

2009 Bird of the Year: Yellow-billed Magpie

The Yellow-billed Magpie, a bird that is popular among bird enthusiasts but perhaps not well known to most Californians, has been named Audubon California's 2009 Bird of the Year. The bird was chosen through an online poll conducted over a six-week period ending Dec. 7, 2009. In many ways, the selection of the Yellow-billed Magpie as our first Bird of the Year is fitting, as the bird is a true endemic that lives only in California, and its population may be rebounding after experiencing major population declines. As Californians, the Yellow-billed Magpie is our bird, and it will benefit greatly from the increased awareness that this recognition will generate.

A true California bird

The Yellow-billed Magpie is one of California's most striking birds. Aside from its signature yellow bill, the bird is easily recognizable from its white, black and iridescent body and wings. Its range includes the Sacramento and San Joaquin valley floors and foothills, and valleys of the Coastal Ranges from San Francisco Bay south to Santa Barbara County. In some areas, the species coexists with dense human settlement, but in other parts of the bird's range, populations have declined or vanished in apparent response to development of housing or agriculture.

A possible 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.



photo by Brian Sullivan

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 isolation of habitat fragments throughout its range. In 2003, the total number of magpies was estimated at 180,000 birds (Crosbie et al. 2008). Then the birds were hit hard by West Nile Virus. Breeding Bird Surveys show a decline of 22% from 2003 to 2005 and Christmas Bird Counts show an even larger decline of 42% from 2003 to 2006. These declines estimated were supported by intensive surveys done at the Wildlife Population Health and Ecological Genetics Unit at the Veterinary Genetics Laboratory at UC Davis.

Dr. Holly Ernest, who directs the UC Davis unit, observed that between 2004 and 2006, more than 12,000 magpie carcasses were reported to the California Department of Health Services and that 78% of the magpies tested were West Nile Virus-positive.

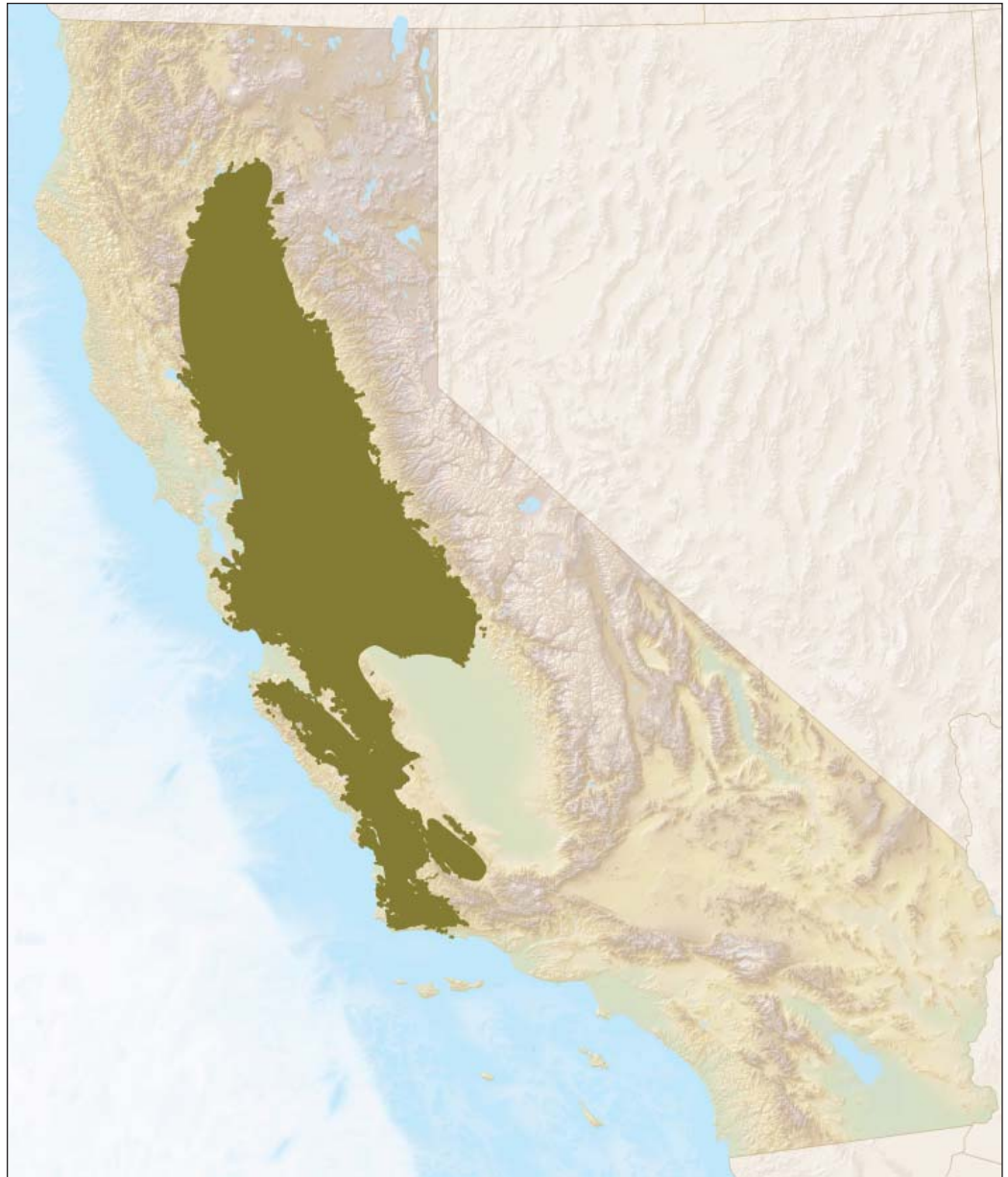
There have been increasing signs of hope in 2008 and 2009, as a great deal of anecdotal evidence suggests a rebound in the species. In an effort to better understand the Yellow-billed Magpie numbers, Audubon California

in June of 2009 conducted a survey of the bird throughout its range. The survey identified 1,820 birds across 18 counties. Audubon California is anxious to expand its efforts when it conducts the survey again in June 2010.

Despite this optimism, researchers with Audubon California recently identified the Yellow-billed Magpie as being particularly susceptible to climate change. According to models created with historical climate data, the Audubon Christmas Bird Count, and Breeding Bird Survey, researchers determined that the species could lose as much as 75 percent of its range (a loss that could push it over the brink into extinction) in the next 100 years if we do nothing to address global greenhouse gases. However, if we aggressively cut emissions, Yellow-billed Magpies could lose as little as 9 percent of their range.

Yellow-billed Magpie conservation

Audubon California is helping the Yellow-billed Magpie in several ways. Working with our chapters and other organizations, we continue to promote the conservation of oak woodlands – prime habitat for this species. – throughout California’s Central Valley. We are also looking at ways to help landowners maximize the habitat potential on their properties. In the coming year, we will expand our survey, and do what we can to raise awareness about the Yellow-billed Magpie and its challenges.



The range of the Yellow-billed Magpie in California.

Citation

Crosbie, S.P., W.D. Koenig, W.K. Reisen, V.L. Kramer, L. Marcus, R. Carney, E. Pandolfino, G.M. Bolen, L.R. Crosbie, D.A. Bell, and H.B. Ernst. 2008. Early Impact of West Nile Virus on the Yellow-billed Magpie (*Pica nuttalli*). *Auk* 125: 542-550.