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Blackbirds benefit from silage buyout

Successful nesting, hatching a reverse of 2007's disaster

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Tri-colored blackbirds did not repeat their reproductive debacle of 2007. Instead, many nested and hatched their young successfully this spring in the southern San Joaquin Valley.

Susan Kester, who manages Sustainable Conservation's Species Conservation program, said some of the success was attributed to the buyout of a 36-acre silage field and the delayed harvest of another field.

The tri-colored blackbird isn't on the endangered species list, but is listed as a state species of concern. California is home to 95 percent of the world's population, an estimated 250,000-300,000 tri-colored blackbirds.

The birds traditionally nested in wetland areas, but with the increase in winter forage crops over the past 30 years in the southern San Joaquin Valley, they have moved into those crops for nesting. The crops afford them safety from predators and more food, but harvest before young birds fledge from the nests can decimate large numbers because so many nest together in a field.

Kester's program seeks to build populations of the birds without restrictions on farming practices. She said in a phone interview that 2007 was deemed a reproductive failure with large number of birds abandoning nests.

She theorized the abandonment might have been due to a lack of insect populations. This spring, an agreement with a grower safeguarded a single colony of about 80,000 tri-colored blackbirds. Audubon California announced the agreement to delay harvest to give the young time to leave the nest.

A silage buyout in Kern County allowed another 43,000 to 60,000 to fledge safely. Compensation to the growers came from private funds and a grant from the California Department of Fish and Game through the Landowner Incentive Program.

Kester said a census taken in April showed larger numbers of the birds this year. She declined to reveal the total counts.

A tri-color blackbird census is taken every three years and is funded by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Kester said Sustainable Conservation is still confirming the accuracy of the census. She characterized it as more of a snapshot in time of the bird population levels.

If the bird were to be listed as threatened or endangered, anyone disturbing a nest could be fined.

Rather than take that approach, Kester said a statewide alliance was formed to boost population of the tri-color blackbird and keep it off the federal endangered species list. She said the alliance sought funding to pay farmers to either forego or delay harvest.

Tri-color blackbirds move north after their young hatch in the south valley. Kester said they do nest again the same season, but their strongest hatch occurs in the south.

Western United Dairymen is one of the 16 members of the alliance that has formulated a plan to create habitat, monitor populations and do research on the birds.

Paul Martin, WUD's environmental services director said the dairy industry is amenable to buyouts to protect nests.

"It's an economical way to protect the birds. On just a few acres, their nests can be so dense, you can save thousands," Martin said. "It's a good opportunity for producer to be positive force and be part of a cooperative effort."

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