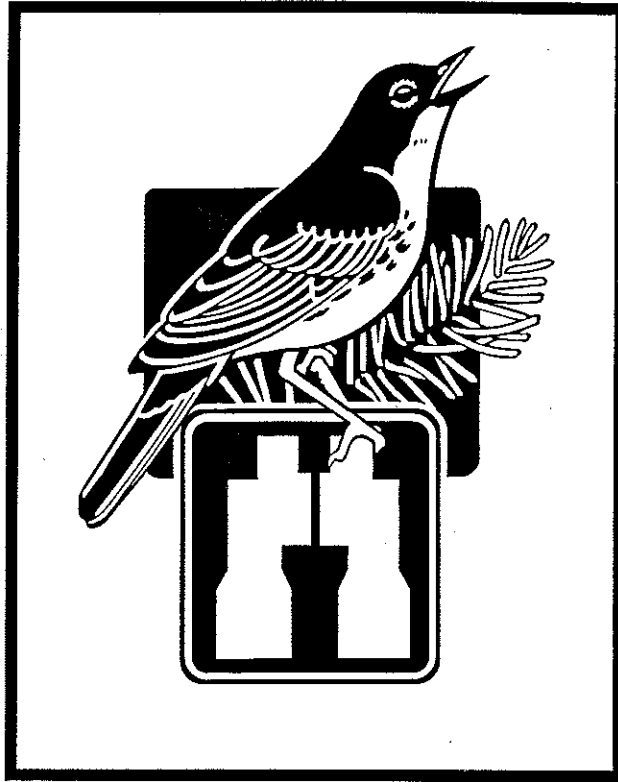


# Jack Pine Wildlife Viewing Tour

*Dedicated To Kirtland's Warbler Conservation*



## Final Report

Submitted to

**The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation**



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## **Introduction**

The Jack Pine Wildlife Viewing Tour officially opened in June of 1994. This report provides some background on the development of the "Auto Tour" and highlights the accomplishments of this partnership effort from its beginning through 1998.

## **Saving An Endangered Species**

The entire world population of Kirtland's warblers nests in the jack pine forests in Michigan and spends the winters in the Bahama Islands. These endangered warblers nest only in young jack pine forests found on sandy soils in a few counties in northern Michigan. Maintaining these young, "new growth" forests requires an intensive timber management program. In the 1980s, public opposition to some of these forest management practices began to occur.

Recognizing that Kirtland's warbler recovery depends on public support, the Kirtland's Warbler Recovery Team conducted a comprehensive assessment of public concerns and understanding of Kirtland's warbler management in 1991. Based on this assessment, an information and education plan (I & E Plan) was developed in an effort to increase public understanding and support for Kirtland's warbler conservation and management of the jack pine ecosystem. The I & E Plan contained 16 recommended actions for improving communications and public education. Action 9 proposed the development of a self-guided Auto Tour that would interpret jack pine ecosystem management and Kirtland's warbler biology.

## **Partners in Conservation**

In September 1992, an Interpretative Team with representatives from natural resource agencies, local businesses and homeowners, and industry was formed to guide development of the Auto Tour. A firm specializing in natural resources communications was hired to help design the Auto Tour route and work with the Interpretive Team on Auto Tour development and implementation. The Michigan Department of Natural Resources and U.S. Forest Service were the primary agencies responsible for overseeing on-the-ground development.

Partners directly involved with the project included:

- ABT Co.
- Alcona County Road Commission
- Chamber of Commerce for Oscoda County
- Chevrolet/Geo Environmental
- Consumers Energy
- Eastern National Forest Interpretive Association
- Michigan Consolidated Gas Company
- Michigan Department of Corrections
- Michigan Department of Natural Resources
- Michigan Department of Transportation
- Michigan United Conservation Clubs
- National Fish and Wildlife Foundation
- Northeast Michigan Sportsmen's Club
- Oscoda County Road Commission
- Ruffed Grouse Society
- U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
- U.S. Forest Service
- Weyerhaeuser Foundation
- Wildlife Forever

## **The Ribbon Cutting – A Successful Start**

The 48-mile east loop of the Jack Pine Wildlife Viewing Tour was officially opened at a ribbon-cutting ceremony on June 11, 1994. Attendees at the ceremony included representatives from partner organizations, local and state elected officials, and participants in the First Annual Kirtland's Warbler Festival. Following the ribbon-cutting ceremony, a special "tour of the Tour" was provided for over 40 partners and other VIPs.

