in 2007,

we were not able to locate the historic San Jacinto Valley tricolored nesting population. We attribute this to the ongoing drought which, as in Los Angeles County, was manifest by a complete lack of spring green-up. Consequently, tricolor wildland foraging conditions were also largely nonexistent in Riverside County. We also noted poor rainfall likely contributed to the stunted dairy wheat fields in the San Jacinto Valley largely rendering them unsuitable for tricolor silage crop nesting. We concluded no significant tricolor nesting colonies were realized in Riverside County in 2007.

### **San Diego County**

On April 4, 2007, we surveyed the Ramona Grassland area of San Diego County. We observed a flock of less than 100 tricolors foraging in a reclaimed water irrigated grassland. The irrigated grassland was owned and operated by the Ramona Municipal Water District (RMWD). We then sought permission to enter the District lands to potentially monitor tricolor nesting activity. Our written request to access these lands was summarily denied. The April 9, 2007 RMWD response letter indicated access to District owned property was not allowed for any reason. It was readily apparent that RMWD has no interest in participating in the conservation of tricolored blackbirds.

We were alerted to the formation of a tricolor colony in southern San Diego County by an email sent out by Phil Unitt, San Diego Natural History Museum. A colony of 800 to 1000 birds had formed on the Department of Fish and Game, Rancho Jamul Ecological Reserve. A former stock pond area had been newly flooded for the second consecutive year by the Fish and Game management staff on the Ecological Reserve. Nesting substrate consisted primarily of bulrush and cattails fringing the newly flooded pond area. The nesting colony was monitored from early May to the middle of June. Apparently, southern San Diego County received near normal rainfall in 2007. A striking feature of this colony was the super abundance of grasshoppers in the adjacent tricolor foraging fields. The grasshoppers were subsequently identified as devastating grasshoppers (*Melanoplus devastator*) by Greg Balmer, UCR Entomology Lab. This grasshopper's main distribution is in the western coastal states, where it inhabits semiarid rangelands dominated by forbs and annual grasses. Infested rangelands have been reported to harbor from 35 to 100 grasshopper nymphs and adults per square yard. The nesting success of this particular tricolor colony is thought to be due to the availability of the wetland nesting substrate and the super abundance of the devastating grasshopper in the adjacent foraging habitat. After the tricolors departed, we conducted several nest transects at the colony site (July 19, 2007). Our sample transects indicated 200 to 300 nest were built in the colony. We estimate 150 to 450 young were produced in 2007

In September 2007, Tyler Grant, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist, reported a nesting colony of approximately 100 tricolors on a private ranch located on Palomar Mountain (Laguna Mtns.). The success of the colony was not known, but incredible numbers of grasshoppers were also reported in the grasslands associated with this San Diego County nesting location.

### **Discussion**

The status of tricolored blackbirds in southern California remains tenuous. Adequate rainfall this rainy season will be decisive if southern California tricolored blackbirds are to rebound in 2008. The record drought conditions in much of southern California this year serve to highlight the importance of adequate high quality foraging habitat in the long term conservation planning for the southern California population segment. A determination on the genetic structure of southern California tricolored blackbirds and their connectivity to Central Valley populations warrants a high research priority. The upcoming 2008 statewide tricolor survey should endeavor to be as rigorous and comprehensive as possible with particular emphasis on southern California in order to more thoroughly assess the status of this population segment.