

# Nesting Tricolored Blackbird Survey: Baja California 2008

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## SUMMARY

Following extensive surveys in 2007, we surveyed 26 potential Tricolored Blackbird nesting sites in Baja California on seven days from March to June 2008 for a total of 35 site visits. Tricolored Blackbirds were observed at seven locations south to El Rosario and nesting was confirmed at four. The nesting sites essentially outlined the species' range in Baja California and included two where blackbirds had been recorded previously but never confirmed nesting. The largest colonies were at those sites. Approximately 100 pairs nested near El Rosario, at the edge of the Vizcaíno Desert, and approximately 80 pairs nested in the northern Sierra Juárez at Rancho Japá. At traditional sites approximately 20 pairs nested at Presa Abelardo Rodríguez, near Tijuana, and about 40 birds were found at Héroes de la Independencia, the only location where nesting was recorded in 2007. Additional birds were found around Tijuana—at Parque de la Amistad and east of Valle Bonito—and at Leyes de Reforma. The region's rainfall totals were significantly better than last year but still below average. As a result, in 2008 the Tricolored Blackbird population was probably reduced (low recruitment in 2007) and productivity was probably poor to mediocre.

The Tricolored Blackbird (*Agelaius tricolor*) is similar to the familiar and widespread Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*), but is restricted to the Pacific coast of North America from Washington to northwestern Baja California. Although the species has expanded its range northward over the last 30 years, the vast majority of the population resides in the Central Valley of California. Recent declines in Tricolored Blackbird numbers there have led to increased concern for the species throughout its range. Accordingly, the Sonora Joint Venture funded surveys of nesting Tricolored Blackbirds in Baja California in 2007 and 2008. This report follows an earlier one on the 2007 effort.

## METHODS

In 2007 we examined historical occurrence data in order to identify known and potential nesting sites for the Tricolored Blackbird in Baja California. We surveyed 44 potential nesting sites in 2007 for a total of 103 site visits.

In 2008 Erickson visited 26 sites on seven days from 5 March to 6 June for a total of 35 site visits (Table 1). The reduced effort this year did not allow for surveys of many of the less promising locations visited in 2007.

## RESULTS

Tricolored Blackbirds were found at five traditional sites and two sites first discovered in 2007. Complete survey results are shown in Table 1. Figure 1 shows much of the same information graphically, and also shows the locations of all known previous observations in Baja California.

Nesting was confirmed at four sites in 2008. Near Tijuana, about 20 pairs were feeding large young (some out of the nest) in dense mulefat (*Baccharis salicifolia*) and tree tobacco (*Nicotiana glauca*) on the south side of Presa Abelardo Rodriguez (32° 26' N 116 ° 54' W, elevation ~100 m) on 6 May. Adults were commuting to stables on the south side of the new highway to obtain food.

In the northern Sierra Juárez, about 80 pairs were nesting in a marsh just below the dam at Rancho Japá (32° 26' N 116 ° 10' W, elevation ~1300 m) on 13 May. The birds appeared to be at various stages of the nesting cycle with some males still singing, most tending occupied nests, and some tending fledged young. Most adults were commuting to forage well to the south-southeast, beyond the reservoir.

At the south end of the Sierra Juárez, about 40 birds were at the marsh below the dam at Héroes de la Independencia (31° 36' N 115 ° 54' W, elevation >1000 m), the only active nesting site found in 2007. On 5 May the birds appeared to be early in the nesting cycle, as there was much singing and no birds obviously carrying food to young. As in previous years, adults commuted to and from areas to the east.

At the southern extent of the species range, the largest nesting colony found in 2008 was in Arroyo del Rosario, near the mouth of Cañada San Fernando east of El Rosario (30° 04' N 115 ° 43' W, elevation <50 m). On 5 May about 100 pairs in a cattail marsh were apparently at about the same stage of nesting, as there were no singing birds and no fledged young. Adults were busy feeding young in nests and commuting to lower Cañada San Fernando to forage in upland areas.