## Project Goals

The Interpretive Team established the following goals for the Auto Tour:

1. **Communicate important messages about Kirtland's warbler conservation to key groups of the public.**
2. **Create an additional economic asset dependent on Kirtland's warbler conservation.**
3. **Provide recreational opportunities for people who enjoy viewing wildlife.**

The key messages and conservation themes laid out in the I & E Plan formed a valuable foundation for development of all interpretive materials. They also guided the development of a detailed Interpretive Plan which included ten guidelines that further refined interpretive goals and objectives, as well as specifics for each interpretive site.

## Designing the Auto Tour Route

The Auto Tour route as originally designed totaled approximately 100 miles and traversed four counties. The tour route was laid out to go near or through as many communities as possible in order to provide economic benefits to local businesses. A scenic route was selected and designed to take visitors through a variety of terrain and habitat types. The east loop was developed with this National Fish and Wildlife Foundation grant. The west loop may be developed in the future if additional grants or funding is obtained or if chambers of commerce and businesses provide local financial support.

## Signing



A Jack Pine Wildlife Viewing Tour logo was created and is the identifying symbol for the Auto Tour. It is used in a variety of ways including signing. The logo was designed to incorporate three important elements: 1) the Kirtland's warbler—focus of the Auto Tour; 2) the jack pine—symbolic of the ecosystem of which the warbler is a part; and 3) the watchable wildlife “binoculars” logo—the national symbol for identifying wildlife viewing sites.

The logo sign was used along the entire route of the Auto Tour as a “trailblazing” sign or confidence marker for Auto Tour users. Nine interpretive sites along the route have been completed and each of these sites has been marked with a logo sign plus a sign naming the site. Logo signs have been placed on both sides of the roads so people can drive the Auto Tour route from either direction. These signs were erected by the Alcona and Oscoda County Road Commissions and the Michigan Department of Transportation. There has been very little vandalism or theft of these signs, but when it has occurred, the county or state highway agencies have replaced or maintained the signs.

## **Auto Tour Brochure**

A four-panel brochure detailing the Auto Tour route, sites, and key interpretive messages was developed and distributed free of charge through project partners, agency field offices, local businesses, travel information centers, and chambers of commerce. The brochure was updated and reprinted in 1995, 1996, and 1998. Total distribution to date is 27,400 copies.

## **Site Enhancements**

Enhancements to four interpretive sites along the Auto Tour were accomplished prior to the opening of the Tour in 1994. Enhancements included parking lot development, road barriers, and interpretive signs. Since 1994, nine of the eleven interpretive sites have been developed. The last two interpretive sites to be developed, the Kirtland's Warbler Monument and the Mack Lake Fire site, are scheduled to be completed in 1999.

The following are examples of the type of information provided and the enhancements accomplished at four of the interpretive stops.

### ***Snags***

This site interprets the forest management practice of leaving standing dead snags and downed woody debris during timber harvests. Two fiberglass embedded interpretive signs were developed and installed to describe to visitors how this practice benefits many forms of wildlife. An approach and short turnaround loop for the site was also created and graveled.

### ***High Banks Overlook***

Perched on a high bluff, this site has a spectacular view of the AuSable River. The parking area and access road were expanded and graveled to accommodate expected visitation. A railing was erected around the perimeter of the parking area. Crushed limestone was placed on the foot trail to the river bluff to make the trail handicap-accessible. In 1999, a grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will fund an observation platform and benches and will upgrade accessibility.

### ***Nearly Ready for Warblers***

This site overlooks a clearcut that was replanted to jack pine. The parking area was graded and graveled, and a railing was erected to manage visitor use of the area. Two fiberglass embedded interpretive signs were developed and erected. In 1999, this site will be moved to the south due to realignment of the county road and a new jack pine clearcut. New interpretive signs were produced in 1998 to conform to the new location and its adjacent forest management practices.

## ***Ruffed Grouse Walk***

This site is located in an aspen forest that has been managed and maintained through clearcutting. A 3,300-foot, handicap-accessible trail was developed that leads visitors through three different age classes of aspen. This forest walk is a self-guided interpretive tour, and has its own brochure. The brochure interprets five stops along the Ruffed Grouse Walk. Each stop describes a specific aspect of the aspen forest, such as the vegetation and wildlife use, the benefits of different-aged aspen, layered forest canopies, and forest openings. In 1998, the brochure was updated to interpret a new aspen clearcut that was made adjacent to the trail.

The Ruffed Grouse Society was a major sponsor for this site. In 1995, a special ribbon-cutting ceremony opened this unique trail. A bus tour of the Auto Tour and this interpretive site was a featured event of the second annual Kirtland's Warbler Festival.

Additional interpretive sites have been developed along the Auto Tour, including the AuSable Valley Scenic Vista, the Ecosystem Management Area, O'Brien Lake, the Beaver Pond site, and the AuSable River Loop Overlook.

