

## **Summary of Tricolored Blackbird Working Group Meeting**

**September 8<sup>th</sup>, 2010 0930-1300**

**U.S. Federal Building, Sacramento, CA**

The meeting was well attended with the agencies, industry, and non-profit groups being represented. To begin the meeting Bob Meese presented survey data and colony fate determination at select colonies from the 2010 season. The general conclusion was that the majority of colonies are showing low reproductive success and fledglings produced per nest is showing a yearly decline since 2006. He also presented on banding efforts from 2010 resulting in over 160 recaptured birds. As the results are extensive (and fascinating), I encourage everyone to see his report on the Portal when it becomes available. He also highlighted a report created by the Western Riverside County Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan Biological Monitoring Program that documents the decline of the Tricolored Blackbird in Southern California since 1997. This report is available now on the homepage of the Portal and I encourage everyone to read it.

Julie Yee also presented results from her analysis of the double-observer survey. In 2010 there were several volunteer observers coordinated by Audubon California that took part in the survey along with expert observers from UC Davis and FWS. The addition of volunteer observers makes the results of the double-observer survey more representative of the level of variation seen in a large scale survey like the upcoming statewide survey in 2011. She found that the probability of detecting a colony when it is occupied was 84.5% given that some observers did not see a colony that was detected by another observer. The majority of the colonies that were not detected were relatively small (15 to 300 birds) and would not skew the population estimate very much. The variation in observer estimates of colony size was 43%, which could have a dramatic effect on estimating overall population size, especially since the widest variation was in the largest colonies. Some of this variation could be due to observers estimating colony size at different times of the day when the birds are more or less active. It was emphasized that estimating colony size should be done in a standardized way of only counting birds seen and to train volunteers with this method to control for some of the variation.

### **Action Items**

Items agreed on:

- A southern California monitoring protocol could look similar to any protocol used in the Central Valley, and it was emphasized that we use the Leona Valley in S. California as a model of community involvement in Tricolor conservation. Residents of

- the valley have set up a monitoring network that reports any Tricolors seen in the valley.
- An updated Habitat Management Guide for public and private land managers will be completed in October 2010. Anyone with comments on the contents of the Guide, please email [kkyle@audubon.org](mailto:kkyle@audubon.org).
  - Dividing state into regions for management purposes: The Group concluded that the state is currently divided fairly well into Sacramento Valley, Northern and Southern San Joaquin Valleys, Southern California, and Coastal Areas. We began discussing the need to calculate how much habitat is needed for the number of birds nesting and over wintering in each area. By dividing into regions, it will be easier to prioritize various regions given how many birds are present and how much habitat they need. It will also make monitoring the population easier since various groups can be responsible for different areas.
  - We discussed acknowledging the efforts of farmers to conserve Tricolor colonies. Frank Costa of Costa Dairy in Tulare County has expressed tentative interest in having some positive PR about his family's efforts over the past several years to conserve Tricolor colonies. There were suggestions of contacting Ag trade journals such as California Farmer or Western Dairy Business. Also the local papers in Bakersfield or Tulare might be good venues. For awards, we could nominate the Costa family for Leopold Award or a Governor's Award. Keiller Kyle will be following up on the best avenue for highlighting Costa's and others' efforts.

### **Tricolored Blackbird Depredation:**

Everyone agreed that more public outreach is necessary amongst rice and dairy farmers. A Tricolor Identification insert was put into the California Rice Commission's (CRC) fall newsletter and Paul Buttner of the CRC said that this could be a yearly occurrence. Paul also encouraged us to set up a quick talk on Tricolors to be given at required meetings for rice farmers on pesticide and fertilizer usage held in June every year. It would be a good way to get all the farmers in one spot to disperse the message. Also Keiller Kyle followed up on the request that the old Tricolor ID pamphlet be obtained from Katrina Martin of FWS. The pamphlet will be placed on the Tricolor Portal shortly. A suggestion to add in behavioral cues to the current Tricolor ID sheet was met with enthusiasm and could be placed on the back page of the sheet. The ID sheet will be modified and sent out for comments.

