

CURRENT BREEDING STATUS OF THE YELLOW-HEADED BLACKBIRD IN CALIFORNIA

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While surveying the breeding distribution and abundance of Tricolored Blackbirds (*Agelaius tricolor*) in California during the spring of 1971, we also recorded observations on Yellow-headed Blackbirds (*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*). These observations are reported here and compared with published information on the historical breeding status of Yellow-headed Blackbirds in California.

Regions containing potential breeding habitat for blackbirds were identified from topographic maps and systematically searched during the breeding season. Over 8,000 miles were driven within California between 23 April and 10 June. The survey was conducted at the peak of the blackbird breeding season in each region, beginning in southern California and proceeding northward as the season progressed. Three areas of the state were not surveyed: the Mojave and Sonoran deserts, the coastal mountains north from Bodega Bay, and the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Although we could not achieve a complete count of breeding birds, we did obtain an overall picture of breeding abundance that can serve as a basis for future comparisons.

We found Yellow-headed Blackbirds breeding at 27 locations in the surveyed regions (Table 1). Colony size ranged from as few as five adults to as many as 500. The Salton Sea region contained the largest numbers and had the two largest colonies found during the survey. Compared with other blackbird species in California, Yellow-headed Blackbirds were not found breeding in large numbers. We found fewer than 2,000 adults, less than 800 of which were in the Central Valley. Only five of the 27 colonies (19%) contained more than 100 adults. In contrast, during the same survey we located approximately 200,000 breeding Tricolored Blackbirds.

In addition to the birds located during the survey, a roost of about 5,000 Yellow-headed Blackbirds (adults and immatures) became established on the Gray Lodge Wildlife Management Area near Gridley, Butte County, in early August and remained until early October. It is possible that these birds were not breeders but early migrants, since Bent (1958) has shown that southward migration of this species begins in July.

It appears that the abundance of Yellow-headed Blackbirds in California has not changed greatly during recent years. During the Calif. Birds 3:39-42, 1972

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first half of this century, Grinnell (1915) and Grinnell and Miller (1944) described the species as common in the eastern plateau region and Sacramento-San Joaquin basin, and as less common and local elsewhere in the state. On the basis of our data, this general description could still be used for breeding Yellow-headed Blackbirds in California today. In addition, many of the breeding localities

Table 1. Locations of breeding colonies of Yellow-headed Blackbirds in California during the spring of 1971.

Colony	County	Estimated No. of Breeding Adults	Location
Coachella Valley	Riverside	300	5 mi S Coachella
Ramer Lake	Imperial	500+	Ramer Unit of Imperial Wildlife Area
Del Sur	Los Angeles	10	1 mi NE Del Sur
Topaz Lake	Mono	10	3 mi E Topaz
Bridgeport	Mono	5	1 mi W Bridgeport
Mettler Ranch	Kern	5	20 mi S Bakersfield
Lakeview #1	Kern	30	1 mi W Lakeview
Lakeview #2	Kern	50	2 mi NW Lakeview
Shafter	Kern	75	19 mi W Shafter
Wasco	Kern	120	4 mi W Wasco
Mendota	Fresno	100+	2 mi S Mendota
Firebaugh	Fresno	5	1 mi S Firebaugh
Los Banos	Merced	30	2 mi NE Los Banos
Santa Fe Grade	Merced	15	8 mi N Los Banos
Gustine	Merced	5	2 mi SE Gustine
Sacramento	Sacramento	5	1 mi W Sacramento
Folsom	Sacramento	75	5 mi S Folsom
Woodland Sugar Ponds	Yolo	60	1 mi W Woodland
Clear Lake	Lake	100+	S edge Clear Lake
Colusa	Colusa	10	5 mi W Colusa
Sierraville	Sierra	30	2 mi SW Sierraville
Lincoln	Placer	10	1 mi W Lincoln
Honey Lake	Lassen	10	N corner Honey Lake
Madeline	Lassen	25	1 mi S Madeline
Modoc N.W.R.	Modoc	25	3 mi S Alturas
Tule Lake N.W.R.	Siskiyou	10	S corner Tule Lake
Grass Lake	Siskiyou	40	20 mi NE Weed

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reported by Grinnell and Miller (1944) coincide with areas where we found active colonies. More recently, an average of two breeding adults per route were observed in California during the 1968 breeding bird survey (Robbins and Van Velzen, 1969). This compares with three per route for Nevada and two per route for Oregon.

Occasionally, large flocks of Yellow-headed Blackbirds are reported in California during winter and spring months (Audubon Field Notes, 25(3), 24(3), 21(3), and others). In 1971 we also observed several flocks of 1,000-2,000 birds in the Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys during April and early May. These flocks contained either almost all adult males, or almost all females and immature males. If movement data shown by Royall et al. (1971) are applicable to California, it is probable that these large flocks are migrants in transit from southern wintering grounds to more northerly breeding areas.

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APPENDIX

In addition to the data presented here, the following additional Yellow-headed Blackbird breeding colonies were noted during the 1972 breeding season.

Colony	County	Estimated No. of breeding Adults	Location
Honey Lake	Lassen	20	4 mi SE Standish
Susanville	Lassen	60	6 mi E Susanville
Eagle Lake	Lassen	150	E side Eagle Lake
Merrillville	Lassen	10	20 mi N Susanville
Angle Road	Sacramento	12	2 mi ENE Herald

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