## **Auto Tour Promotion**

A detailed promotion plan was developed for the Auto Tour and has been used by natural resource agencies and other partners to promote the Tour in a variety of ways, including:

- Distribution of Auto Tour brochures to libraries, area businesses, travel information centers, and chambers of commerce
- Being featured in the *Michigan Wildlife Viewing Guide* as one of the best places in Michigan to see wildlife
- Distribution of a promotional leaflet through highway Travel Information Centers throughout Michigan
- Production and distribution of 150 copies of a colorful, 11" x 17" Auto Tour poster entitled "Take a Scenic Ride on the Wild Side"
- Promotion in the Kirtland's Warbler Recovery Team Newsletter, *KW Notes*
- Magazine advertising in conjunction with the Kirtland's Warbler Festival in
  - *Michigan Natural Resources Magazine*
  - *WildBird*
  - *Birder's World*
  - *Fine Gardening*
  - *Winging It*
- Advertising on place mats used at local restaurants
- Articles in newsletters and publications of partner organizations and agencies
- News releases and other media relations efforts at the local, state, and national levels
- Promotion during the Kirtland's Warbler Tours led by the U.S. Forest Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

- Promotion in the new Michigan Department of Natural Resources video, *The Kirtland's Warbler in the Jack Pine Ecosystem*
- Promotion in the DNR Nongame Wildlife Fund and Natural Heritage Program publications and *Spotting Scope* newsletter, and DNR Wildlife Division web page
- *Tracking NatureWatch Successes*, USDA-USFS publication # FS-577, February 1998
- *Refuge Reporter*, USFWS Refuge System quarterly newsletter, Spring 1977
- Huron-Manistee National Forest web page which is linked to many others, including the Kirtland's Warbler Festival, Michigan DNR, and Travel Michigan's Birdwatching sites

In 1994, a media campaign was organized by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) with assistance from the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to promote the Auto Tour and other Kirtland's Warbler I & E efforts. Local, state, and national media were contacted regarding the first annual Kirtland's Warbler Festival and the ribbon-cutting ceremony of the Jack Pine Wildlife Viewing Tour. These contacts resulted in coverage throughout Michigan via newspapers, magazines, radio, and television. Local and state politicians, as well as many high-ranking agency staff from Lansing, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, and Washington D.C. attended these 1994 activities. Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt attended and drove part of the Auto Tour route. He was so impressed with the community involvement and partnerships that he wrote an article titled "The Mio Model" for the summer 1994 issue of *Defenders* magazine describing the Kirtland's warbler recovery effort as a model for endangered species recovery throughout the nation.

## Awards

The Jack Pine Wildlife Viewing Tour and the Kirtland's Warbler Festival have been recognized with a number of awards:

- National Winner, U.S. Forest Service's *Eyes On Wildlife Award*
- Eastern Region of the U.S. Forest Service's *Public Service Award*
- National Association for Interpretation, *Interpretive Media Award*, 3rd place in the Trail Guide category for the Auto Tour brochure
- The Director's *Partners in Conservation Award* from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Award from the Michigan Office of the USFWS
- Huron-Manistee National Forest *Partnerships Award*

## Additional Grants

Two grants were received from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for the development of interpretive materials and sites. A \$3,000 grant was received in 1995 and a \$2,500 grant in 1997. Because these were federal funds, they could not be included as a match for the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation challenge grant.

The Huron-Manistee National Forest received a \$14,000 grant through the federal Department of Transportation Inter-modal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) to develop the AuSable Valley Scenic Vista interpretive site. This ISTEA grant was matched by a \$14,000 grant from the Alcona County Road Commission and \$7,000 from the Huron-Manistee National Forest. A looped roadway, handicap-accessible restroom, and elevated observation deck were funded by these grants. This site is located on a tall hill with a panoramic view of the AuSable River valley and Alcona Dam pond. Development of this site also added ten miles to the Auto Tour, extending the developed tour route to 58 miles in length.

## Evaluation

There have been three evaluations of the Auto Tour and the Kirtland's Warbler I & E efforts that shed light on the success of the Auto Tour.

### *Evaluation of the Jack Pine Wildlife Viewing Tour*

by Dr. Maureen H. McDonough and Dr. Dennis B. Propst, Michigan State University

In the summer of 1996, Michigan State University (MSU) was contracted to estimate the use of the Auto Tour and to assess the Auto Tour's interpretive materials. This study found an estimated 688 visits (observed across all seven monitored sites) and an estimated 96 (low) to 367 (high) vehicles using the sites. In addition, 15 parties were interviewed at four sites. From these findings, the authors concluded that the Auto Tour is underutilized, and based on their professional expertise, they concluded that there were "interpretive problems" with the Tour.

