Audubon California's
Working Lands Series

Helping a great California bird: the Yellow-billed Magpie

The Yellow-billed Magpie is one of California's most striking birds. Popular among nature enthusiasts, the bird is easily recognized by its signature yellow bill and its white, black and iridescent body and wings. As a testament to its popularity, the Yellow-billed Magpie was named Audubon California's 2009 Bird of the Year following on online poll where voters chose it over more commonly known birds such as the California Condor and the Brown Pelican.

Struggling to make a comeback

For a variety of reasons – including habitat loss, pesticide use, and West Nile Virus – the Yellow-billed Magpie population has found itself at risk in recent years, and it is now an Audubon Watchlist species. Researchers observed a slow but steady decline in the Yellow-billed Magpie from 1995 to 2003, probably due to a reduction in oak woodland habitat and other factors, and then West Nile Virus caused the population to crash even further. Anecdotal evidence tells us that the bird might be staging a comeback, and that's why it is important to give it the best chance through conservation.

The Yellow-billed Magpie on private lands

The Yellow-billed Magpie is a California endemic, meaning that it lives only in our state. Its range and habitat preferences make it a fairly common sight on ranches and agricultural lands on the Sacramento and San Joaquin valley floors and foothills, as well as the valleys of the Coastal Ranges from San Francisco Bay south to Santa Barbara County. The bird is particularly drawn to oak savannah and other open areas with large trees, and along streams. It also is known to forage in grassland, pasture, fields, and orchards.

Why you should help Yellow-billed Magpie

The Yellow-billed Magpie is as much a part of California's natural heritage as ranches and farms. When you help the magpie, you enhance the conservation value of your lands. Moreover, when the magpie is thriving, it's an indicator of the environmental health of your lands. More specifically, there is anecdotal evidence that at certain times of the year, the Yellow-billed Magpie helps your working lands by consuming vast amounts of insect pests.

photo by Brian Sullivan

What you can do on your land to help

- Plant and restore oak woodlands and forest along rivers and streams, and retain patches of chaparral, riparian and grassland habitat adjacent to oak habitat.
- Allow shrubs, plants and trees to thrive near rivers, streams, and rangeland areas. Leave dead or downed wood where it falls to help create habitat.
- Strive for a good mix of older and younger tree on your property. Avoid removing trees as much as possible, and certainly avoid removing the largest, oldest trees. If absolutely necessary, thin oaks for wood harvest rather than complete removal.
- Protect oak seedlings from pests with tree tubes, milk cartons, and/or welded wire.
- Try to discourage populations of non-native birds and animals, for example, by covering nest cavities of starlings, or removing outdoor food that can attract rats, pigeons, or feral cats.
- Try to limit use of pesticides and herbicides where possible, especially on lawns.
- Avoid the use of squirrel poison – particularly those that have been banned. These are particularly harmful to Yellow-billed Magpies.

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The Audubon California Working Lands Series provides information for farmers, ranchers and private landowners to help make their properties even better homes for birds and other wildlife. Learn more about our private lands initiatives at www.ca.audubon.org/lsp

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