

A COLONY OF TRI-COLORED BLACKBIRDS

By JOHN G. TYLER

THE last day in April of this year found me in the field about thirty miles south-west of Fresno. Large wheat and alfalfa ranches extended for some miles in each direction and were crossed by several large canals or sloughs besides a great many smaller ones.

While crossing a field from which the water had evidently been drained only a few days before, I noticed a number of Tri-colored Blackbirds (*Agelaius tricolor*) flying out toward the field from a point somewhere to the west of me, while about an equal number were constantly flying up from the ground and returning in the direction from which the others came. It was evident that there was a breeding colony not far away and I decided to find it if possible.

About half a mile or less from where the birds were first seen, I came suddenly upon a patch of nettles of something less than half an acre in extent, growing in a low, damp sink that was really the end of a large abandoned slough.

In the lowest land the nettles were very dense and some of them were six feet or more in height; but toward the border where the ground was higher and dryer they gradually became smaller until at the outer edge they were scarcely six inches high and were finally replaced by a rather thin growth of foxtail grass. On two sides of the nettle patch was a more or less dense fringe of willows. Altho only a few birds were to be seen it was apparent at once that this was the object of my search, for the leaves of the nettles and willows and even the grass had the appearance of having received a coat of whitewash.

Before reaching the nettles I was somewhat surprised when a female blackbird fluttered up from the grass and revealed a nest built on the bare ground. A rather hasty search resulted in the finding of several other nests in like situations. These were all built out in the short thin grass and not concealed at all or protected from the rays of the sun and would certainly have made a rich harvest for some prowling egg-eater. There was nothing, however, to indicate that they had been disturbed in any way.

The dozens of birds that from nearly every twig screeched and cackled their displeasure at my presence, only made me more determined to explore the densely populated portion of the colony. The nettles looked rather formidable, however, and for some time I walked around the outside of the colony like a small boy running around a swimming hole before getting up courage to plunge in. Once or twice my eagerness to look into some partly-concealed nest caused my face to brush against a nettle stalk, so I finally decided to take the consequences and waded right in.

For more than one reason the hour that I spent there will probably never be forgotten. There were nests everywhere: in some instances three or four built one on top of another, tho in such cases only the upper one appeared to be occupied. The average height from the ground was between one and three feet, but many were seen that were ten and twelve feet up in the willows. They were all built almost entirely of grass stems that had been freshly pulled, giving the nests a bright, green appearance. Some of them had a few coarse brown weed stems woven into the framework but in the majority no other material but the grass was used and none contained any lining. As the heads of the grass had not been detached, the nests presented a ragged, fuzzy appearance. In size and shape they varied greatly, due no doubt to the different situations in which they were built,

A great many of the nests contained eggs and it would be impossible for me to describe the wonderful variations in size, shape and color; but the most common type was a pale blue ground color of a decidedly different shade from the usual tint in eggs of the Bi-colored Blackbird, with a few heavy scrawls on the large end. These markings resembled rust spots more than anything I can think of. Four eggs were the usual complement, but sets of three and five were not uncommon.

One fact that impressed me more, perhaps, than anything else was that in the center of the colony where the nettles were thickest, nearly all of the nests contained small young birds and doubtless it was the parents of these that I first saw. A little farther out, however, there were full sets of badly incubated eggs while near the outside were incomplete sets of fresh eggs.

The only way I could account for this was to suppose that only a portion of the colony had first settled in the nettles, choosing, of course, the rank growth in the center. A few days later, perhaps, another flock came upon the scene while traveling about in search of a nesting place, but were compelled to take a position nearer the outside. In this way, possibly, several flocks arrived at intervals of a few days until finally the last ones to appear chose to build upon the ground rather than leave so desirable a place. This is only a theory but it does not seem unreasonable.

As was suggested before, there were a number of reasons why that was a day long to be remembered and while I shall never regret the experiences yet there were some features that were not altogether pleasant. I was not long in discovering that the willows shut out every particle of breeze and that the sun was shining down fiercely, causing large drops of perspiration to pursue each other down my face; furthermore nearly every step disturbed half a dozen big hungry mosquitoes that lost no time in getting to work on my face, and any attempt to brush them off generally brought my hand in contact with a nettle stalk which produced a sensation that was not altogether pleasant. Added to all this was the din made by hundreds of birds that perched about on every side and entertained me with a wonderful variety of vocal selections.

One attempt was made to count the nests in this colony but after tramping around for a few moments I had no idea what portion of the colony had been explored so I sat down to try and estimate the number of birds in sight. This seemed an even more difficult task as the birds were constantly changing their positions so I contented myself by saying "There must be hundreds of them."

The food that I had first seen them gathering seemed to be a short, heavy worm but I failed to find any while crossing the field, tho there must have been a great many as it seemed to be no trick at all for a blackbird to pick one up anywhere. It would be hard to imagine the number that must have been required a few weeks later when all the eggs were hatched.

About two hundred yards from this colony was another nettle patch of nearly the same size and evidently tenanted by about the same number of birds; but it would have been necessary to wade a slough to investigate more closely and my time was somewhat limited. Perhaps it would be well for me to admit too, that I had encountered about all the nettles that I cared for in one day so I hurried away to the nest of a Swainson Hawk in a tall cottonwood where there was more breeze and fewer mosquitoes.

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