

# **Regional Conservation Partnership Program**

## Protection, Restoration, and Enhancement of Tricolored Blackbird Habitat on Agricultural Lands

Report to the Natural Resources Conservation Service  
April 1, 2016 to June 30, 2016  
Agreement No: 68-9104-5-261



### **Grant Overview**

#### *Partners*

Audubon California, California Farm Bureau Federation, Dairy Cares, Sustainable Conservation, Western United Dairymen, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

#### *Geographic Area*

California Bay Delta Critical Conservation Area (Bay Delta CCA)

#### *Timeline and Reporting*

The full grant length is May 19, 2015 to September 30, 2019. This grant reporting period is from April 1, 2016 to June 30, 2016. We provide narrative reports every six months, but this report will cover three months as we transition from an October and April reporting schedule to a January and July reporting schedule. The last report covered activities from October 1, 2015 to March 31, 2016.

#### *Partner Activities April 1, 2016 to June 30, 2016*

**Objective 1 Outcomes: Protect silage colonies through NRCS harvest management practice**

Surveys to locate Tricolored Blackbird colonies on agricultural lands

- A field technician from Audubon California conducted road surveys two days per week from March 1, 2016 to May 23, 2016 to locate Tricolored Blackbird colonies. Driving routes primarily focused on known nesting hotspots in Merced, Madera, Fresno, Kern, Kings, and Tulare Counties. Conservation Project Manager, Samantha Arthur, also conducted driving surveys to locate new colonies.
- Two field staff separate from the RCPP and on contract with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) conducted extensive surveys of the valley and located farm colonies. This reduced the survey effort needed from Audubon.

Outreach to producers with Tricolored Blackbird colonies

- In 2015 our RCPP partnership developed a colony identification response plan in coordination with the Tricolored Blackbird Working Group to facilitate immediate outreach to dairy producers with Tricolored Blackbird colonies sighted on their property. We implemented this response plan again in 2016 and contracted a retired Western United Dairymen field representative to provide direct outreach and technical assistance to dairies with Tricolored Blackbirds. The contractor provided rapid, nearly same day outreach to dairies with reported colonies to inform them of the NRCS harvest management program offering. He also provided follow-up to many dairies to facilitate their enrollment in the program.

Colony monitoring

- All colony sites on dairies or farmland were delineated with a buffer by an NRCS or Audubon biologist. Buffers were a minimum of 100 feet in accordance with the avoidance measures set by the Department of Fish and Wildlife.
- NRCS monitored all colonies in Kern and Tulare Counties on a weekly basis and Audubon monitored the one colony in Fresno County on a weekly basis to determine colony progression. When the colony completed its nesting cycle the field was cleared by an NRCS or Audubon biologist for harvest.
- Colony transects were conducted on an opportunistic basis to assess occupied area and nest density to estimate colony size.

Colony protection

- For the first time, all dairies with known colonies participated with NRCS and protected the colonies. This success can be attributed to pre-season outreach efforts, additional colony detection by CDFW and Audubon, and dairy industry efforts to respond quickly and as the first-point of contact for farmers.
- The RCPP worked with six dairies to protect 55,500 nesting Tricolored Blackbirds. An additional 1,500 birds were protected at a site in Riverside County, which was outside of the RCPP area and funded through the NRCS Declining Species Initiative.
- The following tables summarize acres, number of birds and funds distributed.

**NRCS RCPP**

<b>County</b>	<b>Acres</b>	<b>RCPP Funds (\$636.99 per acre)</b>	<b>Number of Birds</b>
Kern	169.7	\$108,097.20	20,000
Kern	33	\$21,020.67	5,000
Kern	40	\$25,479.60	7,500
Tulare	80	\$51,896 (\$648.70 per acre)	15,000
Tulare	14.3	\$9,108.96	1,000

Fresno	32	Technical assistance only	7,000
<b>Totals</b>	369 TA/337 FA	\$215,602.43	55,500

**NRCS Declining Species Initiative**

County	Acres	Declining Species Funds (\$636.99 per acre)	Number of Birds
Riverside	15.1	\$9,619	1,500

**CDFW (Audubon provided technical assistance)**

County	Acres	Number of Birds
San Benito	5.82 (without buffer)	5,000

\*Note a second colony of 5,000 was on the same property, but in milk thistle off of the cultivated field. CDFW compensated this farmer for the acreage in wheat.