The quantitative results of the MSU study indicate that the Auto Tour is not being used as much as had been desired. However, in terms of the "interpretive problems" mentioned in the study, it is clear that the authors did not evaluate the Auto Tour against its stated goals and guidelines. For example, the MSU Interpretive Evaluation makes several statements based on the premise that to use the Auto Tour, one must drive the entire route at one time, yet Guideline 4 of the Auto Tour's Interpretive Proposal states that the sites should "stand alone" and not require visitors to make every stop in one trip. The Interpretive Evaluation also criticizes the fact that the *Snag* site is not relevant to the Kirtland's warbler or its habitat, yet Guideline 9 of the Auto Tour's Interpretive Proposal states that the tour should emphasize the entire ecosystem, not only the Kirtland's warbler.

Based on the assessment that the Auto Tour was underutilized, the MSU study questioned whether the goals of the Tour were met. Agency staff involved in these efforts contend that development of the Auto Tour has served and will continue to serve a very valuable function. Although the number of people using the Auto Tour in summer 1996 was lower than desired, the fact that the agencies made the effort to create something beneficial for the local communities goes a long way in developing positive relations between the agencies and the communities.



The MSU study made several recommendations for improving the use of the Auto Tour, including placement of signs and kiosks at the more heavily used interpretive sites to promote the Tour and to provide copies of the Auto Tour brochure at these sites. Four "Welcome to the Jack Pine Wildlife Viewing Tour" interpretive signs have been produced that describe the Auto Tour route and its highlights. In 1999, these signs and kiosks will be placed at the more heavily used interpretive sites such as the AuSable River Overlook.

***Public Support for Endangered Species Recovery: An Exploratory Study of the Kirtland's Warbler***

by Barry D. Solomon, Michigan Technological University. (Published in *Human Dimensions of Wildlife*, Fall 1998, Volume 3 Number 3, pp. 62-74).

Michigan Technological University conducted a survey of 290 residents of Mio and Grayling during spring 1996 and spring 1997 regarding local attitudes toward the Kirtland's warbler and its recovery program. The survey results indicate that local awareness and knowledge of the bird and the recovery program are high, especially among men. Sixty-two percent of respondents believe the Kirtland's warbler management program is effective, and 57% support the program. Of those respondents who gave an opinion about local attitudes toward the Kirtland's warbler, 83% thought attitudes had become more positive. Natural resource agency staff involved in the Kirtland's warbler recovery effort believe strongly that the Auto Tour, along with the Kirtland's Warbler Festival, have been important factors in bringing about these improvements in public awareness and attitudes.

***Making Communications Work for Kirtland's Warbler Conservation: Maintaining the Course for Success***

by D.J. Case and Associates, Specialists in Natural Resources Communications

In 1997, the Kirtland's Warbler Recovery Team decided to do an assessment of the progress, effectiveness, and direction of the Kirtland's warbler I & E efforts which had begun in 1991. Various key audiences and stakeholders were interviewed for their perceptions of the achievements of the goals of the I & E Plan. Of the 21 interviewees, representation was as follows: USFS (7); USFWS (3); DNR (3); tourism/business (5); local residents (2); and conservation organizations (1). In this study, major I & E efforts associated with the Kirtland's warbler since 1991 were assessed.

Overall, the majority of responses indicated that as a result of I & E efforts, target audiences have more favorable attitudes toward and/or better understanding of Kirtland's warbler management activities. Overwhelmingly, respondents said I & E efforts have been worth the money and time. However, many respondents also indicated that a lot of work still needs to be done in this regard.

The majority of respondents said that the overall impact of the Auto Tour on the local communities has been positive, that local people see the Auto Tour as an economic asset, and that the Auto Tour has been fairly successful. Some respondents questioned whether or not the Auto Tour has helped draw tourists to the area, but they said that once tourists arrive, the Auto Tour does keep them in the area longer. Most respondents said promotion of the Auto Tour should be increased. The interviewees *not* in favor of increasing promotion said that the Auto Tour is doing fine as it is, and that the Auto Tour is not a high priority for any particular interest group.

Promoting the Auto Tour as a separate attraction may not bring visitors to the area, but a package promotion that includes the Auto Tour, guided Kirtland's warbler tours, and the Kirtland's Warbler Festival will serve to keep people in the area longer, creating an economic asset that is dependent on Kirtland's warbler conservation. Local chambers of commerce such as the Chamber of Commerce for Oscoda County send out the Auto Tour brochure and a Kirtland's Warbler Festival flyer to all people requesting information on things to visit when they are in the area.

## Special Thanks

The staff from the host agencies—the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, the U.S. Forest Service, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service—who had the pleasure of working on this unique project, take this opportunity to offer their great appreciation to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, D.J. Case and Associates, and the many other organizations, corporations, and individuals who helped make this project possible.