### **Cattle Egret Predation**

Good feedback came back about next steps in managing this issue. First it was agreed that this is a problem, one that should be solved before the 2011 breeding season. Second, we agreed that we needed to speak with a Heron/Egret expert, John Kelly, to get more information about the ramifications of cutting down rookery substrate or shooting the birds. The three major methods of removing the predation problem were 1) cutting down rookery substrate and dispersing the birds 2) shooting the birds to lower or extinguish the population and 3) hazing the egrets either at the rookery or at the Tricolor colonies to disperse the egrets.

As a follow up, Keiller Kyle spoke with John Kelly about these three possible options and will send an email detailing his conversation shortly.

### **Silage Buyouts**

There is \$61,000 left for 2011 after which time the money will disappear with no current avenue of renewal. An alternative to the yearly spring buyout is to try and establish long-term agreements (i.e. 5 years) with specific growers to maintain a colony site on their property in exchange for the Working Group covering input costs. According to the Cooperative Extension, the input costs of growing 80 acres of triticale are ~\$27,000 adjusted for 2010 input prices. Attendees were generally in favor of this idea and were very interested in speaking with farmers in the fall regardless of a five-year agreement. Keiller Kyle and other agency personnel will follow up with contacting growers. Funding for these 5-year agreements is still needed.

### **Duck Club Solar Project**

Keiller Kyle described an idea he had to approach duck clubs, especially in the southern San Joaquin Valley, to encourage them to use solar panel arrays to power their water pumps. While sizing the project, he is attempting to get them to add enough solar panels to pump water for Tricolor habitat in the spring. He has received serious interest from roughly 7 to 8 duck clubs in the region around Kern NWR and will continue to pursue these opportunities. In order to secure water for Tricolors, some level of investment will be necessary from the Working Group. Partners in Fish and Wildlife is interested in investing some or all of their \$25,000 yearly grant money towards some of these projects and other funding sources are being sought to invest in the Tricolor portion of these projects.

We also learned from Tom Moore of NRCS that Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) would cover maintaining wetland areas despite the grant typically being used in agricultural situations. Keiller Kyle will develop a program that educates and persuades wetland owners to invest in

solar power pumping and invest money in projects that secure habitat for Tricolors and other species of interest. He will also follow up with Roni Gutierrez of NCRS to figure out the details of the grant. This will be a 2011 project.

### **Southern California Plan of Action**

With time running short in the meeting, it was agreed that Southern California issues will be discussed at a meeting in Southern California later this year (Nov-Dec 2010) or early next (Jan 2011). Jon Feenstra sent some preliminary results from 2010 survey work and estimated that the S. California population is 3,873 individuals. This is down from 2008 and 2009 when populations were 5,775 and 5,453 respectively. A perennial colony site on restricted land was not surveyed in 2010 and could be the difference in population estimates between 2010 and 2008-09 since the colonies typically holds 2000 birds. 17 active colonies were found; all but two were less than 500 birds. Most of the successful colonies occurred in June after a failed attempt in April, most likely due to the cold spring we had. Jon will be presenting a full report shortly that will be placed on the Portal.

### **Updating the Tricolor Portal**

This topic was not discussed extensively but thoughts on if and how we should update the Tricolored Blackbird Portal are welcome. Some ideas are to make it easier to input and extract data from the Portal database as well as make searching for colony sites more map-based rather than list based. The question posed was if we did want to update the Portal how could it be funded and who would do the work, most likely UC Davis?

### **Surveying Colonies 2011**

This topic was shelved until our next Central Valley meeting in late February, early March. It seems the DFG is interested in contributing funding to support the study that will take place in April 2011.

### **Final Thoughts:**

Everyone agreed that a meeting for the statewide survey was a good idea and there was definite support of having a Southern California meeting later this year.

Audubon habitat installation at Canebrake in 2010. Vegetation will be monitored for Tricolor use for the next several years.