

FIRST RECORD OF TRICOLORED BLACKBIRDS IN IDAHO

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ABSTRACT: Over 99% of Tricolored Blackbirds (*Agelaius tricolor*) occur in California. However, small populations persist in Oregon, Washington, Nevada, and Baja California. Loss of wetlands that historically served as foraging and breeding habitat has led to their increasing use of agricultural landscapes including silage fields and cattle feedlots. Here we provide the first documentation of the Tricolored Blackbird in Idaho (26 March–13 May and 3 November–16 December 2023), of up to 30 birds observed at five different locations associated with cattle feedlots, each 10–15 km apart, in Payette and Gem counties. Seven observations included recordings of vocalizations (3–23 April and 14 December 2023), largely coinciding with the final observations at each location, presumably before dispersal to breeding grounds. We consider three hypotheses to explain the apparently sudden occurrence of these birds, including their return to some of the same sites in November 2023: (1) a continued pattern of range expansion due to climate change; (2) an undetected long-term population due to low survey effort; or (3) a large-scale movement in response to flooding and extreme weather in the traditional range. We encourage continued monitoring and surveying of these locations in the coming years and surveying for both new wintering locations and for evidence of the Tricolored Blackbird breeding in Idaho.

OBSERVATION AND IDENTIFICATION

On 26 March 2023 we were exploring sites in southwest Idaho underrepresented in reports to <https://eBird.org>. Driving along Big Willow Road, 18 km southeast of the town of Payette, we stopped to sort through a mixed blackbird flock across from a cattle feedlot. The flock consisted of Brewer's Blackbirds (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*), Red-winged Blackbirds (*Agelaius phoeniceus*), Brown-headed Cowbirds (*Molothrus ater*), and European Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*). Within about 10 min the birds flushed, and we immediately noticed a blackbird with bright white median coverts and crimson red lesser wing coverts (Figure 1). Over the next 30 min, we noted additional field marks including glossy black feathers, a rounded head, pointed wings in flight, and a bill longer and tail more squared than in a Red-winged Blackbird. Our photos confirm the bird was a Tricolored Blackbird (Figure 1).

After we alerted other observers, additional reports documented the Tricolor at the first cattle feedlot, and more Tricolors were noted near two other cattle feedlots, 10 km apart (Figure 2, Table 1). C. Strobe noted copulation between Tricolored Blackbirds on 31 March 2023 when a minimum of 12 was that spring's highest count in Payette Co., and groups of both sexes were documented by multiple observers (Figures 3, 4, Table 1).

On 5 April 2023, E. Medes discovered a group of 13 Tricolored Blackbirds, a new high count for Idaho, in neighboring Gem County along Van Deusen Road near another cattle feedlot, 10 km east of the nearest previously recorded location. Medes and D. Hughes obtained audio recordings at a potential roost

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FIGURE 1. First documented Tricolored Blackbird in Idaho, a male in a mixed blackbird flock at the Big Willow Lower cattle feedlot 18 km southeast of Payette on 26 March 2023.

Photos by Katie Sorenson

site. Seven other reports also noted or recorded vocalizations (Table 1). On 23 and 25 April 2023, Medes observed a single male Tricolor at a fifth feedlot near Little Rock, Gem County, ~15 km southwest of the Van Deusen feedlot (Figure 5). Sightings decreased after mid-April, in spite of some attempts to survey the area into the breeding season. The only sighting in May was of

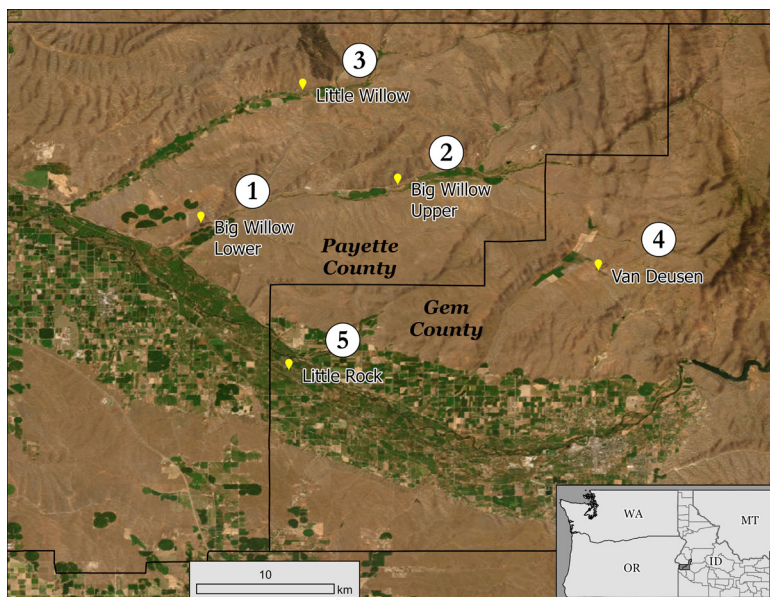


FIGURE 2. Locations of cattle feedlots where Tricolored Blackbirds were encountered in March and April 2023. Circled numbers indicate the observations' sequence. Inset map shows Payette and Gem counties, Idaho.

