

SPECIES

Tricolored Blackbird *Agelaius tricolor*

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Habitat

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Habitat in Breeding Range

Nesting Habitat

Tricolored Blackbird nesting habitat has changed over the last century, as the availability of the historic wetland nesting habitat has declined and the species has had to switch to newly available nesting substrates. From 1931 to 1936, almost 93% of 252 breeding colonies observed in the Sacramento Valley, were in freshwater marshes dominated by cattails (*Typha* spp.) or bulrushes (*Schoenoplectus* spp.); remaining colonies were in willows (*Salix* spp.), blackberries (*Rubus* spp.), thistles (*Cirsium* and *Centaurea* spp.), and nettles (*Urtica* sp.; [1 \(/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF21364\)](/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF21364)). By the 1970s, only 53% of colonies reported in the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys were in cattails and bulrushes (with most of the remainder in the non-native Himalayan Blackberry (*Rubus armeniacus*) and Milk Thistle (*Silybum marianum*) ([8 \(/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF57587\)](/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF57587)). Other less frequently used nesting substrates include Giant Cane (*Arundo donax*), Safflower (*Carthamus tinctorius*), Mustard (*Brassica nigra*) ([4 \(/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF21366\)](/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF21366)), [8 \(/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF57587\)](/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF57587)), Stinging Nettle (*Urtica dioica*), tamarisk (*Tamarix* spp.), riparian scrublands and forests (e.g., willow, Fremont Cottonwood [*Populus fremontii*], California Ash [*Fraxinus latifolia*]), Mule Fat [*Baccharis salicifolia*]). Few or a single nesting records exist for winter wheat (*Triticum* spp.), barley (*Hordeum* spp.), Desert Olive (*Forestiera neomexicana*), Lemon (*Citrus limon*) orchard, and Fava Bean (*Vicia faba*) (data from American Birds, 1960–1989, [40 \(/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF21349\)](/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF21349), [63 \(/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF21353\)](/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF21353), [64 \(/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF70124\)](/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF70124), [18 \(/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF63058\)](/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF63058), RJM).

The Tricolored Blackbird nests in larger marshes and selects denser vegetation than the Red-winged Blackbird ([7 \(/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF53882\)](/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF53882)). In recent decades, although nesting continues to occur regularly in wetlands, especially in coastal areas and in southern California, use of certain agricultural crops and upland shrubs and thistles has increased in the San Joaquin Valley ([65 \(/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF70111\)](/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF70111)). Since the 1980's, most of the largest colonies were in fields of triticale, a wheat x rye hybrid grain, especially those infested with Eurasian weeds dominated by mustard (*Brassica* spp.) and mallow (*Malva* spp.) ([5 \(/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF35588\)](/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF35588), [63 \(/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF21353\)](/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF21353), [66 \(/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF70117\)](/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF70117), [67 \(/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF63059\)](/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF63059)). Presumably, the repeated destruction of these colonies by harvest of the nesting substrate while eggs or young were still in the nests ([15 \(/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF61253\)](/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF61253)) has contributed to declines in the species population and may explain why the number of birds nesting in these so-called "silage colonies" has recently been severely reduced ([68 \(/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF70109\)](/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF70109)). No colonies were lost due to harvest in 2016, so this source of human-caused mortality may have been eliminated for the first time since the 1980s (S. Arthur, personal communication; RJM)

Tricolored blackbird nests in the lower Sierra Nevada foothills and eastern reaches of the Central Valley in an area dominated by annual grasslands. Here, nesting colonies are predominantly located in small patches of Himalayan Blackberry and typically associated with stock ponds, irrigated pasture, and natural creeks.

Tricolored Blackbird tends to move from one nesting location to another among years, presumably in response to changes in the abundance of preferred prey or to nesting habitat suitability (10 ([/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF63685](#)), 14 ([/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF70104](#))).

Foraging Habitat

Tricolored Blackbird forages in a wide variety of habitats that may provide sources of seeds and invertebrates. In areas of cultivated agriculture, Tricolored Blackbird often forages in grain piles at dairies that provide carbohydrates to maintain adults and forage in alfalfa, wetlands, alkali scrub, Coast Live Oak and other land cover types that support insect prey required for egg-laying and to feed nestlings (69 ([/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF21354](#)), 70 ([/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF55566](#))). Insecticide treatments appear to have made large areas of agricultural lands unsuitable for foraging to support nesting, and have caused substantial changes in local breeding populations over the last decade (44 ([/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF70118](#))). Dairies and feedlots are associated with many Tricolored Blackbird colonies, especially in the San Joaquin Valley (9 ([/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF21360](#))). This association was not mentioned in early species accounts (e.g., 1 ([/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF21364](#)), 3 ([/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF49326](#)), 4 ([/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF21366](#)), 7 ([/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF53882](#)), 8 ([/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF57587](#))). In 1994, 55% of all observed nests were associated with dairies (9 ([/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF21360](#))); in 2008 that number was 50% of all colonies (17 ([/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF64390](#))); and in 2011, 78% of the birds counted in the early portion of the nesting season during a statewide survey were nesting in association with dairies (18 ([/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF63058](#))). Although dairies may provide nesting substrate (primarily Eurasian weeds infesting the triticale grown to feed the cows), a water source (drainage ditches or wastewater ponds), and food (stored grains), colonies located adjacent to dairies are only rarely productive and the potential productivity of many is lost when the nesting substrate is harvested when the young are still in the nest (15 ([/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF61253](#))). In the Sierra Nevada foothills and the eastern Central Valley grassland region, colonies are located within a matrix of foraging habitat consisting of grasslands, irrigated pasture, and grain fields where dairies are essentially absent (62 ([/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF70122](#)), 71 ([/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF70103](#)), 14 ([/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF70104](#)))

