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CONTROLLING YELLOW-BILLED MAGPIES (*Pica nuttalli*)

Rex Lynda II

Agricultural Commissioner and Sealer of Weights and Measures of Merced County, CA

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CONTROLLING YELLOW-BILLED MAGPIES (Pica nuttalli)

Rex Lynda 11

Agricultural Commissioner and Sealer of Weights and Measures of Merced County, 740 West 22nd Street, Merced, California.

DESCRIPTION AND RANGE

The yellow-billed magpie is a little smaller than the American or black-billed magpie, but the difference in size is very slight. The birds look exactly alike, except one has a black beak and the other has a yellow bill and a bit of yellow skin back of the eye.

The yellow-billed magpie may represent a dying ancient race. Since scientific interest has been directed toward its habits and distribution, its range has become more restricted. There are reports that 50 or 60 years ago it was common in many places close to the Coast, where the observer would now look for it in vain. It inhabits only the interior of California west of the Sierra Nevada, chiefly in the Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys. It haunts stock ranches, because food to its liking is usually plentiful in such places. When cattle and sheep are butchered the refuse attracts magpies. They gather about any dead animal. They feed on grasshoppers, worms and grubs, and of course always look for a reasonable supply of eggs.

The difference in the distribution of these two species constitutes one of the amazing and unexplained problems of ornithology. Closely related subspecies of the black-billed form are found in Northern Africa, Spain, Northern Europe, Northern Asia, China and

Western North America. The species occurs over the greater part of the Northern Hemisphere. On the other hand, the yellow-billed magpie is confined to less than half of California. Why one is so restricted and the other so widely distributed is a problem for evolutionists. (From: Book of Birds, Volume II, 1937, Pg. 114, T. Gilbert Pearson)

HABITAT AND RANGE IN MERCED COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

There are concentrated populations in the Los Banos area, Gustine area, and along the course of the Merced River comprising about 19,100 acres. They are occasionally seen in other areas of the County, but only infrequently observed in the southwestern portion of the County. The heaviest populations are in walnut orchards, dairy farms, almond orchards, turkey ranches and areas adjacent to river bottoms.

LEGAL STATUS

Section 3800 of the California Fish and Game Code was amended in 1959 placing the yellow-billed magpie on the non-protected list for a period of two years. Legislation of 1961 extended this for another two years. With this amendment the County Board of Supervisors by resolution can declare that it is necessary for control.

METHODS

Treated Baits

Suet: 1/4 oz. strychnine alkaloid per pound

Walnut meats quartered: 3/16 oz. strychnine alkaloid per pound

Almond meats quartered: 3/16 oz. strychnine alkaloid per pound

Prebaiting with untreated baits is necessary from 3 to 5 days. Blocks of wood 2x4x12 inches are used with two or more 1-1/4 inch holes 1-1/2 inch deep bored into 2-inch edge. Those blocks are suspended in trees by wires or securely nailed to 1x4x8-foot boards nailed to fence posts. Nailing of blocks to trees is discouraged because of the difficulty in replenishing the baits.

Almonds and walnuts are placed on hard-surfaced road shoulders or boards. Treated bait stations such as these are watched at all times. Acceptance and kill is within 1-1/2 hours, after which all excess bait is swept up.

Acceptance in Merced County has been best during January to May.

Nest Knocking

The elimination of nests with long poles or by climbing trees and breaking nests apart, should be complete, in that a partially destroyed nest will be immediately rebuilt; all sticks should be hauled out of the orchard and burned.

RESULTS

Chronological data of one orchard treated in 1959 at Gustine follows (data from Inspector's field notes):

February 27, 1959 Placed 44 blocks with suet only in Mrs. Nunhall's
100-acre walnut orchard on Sullivan Road

March 4, 1959 9:00 A.M. Placed poison suet in blocks
5:00 P.M. Found 2 dead magpies

March 5, 1959 9:45 A.M. Found 9 dead magpies
 11:45 A.M. Found 11 more dead magpies
 5:00 P.M. Found 28 more dead magpies
 March 6, 1959 8:00 A.M. Found 21 dead magpies
 5:00 P.M. Found 20 more dead magpies
 March 7, 1959 5:00 P.M. Found 30 dead magpies
 March 11, 1959 5:00 P.M. Found 22 dead magpies
 March 4, 1959 to March 24, 1959: Ranch Foreman buried 93 magpies.
 Blocks rebaited each morning.
 Total: 236 Magpies.

During 1959, from February 29 to April 29, 255 block stations were maintained. Also 22 property owners cooperated in the nest knocking program and 1800 nests were destroyed. Counting dead birds, eggs in nests, and young in nests a total of 4,775 magpies were destroyed. Costs and material used are indicative of the expansion of the program with good results. Detailed accounting of dead birds was not maintained during 1960 and 1961.

	Materials	Costs - Labor and Mileage
1961	\$74.00	\$ 2,400.00
1960	38.00	1,105.00
1959	3.00	101.00