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TABLE 1 Notable Sightings and Behaviors of the Tricolored Blackbird in Idaho

Observers	Date	Source ^a	Notes
P. Olsoy, K. Sorenson	26 Mar 2023	https://ebird.org/checklist/S131892918	First sighting, Big Willow Lower feedlot
L. Wentz, A. Andrus S. Dzielski	29 Mar 2023	https://ebird.org/checklist/S132147998 https://ebird.org/checklist/S132143355 https://ebird.org/checklist/S132182600	New site, Big Willow Upper Location of roost site in the riparian area at Big Willow
S. Urban, R. Raymondi	31 Mar 2023	https://ebird.org/checklist/S132340366	New site, Little Willow feedlot
E. Medes, D. Hughes	5 Apr 2023	https://ebird.org/checklist/S132791780 https://ebird.org/checklist/S132909288	First Gem Co. sighting, Van Deusen feedlot
E. Medes	23 Apr 2023	https://ebird.org/checklist/S134785719 https://ebird.org/checklist/S134993828	New site, Little Rock feedlot
C. Strope	31 Mar 2023	https://ebird.org/checklist/S132300788	Copulation and singing, Big Willow Upper feedlot
P. Olsoy, K. Sorenson	13 May 2023	https://ebird.org/checklist/S137475168	Final sighting in spring 2023
L. Evers, L. Wentz E. Medes	3 Nov 2023 9 Nov 2023	https://ebird.org/checklist/S153669512 https://ebird.org/checklist/S154078501	First Payette Co. sighting in fall 2023 First Gem Co. sighting in fall 2023
K. Kleman	3 Apr 2023	https://macaulaylibrary.org/asset/553196671 https://macaulaylibrary.org/asset/553196751	Audio recordings
D. Hughes	5 Apr 2023	https://macaulaylibrary.org/asset/554436731	Audio recording
E. Medes	5 Apr 2023	https://macaulaylibrary.org/asset/553918141	Audio recording
D. Hughes	5 Apr 2023	https://macaulaylibrary.org/asset/554434411	Audio recording
L. Davis	9 Apr 2023	https://macaulaylibrary.org/asset/555835881	Audio recording
C. Zeillemaker	19 Apr 2023	https://ebird.org/checklist/S134659230	Notes on vocalization
E. Medes	23 Apr 2023	https://macaulaylibrary.org/asset/561961361	Audio recording
E. Medes	14 Dec 2023	https://macaulaylibrary.org/asset/612240785	Audio recording

^aWeb link to eBird checklist or Macaulay Library record.

four males at the Big Willow Upper feedlot in Payette Co. on the 13th. Because of lack of public access to potential breeding sites on privately owned land, we were unable to survey except from roads. Although multiple observers noted courtship behavior and copulation, no one found conclusive evidence of breeding or nests in Idaho in 2023.

Tricolors returned the following fall to both Payette and Gem counties. The first report, by L. Evers and L. Wentz, was of at least two at the Upper Big Willow feedlot on 3 November (Table 1). Medes reported 12 males and an uncertain number of females at the Van Deusen cattle feedlot on 9 November. We revisited both sites on 11 November 2023 and found at least 15 Tricolored Blackbirds at Van Deusen and at least 20 at the Upper Big Willow feedlot, a new high count for Payette Co. Medes (pers. comm.) and L. Downer reported ~30 at the Van Deusen feedlot on 10 November 2023, a new high count of the species for Idaho.

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FIGURE 3. Three male Tricolored Blackbird with one Red-winged Blackbird (left) in Payette Co., Idaho, 3 April 2023.

Photo by Kent Kleman

DISCUSSION

The reason for the unexpected discovery of dozens of Tricolored Blackbirds in Idaho, representing a first state record (pending acceptance, Idaho Bird Records Committee 1-A-2023 and 2-A-2023 Tricolored Blackbird), is unknown. One hypothesis is that the birds arrived in Idaho as part of a



FIGURE 4. Male Tricolored Blackbird between two Red-winged Blackbirds at a cattle feedlot in Payette Co., Idaho, 25 April 2023.

Photo by Scott Urban

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FIGURE 5. Lone male Tricolored Blackbird near Little Rock, Gem Co., Idaho.