Small breeding colonies in southern California have occurred at private and public lakes, reservoirs, and parks surrounded by shopping centers, subdivisions, and other urban development. Adults from such colonies may forage in undeveloped uplands nearby but most of these small, urban wetlands fail to sustain blackbirds after the surrounding upland foraging habitats are eliminated entirely by development (25 ([/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF63197](#)), RJM).

Individuals forage up to 9 km from their colonies although in most cases only a small part of the area within this range provides suitable foraging (72 ([/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF62130](#))). Agricultural crops such as cultivated row crops, orchards, vineyards, and "conventional" rice paddies provide limited or no breeding season foraging opportunities, but irrigated pastures, moderately grazed rangelands, dry seasonal pools, Alfalfa (*Medicago sativa*), sunflower (*Helianthus* spp.) and organic and unsprayed (by insecticides) rice paddies may provide abundant insect populations upon which breeding birds depend. Feedlots and dairies may help to sustain large numbers of adult breeders and non-breeding birds, and ripening rice is heavily used after the breeding season (73 ([/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF64149](#))). Although generally avoids shrublands, may forage in various scrub plant associations (41 ([/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF35587](#)), RJM), especially when caterpillars are abundant (72 ([/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF62130](#))).

Habitat in Nonbreeding Range

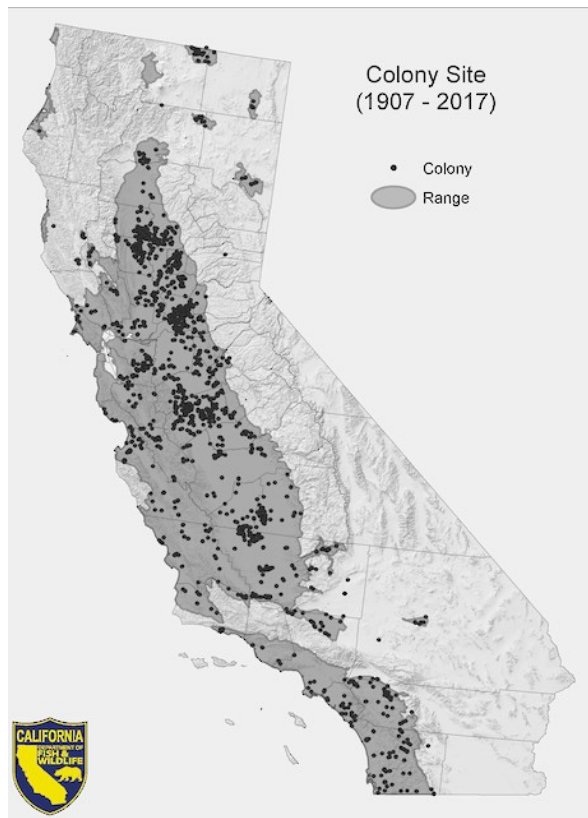
Habitat in Overwintering Range

The Tricolored Blackbird forms large roosts, sometimes in association with other species, such as Red-winged Blackbird, Brewer's Blackbird (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*), Yellow-headed Blackbird (*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*), Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*), and European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) (5 ([/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF35588](#)), 7 ([/bow/species/tribla/cur/references#REF53882](#))). The overwintering range of birds that breed in the Central Valley is concentrated around the Sacramento/San Joaquin Delta (Merced County) dairies, and formerly, dairies on the Point Reyes National Seashore (Marin County). Southern California birds tend to be itinerant, but winter flocks often occur in Leona Valley (Los Angeles County).

Coastal birds are also itinerant and often occur in association with dairies. Preferred roost sites include cattail and bulrush marshes near suitable foraging areas including pastureland, recently cultivated cropland, and livestock feedstores.