No birds were found at five former nesting sites: Rancho Tres Pozos, Valle Ojos Negros, La Misión, Maneadero Plain (although access was denied to the Baja Country Club), and the San Quintín Plain. Birds found away from nesting sites were at Parque de la Amistad in Tijuana (one bird on 13 May, 12 on 5 June), the drainage just east of Valle Bonito (seven birds on 6 May), and Leyes de Reforma (10 birds on 5 March).

## **DISCUSSION**

Increased rainfall this season allowed for improved Tricolored Blackbird reproductive success compared to last year, but the results were still probably subpar due to continuing dry conditions and a reduced population following last year's disastrous season. As evident in Figure 1, the four nesting sites in 2008 essentially outlined the species' range in Baja California. Rancho Japá in the northeast and El Rosario in the far south represented new nesting locations, although blackbirds had been seen at both sites previously. At El Rosario the Tricolored Blackbird was first recorded in 1906, a maximum of 250 was observed in September 1999, and 15 juveniles seen in May 2003 suggested local nesting. At Rancho Japá the species was first reported in 2005 and a maximum of 50 was seen in May 2007.

Conditions had improved at the small reservoir at Rancho Tres Pozos where blackbirds nested in 2005 but the marsh was subsequently cleared. We were not allowed access to the ponds at the Baja Country Club. We wish to emphasize the potential throughout the region for creating suitable nesting habitat at small impoundments such as these, where marsh habitat is allowed to develop.

We now believe that the locations most worthy of surveys to document new or continued nesting include the Río Tijuana area east of Tijuana, Valle Guadalupe, Valle Ojos Negros, and Valle San Telmo.

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Table 1. Tricolored Blackbird nesting survey results for 2008. Survey sites are divided into a more interior group and a more coastal group. Within each group locations are generally listed from north to south. Nesting records prior to 2008 are summarized in the last column.

Location	Date Surveyed	Number of birds found	Nesting Records Prior to 2008
<b>Sites east of Highway 1</b>			
vicinity Tijuana			
Parque de la Amistad	13 May	1	
	5 Jun	12	
Presa Abelardo Rodriguez	6 May	~20 pairs nesting	nesting confirmed in 2002
drainage just east of Valle Bonito	6 May	7	
<b>Sierra Juárez</b>			
Rancho Japá	13 May	~80 pairs nesting	
Rancho Tres Pozos	13 May	none	25 pairs nesting in May 2005
Laguna Hanson	5 Mar	none	
El Rayo	5 Mar	none	
Valle de Guadalupe	5 Jun	none	
Valle Ojos Negros	5 May	none	large colony in the San Rafael Valley [east of Ensenada] in May 1885
Héroes de la Independencia	5 Mar	none	30–50 pairs nesting 1991–2007
	5 May	~40 at colony	
Leyes de Reforma	5 Mar	10	
	5 May	none	
<b>Sites generally along Highway 1</b>			
Real del Mar	4 May	none	
	5 Jun	none	
Cantamar	5 Jun	none	
El Descanso	6 Jun	none	
Río Guadalupe estuary	6 May	none	
	5 Jun	none	
	6 Jun	none	
La Misión	6 May	none	1000–1200 bird colony in May 2002
La Salina	5 Jun	none	
Presa Emiliano Zapata, Ensenada	6 May	none	
Lagunita El Ciprés	4 May	none	
	6 May	none	
	5 Jun	none	
Maneadero Plain	6 May	none	up to 110–130 pairs nesting at Baja Country Club 2000–2006
	5 Jun	none	
Las Animas	6 Jun	none	
Río Santo Tomás estuary	6 Jun	none	
Valle Santo Tomás	6 Jun	none	
lower Valle San Telmo	4 May	none	
San Quintín Plain	5 May	none	25 nesting in May 2003
El Rosario	5 May	~100 pairs	15 juveniles seen in May 2003