Photo by Elizabeth Medes

pattern of range expansion throughout the Pacific Northwest, likely due to climate change (McCormick 2022). The nearest known source populations are in central Oregon and southeast Washington. Another hypothesis is that a small population has existed in Idaho for longer but until now has remained undetected because of low survey effort. The area is one birders seldom investigate: Payette and Gem counties account for only 3% of Idaho eBird checklists. The return of Tricolored Blackbirds to at least two sites in November 2023 provides additional examples of their use of cattle feedlots in this area as a longer-term wintering site. Complicating matters is a photo of a male blackbird taken on 1 January 2014. It was posted to the Idaho Birding Facebook group from Little Willow Road in Payette Co., near one of the 2023 sites, but identification of the bird was inconclusive. However, this photo from nine years prior provides some evidence suggesting longer-term wintering in southwest Idaho. Two other reports of the Tricolored Blackbird have been submitted to the Idaho Bird Records Committee, one from Pearl, Gem Co., in 2007 (IBRC 1-A-07), the other from northern Idaho (IBRC 28-A-11), but both were rejected. Finally, during the winter and spring preceding this discovery exceptionally heavy precipitation flooded much of the blackbird's core range in the Central Valley of California. This flooding might have caused large-scale movements, as the Tricolored Blackbird is prone to frequent movements throughout its life cycle (Beedy et al. 2018) and may breed itinerantly (Hamilton 1998).

Surveys of the species' core range in California have documented population decreases of almost 90% from historic levels (Meese 2022). As popula-

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tions have declined, sites of nesting and foraging have shifted from wetlands to agricultural landscapes (Beedy et al. 2018, Castañeda et al. 2023). Tricolors use dairies and feedlots because they provide a concentrated source of foods such as house flies and drone fly larvae, more concentrated than in many grasslands and wetlands (Goodward and Diaz 2023). Outside of California, there are isolated populations in Oregon (Neff 1937, Marshall et al. 2003, Denny and Denny 2007), Washington (McCormick 2022), and near Reno, Nevada (Ammon and Woods 2008). Few vagrants have been recorded outside of the main range, with single individuals seen in eastern Oregon near Burns in 2020 (<https://ebird.org/pnw/checklist/S66144207>) and at Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in 2022 and 2023 (<https://ebird.org/checklist/S111334457>, <https://ebird.org/checklist/S134679976>). Interestingly, the record closest to Idaho before the year 2023 was of four Tricolors on 25 April 2021 in Jordan Valley, Oregon, 15 km from the Idaho border and about 100 km from the 2023 Idaho sightings (<https://ebird.org/checklist/S86394188>). Like Payette Co., Malheur Co., Oregon, is sparsely populated and could have yet-undiscovered populations of Tricolors.

Another unknown is whether the Idaho birds represent a wintering population that breeds beyond Idaho, possibly the well-documented breeding populations in Oregon or Washington (Marshall et al. 2003, Wahl et al. 2005, Denny and Denny 2007, McCormick 2022). The initial observations in Idaho did not note vocalizations, and most vocalizing occurred shortly before observations ceased for the season. This suggests that the Tricolors may have left their wintering sites to breed elsewhere, consistent with the phenology of other populations (Collier 1968, DeHaven et al. 1975). The distance from wintering to breeding grounds could be hundreds of kilometers (Beedy et al. 2018). Known breeding in Washington is confined to six locations and always in emergent vegetation (McCormick 2022). Few ponds or wetlands exist near the recent Idaho sightings, but the Snake River Plain resembles Washington's Columbia Basin, where irrigation could raise the water table in some areas and generate sites suitable for Tricolored Blackbird breeding colonies. Many such sites exist in Payette and Gem counties, as well as in more populated areas in Canyon and Ada counties. The non-native Himalayan blackberry (*Rubus armeniacus*) is another potential nesting substrate that is available throughout southern Idaho, including in riparian areas near each feedlot, and would provide protection from common predators in the area such as the coyote (*Canis latrans*) and raccoon (*Procyon lotor*), nest predators such as the Common Raven (*Corvus corax*), disturbance by livestock, and adverse weather (Beedy et al. 2018, Airola 2021). If the Idaho birds follow a pattern similar to that in Washington, grain stores could be another source of wintering Tricolored Blackbirds (see McCormick 2022).

With California expected to be warmer and more prone to drought in the future (Thorne et al. 2018), and documented range shifts northward (Erickson et al. 2021), Tricolors may travel farther north and east to seek new wintering and breeding grounds (Beedy et al. 2018, McCormick 2022). Thus Idaho is likely to see continued incursions. Detection of breeding in Idaho will require a more concerted and systematic effort, similar to California's model (Meese 2017) or as proposed by McCormick (2022) for Washington State, rather than the opportunistic sampling occurring in Idaho now. Band-

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ing or tagging Tricolored Blackbirds wintering in Payette or Gem counties could help clarify the Idaho birds' movements and reveal where these birds go to breed in May.

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