**Objective 2 Outcomes: Develop long-term solutions to silage conflict and pilot project**

Merced National Wildlife Refuge, with financial support from Audubon as RCPP cash match, continued the silage bank pilot project this year. Merced Refuge improved significantly on the first year of the pilot project by working with neighboring farmers to match their forage seed blend and timing of planting. In 2015 late planting resulted in patchy and low forage plant growth. In 2016 the plant growth was dense and high enough for Tricolored Blackbird nesting by April. The planted field was impacted by weeds as spring progressed, but this would not likely diminish the field’s attractiveness to Tricolored Blackbirds, who frequently use weedy silage fields that provide nesting structure. While weeds in the silage bank field will not negatively affect the habitat quality, it can affect the quality of the silage for a nearby farmer to use.

Although Merced National Wildlife Refuge successfully grew a silage field to provide nesting habitat, Tricolored Blackbirds selected a milk thistle site on the Refuge. Spring rains caused a burst of milk thistle on the landscape in Merced County and this substrate was heavily used by nesting Tricolored Blackbirds throughout the county. Without these weather conditions the silage field on Merced Refuge may be an important nesting site for Tricolored Blackbirds in this hotspot area. To assess whether the silage site is used when surrounding landscape conditions are different than 2016, Audubon California and Merced National Wildlife Refuge are partnering to conduct a third year of the project. In 2016 we did not find a suitable transfer to a farmer for the silage grown on Merced Refuge. Because the crop is grown to provide Tricolored Blackbird habitat, it was held past the target date for green chopping done by farmers. The presence of weeds also made the crop less desirable for a local farmer to use it for silage. We will work to evaluate silage transfer potential again in 2017.

**Objective 4 Outcomes: Habitat restoration and enhancement**



*Holiday Lake in Los Angeles County on May 14, 2016*



*Tricolored Blackbird ponds on Kern River Preserve. May 13, 2016*

As reported in the previous quarter, Audubon California has several current and upcoming habitat restoration and enhancement projects that complement the on-farm colony protection efforts. These projects include using private donations to fund two projects with Audubon chapters to provide natural habitat for Tricolored Blackbirds. Yolo Audubon will develop a wetland site on a private ranch in Yolo County with a history of Tricolored Blackbird roosting. This project aims to provide nesting habitat for the 2017 season. Sierra Foothill Audubon conducted surveys throughout the Sierra Foothills to identify potential habitat enhancement or restoration sites for Tricolored Blackbirds.

In addition to the chapter reports and as reported in the previous quarter, Audubon California partnered with West Valley County Water District in the Antelope Valley of Los Angeles County to provide flooded wetland habitat during the 2016 Tricolored Blackbird nesting season. With \$10,000 from Audubon to pump water until mid-July, Holiday Lake attracted nesting Tricolored Blackbirds for the third year in a row. This remains the largest breeding colony in Southern California with approximately 2,000 Tricolored Blackbirds.

In 2015 Audubon California funded a project by Kern and Kerncrest Audubon Chapters to create a solar-powered wetland at the Audubon Kern River Preserve. After lining the soil to retain water and installing solar panels, the site now holds water for Tricolored Blackbird habitat. Native plants were planted by

chapter volunteers and they are expected to grow over the next several years to reach the density needed by Tricolored Blackbirds for nesting.

In addition to currently active restoration and enhancement projects, Dairy Cares and Audubon California worked together to develop a contract with the California Department of Food and Agriculture for \$75,000 to test if targeted wetland habitat restoration can draw Tricolored Blackbirds away from nearby dairies. This funding will be deployed in 2017 and will serve as cash match to the RCPP.

## **Conclusion**

This year we celebrate the milestone of 100 percent participation of known farm colonies in the harvest management practice. NRCS set the foundation for this success with their consistent technical and financial assistance to dairy farmers with Tricolored Blackbirds over the past five years. The tireless efforts of NRCS biologists have made them a trusted partner and resource among producers in the San Joaquin Valley. Since the start of the Tricolored Blackbird RCPP project, Dairy Cares, Western United Dairymen, and California Farm Bureau have made significant efforts to inform their members of resources available to farmers with Tricolored Blackbirds through articles, videos, regional meetings, and direct one-on-one outreach. Most importantly, this year's program success is thanks to the generous, flexible, and collaborative farmers who provided habitat for about 62,000 nesting Tricolored Blackbirds.