

Great Blue Heron Captures a Young Tricolored Blackbird

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On 21 May 2021, Frank Severson and I witnessed a Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*) capture a young Tricolored Blackbird (*Agelaius tricolor*) of near-adult size from a colony. We were conducting a follow-up survey on a colony just south of Lincoln and west of Lincoln Hills in Placer County, California. The colony was in several patches of Himalayan blackberry (*Rubus armeniacus*) growing along a small creek, west of Highway 65 and north of Twelve Bridges Drive. The site is named *Twelve Bridges and Hwy. 65 West* (hereafter, *Twelve Bridges*) in the Tricolored Blackbird Portal (<https://tricolor.ice.ucdavis.edu/>). The survey was undertaken as part of an ongoing effort to document the breeding status of the state-threatened Tricolored Blackbird in the central Sierra Nevada foothills (Airoola et al. 2018).

The predation occurred at approximately 12:45 as we were making a second check of the colony for the day. We were trying to determine if there were any visible fledglings, as we had detected earlier at the *Orchard Creek* colony approximately one km to the south. Survey access to the *Twelve Bridges* site is awkward, with the closest view obtained by pulling off the southbound offramp of Highway 65. This was the fifth weekly monitoring visit to the colony this season, and I had estimated the colony size at 1,500 birds, which is consistent with totals from recent years.

As we were scanning the blackberry clumps and watching the adult blackbirds bringing food to young in nests or to some recently fledged young perched in the blackberries, we noticed a Great Blue Heron standing near one of the blackberry patches. It began walking slowly along the edge of the patch with its neck extended and head swiveling about, peering into the vegetation. The blackbirds responded by mobbing the heron, with a persistent cloud of five to 30 birds swarming around the heron's body and even briefly landing on its back.

The heron showed little or no response to the mobbing, and the blackbirds never ventured near its more vulnerable head or eyes. The stalking and mobbing lasted for about a minute before the heron grabbed a young blackbird that was nearly the size of the adults, though with a shorter tail. The juvenile struggled and fluttered, and after a few seconds the heron flew over

the blackberries with it and out of our view. Frank Severson made a video recording of most of the encounter, which can be viewed at: <https://youtu.be/oxE8BDkWkeA>. Based on the low position on the outside of the blackberry clump where the heron plucked the young blackbird, it appears that this bird was newly fledged and was not removed from a nest. After another minute, perhaps less, activity and regular feeding at the colony had returned to normal.

Other ardeids, primarily Cattle Egrets (*Bubulcus ibis*) and Black-crowned Night-Herons (*Nycticorax nycticorax*), have been reported preying on Tricolored Blackbird colonies, sometimes with devastating results leading to colony failure (Meese 2012, Beedy et al. 2018). Great Blue Herons are not listed as Tricolored Blackbird predators in the readily accessible literature (Bent 1958, Beedy et al. 2018). However, the species has been reported preying on Tricolored Blackbirds at a colony in a cattail (*Typhus latifolia*) marsh (Cook 1996).

Great Blue Herons are highly opportunistic predators that mostly forage solitarily. They will take a wide variety of prey, from fish and amphibians to small mammals and birds, and even species as improbable as Least Bittern (*Ixobrychus exilis*) Vennesland et al. 2011). Indeed, this Tricolored Blackbird is not the first special status species I have seen consumed by a Great Blue Heron, having witnessed several herons eat Black Rails (*Laterallus jamaicensis*) at Tomales Bay, Marin County, California.

On a later visit on 29 May 2021, a Great Blue Heron and a Great Egret (*Ardea alba*) were standing in the creek a few meters from the colony site but were apparently hunting aquatic prey. The *Twelve Bridges* colony was still active, with a few fledglings visible perched up in the blackberries and with adults bringing food to the colony. Therefore, the predation by a single Great Blue Heron apparently was not disruptive enough to cause complete colony abandonment, similar to results observed for other solitary avian predators (Airola 2021).

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A juvenile Brown Pelican (*Pelecanus occidentalis*) was observed by Tony Kurz at Success Lake, Tulare Co. on 2 November 2020.

Photo @ Tony Kurz.