

Community science helps California's native blackbird gain protected status

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Thanks to data gathered by local citizens, scientists were able to get the state's tricolored blackbird listed as threatened. In Monterey County, the blackbirds nest on natural habitats with native vegetation. (C Wyck, contributed)

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MONTEREY — Local citizens helped scientists gather enough data to list the state's tricolored blackbird as threatened, a recent study shows.

Using nesting data from surveys and thousands of sighting entries from eBird -- a birding portal with millions of users worldwide -- postdoctoral fellow Orin Robinson at Cornell University and colleagues estimated that the species' population declined 34 percent over the past 10 years.

Although the findings were published in October, they were submitted in advance as key evidence that convinced the California Fish and Game Commission to approve the blackbird's protection status under the California Endangered Species Act in April. A previous attempt to list the species in 2004 failed because there were no accurate population models of the blackbird.

Almost all of the tricolored blackbirds (*Agelaius tricolor*), or “trikes,” breed within the state, forming large colonies of thousands. This behavior makes it especially vulnerable to habitat loss.

Their numbers have plummeted rapidly since 1935 because freshwater wetlands and grasslands, their natural feeding and nesting sites, were converted in the Central Valley into agricultural fields that produce wine, pistachios, almonds and crops, according to Robert Meese, an ecologist from UC Davis and co-author of the study.



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However, in Monterey County, the smaller, coastal colonies of blackbirds still nest on natural habitats with native vegetation, says Christy Wyckoff, a wildlife biologist at the Santa Lucia Conservancy in Carmel. However, the habitat is in a deteriorated state, she says, and it requires active management to help the bird thrive.

“It’s no secret that the trike is in trouble -- we’re all aware that the bird’s numbers have plummeted,” says Sharon Hull, 73, an avid eBird user who also writes a gardening column for The Herald. She spotted an adult male blackbird feeding a juvenile last summer on Swanton Road in Santa Cruz, where she lives. She hopes the bird’s listing will attract more attention and more funding for conservation efforts.

Since the mid-1990s, scientists and volunteers have surveyed the blackbird’s nesting and breeding sites. Every three years, around 130 people, from researchers to recreational birders, go to the field in every county of the state for three days and count every trike

they see.

Meese coordinated the statewide Triennial Statewide Surveys in 2014 and 2017. “The amount of information that we have on where these birds breed has gone up exponentially in 10 years,” he says.

In 1994, the surveys estimated there were 370,000 birds in the state. In the last survey, in 2017, that number dropped by almost half. “There is very overwhelming evidence of a continuing decline in abundance and a continuing level of threat,” Meese says.

Wyckoff coordinated the survey in Monterey County last year. She gathered 21 volunteers, many from the local Audubon Society, and went to 20 locations in the county looking for nesting blackbirds. The more prominent colonies last year nested in the Santa Lucia Preserve, an 18,000-acre preserve with stock ponds from previous ranching activities; in a wetland in Laguna Seca, which supports up to a thousand birds; and Fort Ord.

Traditional bird surveys like these are designed to study fixed locations over time. But this might not be ideal to study tricolored blackbirds because they have unpredictable migration behaviors and don’t necessarily return to the same nesting sites year after year. “It’s a really hard species to study,” says Robinson. “They move around a lot.” For instance, Wyckoff and the volunteers found a 2,500-bird colony in a previously undiscovered location last year, increasing the county count to 2,793 birds in 2017, in contrast with the 50 that were reported nine years ago.

Since 2005, Meese started managing the Tricolored Blackbird Portal, a website where recreational birders can enter their sightings of tricolored blackbirds. The portal is a way to gather existing information from the surveys and to allow the public to enter new data.

By combining information from thousands of blackbird sightings from eBird with data from the Triennial Statewide Surveys and the portal, Robinson, Meese and colleagues were able to estimate the species’ decline.

For Wyckoff, the fact that science has proven these trends are concerning enough that it warrants protection is encouraging. “I think that it’s an incredible victory,” she says, “but having a species listed signifies how dire the situation is.”

The new threatened status allows the state to prosecute people who kill tricolored blackbirds, which happens often when farmers harvest their crop in the Central Valley. In Monterey, however, “we don’t have that issue,” says Wyckoff. Here, the deteriorated native vegetation in natural nesting sites needs upkeep and stewardship, she says. “These habitats need attention. You can’t just protect the bird and just leave it -- you have to be an active partner with them.”

She is now in talks with landowners in Laguna Seca and Fort Ord to help manage the land, and she's also talking to other landowners who have habitats that could support the trike colonies.

There are no signs the decline will stop, so the scientists expect that there will likely be another petition to change the status from threatened to endangered in the next decade. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is reviewing the bird information for several listings that would include not only California but almost their entire range, which spans from northern Baja California, Mexico, to Oregon and Washington. Wyckoff expects the decision to be released before the end of the year.

But for now, this listing feels special because of the efforts the community put into it. "We couldn't have done that without the citizen scientists," says Meese. "Without a doubt."