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Historic effort for imperiled blackbird

Valley top habitat for once-thriving species

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Courtesy photo

The tricolored blackbird, which has declined in numbers over the years, will be subject to a program under which it will be voluntarily protected by farmers.

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By **Alex Breitter**

Record Staff Writer
September 17, 2007 6:00 AM

The tricolored blackbird, once so numerous that its flocks were described as darkening the sky, never quite won protection on the federal endangered species list.

But an agreement announced last week by conservationists, farmers and the government might help reverse the songbird's overall decline.

Habitat conservation, research, monitoring and public education are all part of the 15-year plan for the blackbird, which nests primarily in dairy silage fields. During the harvest, eggs and hatchlings are killed.

Some conservationists say the bird once numbered in the millions, declining to 154,000 by 2000.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reported a population of 260,000 in 2005.

"This is a real landmark agreement," said Garrison Frost, a spokesman with Audubon California, one of the participants in the plan.

Organizations such as the California Farm Bureau Federation "agreed to work with environmental groups as well as governmental groups to find alternate ways to save the tricolored blackbird that don't involve us battling it out in the courts or in the state Legislature," Frost said.

About 95 percent of the tricolored blackbird population lives in the Central Valley, although no breeding colonies have been established in San Joaquin County for about five years, birder David Yee said.

"There's always potential" for the future, he said. "We're always looking and hopeful that they'll give it a try."

Individual birds can be found in this area year-round, he said. They

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also can be spotted, although rarely, in the foothill counties of the Mother Lode.

Besides silage fields, the birds seek out large tracts of tule reeds, cattails or blackberry to make their nests. Most of the silage fields are in the southern Valley, where dairy farmers have agreed to protect the birds by giving up their harvest in exchange for compensation, said Paul Sousa, environmental specialist with the Modesto-based Western United Dairyman.

Part of the plan announced last week involves establishing a fund with at least \$100,000 available each year to compensate private landowners for blackbird protection.

Contact reporter Alex Breitler at (209) 546-8295 or abreitler@recordnet.com.

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