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## WUD's Mendonsa provides habitat for 15,000 Tricolored Blackbirds

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The Tricolored Blackbird has a very small range in the Pacific states, marked by highly social nesting: nests may be packed in close together, only a foot or two apart.

Photo by Audubon Field Guide

Frank Mendonsa, a dairy farmer in Tipton, Calif., and the president of Western United Dairymen, was recognized for his significant contributions to protecting two colonies of the California emergency-listed Tricolored Blackbird. Since April, Mendonsa's silage fields became a temporary nesting habitat for the colonies of nearly 15,000 birds, and Mendonsa is delaying harvest to help the birds safely fledge their young.

"When the birds first appeared on my property this spring, I didn't know what kind they were," said Mendonsa. "Once it was pointed out to me how few of these birds are left in the world and how many were on my property, I was very moved. I could see how much they needed my help and protection to build back their populations, so I have taken it upon myself to ensure their safety on this farm."

Conservation partners working with Mendonsa to find win-win solutions for farmers and the imperiled birds include Audubon California, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), California Farm Bureau, Dairy Cares, Sustainable Conservation, and Western United Dairymen.

Each spring, Tricolored Blackbirds build large colonies of nests in the Central Valley areas that were once marshy ecosystems and are now cropland. The typical nesting cycle lasts approximately 35 days, before the young birds can safely leave their nest.

About 40% of the birds now use silage crops such as triticale and wheat to build their nests. Since Tricolored Blackbirds are colonial nesters, thousands of birds may impact—and be impacted by—farming operations where they build their nests. By delaying harvest farmers can allow the young birds to safely fledge, though this can mean hardships and lost harvest value to the farmer. The species is now emergency listed as a California endangered species, and also protected under the provisions of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

"A unique partnership of dairy farmers and environmental experts continues to work together to help protect both an imperiled bird and the long-term sustainability of California's dairy industry," said Carlos Suarez, NRCS state conservationist for California. "We applaud Frank Mendonsa's commitment to protecting the colonies temporarily residing in his fields and the actions of other participating dairy farmers."

Entering its third year, NRCS and Audubon California have helped farmers who have Tricolored Blackbirds nesting in their fields by providing incentive payments to delay harvest until the young birds have fledged. Over the past three years, farmers' participation in this initiative has resulted in nesting success for tens of thousands of birds. Currently, there are five contracts with dairy farmers that have nesting colonies in their fields.

"Tricolored Blackbirds have experienced an alarming 64% drop in their population over the past six years," said Samantha Arthur, Tricolored Blackbird Conservation Program Manager with Audubon California. "But these birds are fighters and through the all hands on deck approach found in partnerships with landowners like Mr. Mendonsa and conservation organizations like NRCS, I'm hopeful that this California bird has a chance for survival."

New for 2015, this initiative was selected as one of the first NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) recipients, providing expanded federal funding and technical assistance for harvest management and habitat restoration. RCPP was launched in the 2014 Farm Bill to bring together partners with shared conservation causes.