[< Distribution \(/bow/species/tribla/cur/distribution\)](#)

[Movements and Migration \(/bow/species/tribla/cur/movement\) >](#)



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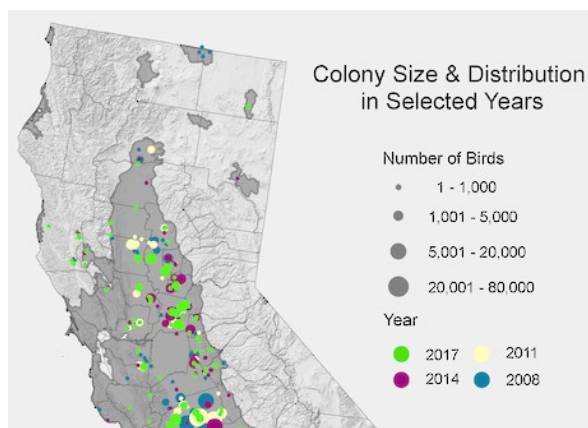
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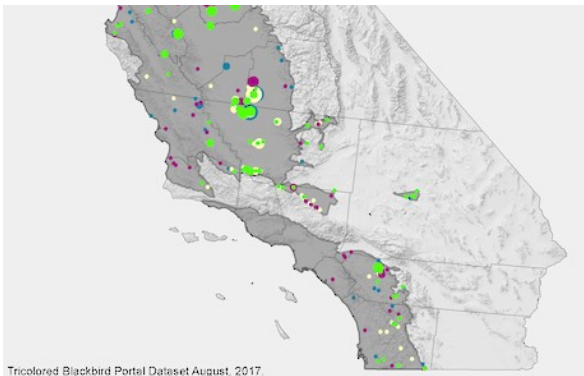
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Figure 3. Locations of all known breeding colony locations in California from 1907-2017.

California Department of Fish and Wildlife, provided by Neil Clipperton.





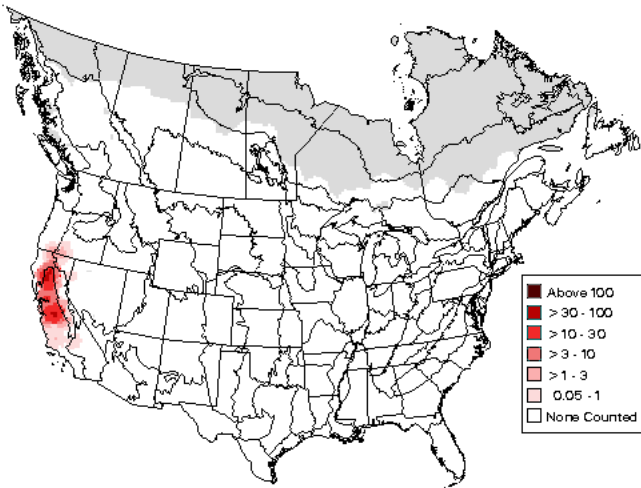
Tricolored Blackbird Point Dataset August, 2017
 CNDDB Jan 2017, includes two additional dates 1875 and 1909.

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Figure 4. Distribution and size of breeding colonies in California in 2008, 2011, 2014, and 2017.

California Department of Fish and Wildlife, provided by Neil Clipperton.



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Figure 9. Relative abundance of Tricolored Blackbird during the breeding season.

Based on data from the North American Breeding Bird Survey, 2011–2015. See Sauer et al. (2017) for details.





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Tricolored Blackbird nesting habitat: Himalayan Blackberry in Placer County.

In recent decades, many colonies have been reported in the introduced Himalayan blackberry (*Rubus armeniacus*) and milk thistle (*Silybum marianum*).

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Tricolored Blackbird nesting habitat.

In recent decades many colonies in the San Joaquin Valley have settled in silage fields dominated by triticale, a wheat x rye hybrid grain crop.

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Tricolored Blackbird nestlings in habitat.

Active nest in triticale field.

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Tricolored Blackbird nesting habitat (thistle field).

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Tricolored Blackbird habitat.

Colony site stretches for about 100 yards along southern edge of pond shown. Colony sites require nearby water, suitable nesting substrate, and open-range foraging habitat of natural grassland, shrubland, or agricultural cropland.

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Tricolored Blackbird habitat.

Dairies and feedlots are associated with many Tricolored Blackbird colonies, especially in the San Joaquin Valley.

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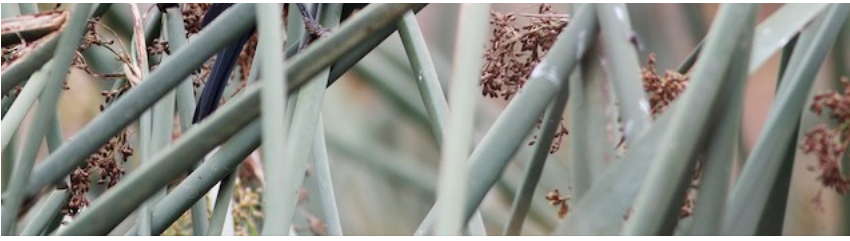
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Tricolored Blackbird in habitat.

Preferred roost sites include cattail and bulrush marshes near suitable foraging areas including pasturelands, recently cultivated croplands, and livestock feedstores.

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