

Mio, MMy!

The Kirtland's Warbler leads a merry chase to Michigan

Story and Photos by Ron Austing

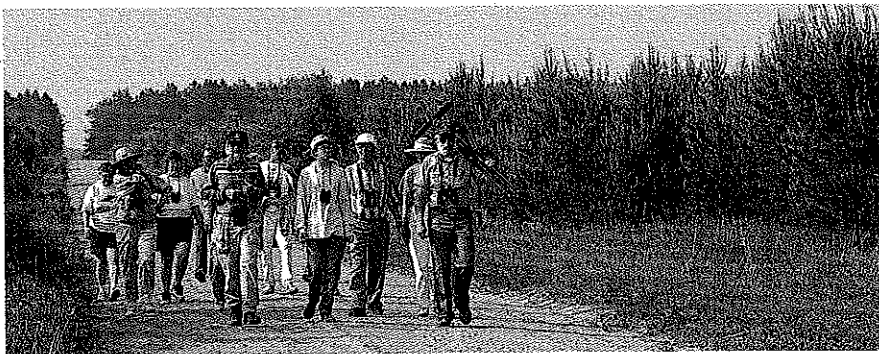
How vividly I recall my introduction to the Kirtland's Warbler. It was exactly 30 years ago. Accompanied by my eldest daughter Theresa, then 15, and friend Mike Bolton, I set out in our station wagon at 10 p.m. on June 15, 1969. Destination: near Lovells, in the midst of Michigan's jack pine plains in Crawford County, close to 400 miles north of our home.

Longtime friends Powell and Betty Cottrille and Eliot Porter had spent the month of June 1960 with me, photographing nesting birds in Miami-Whitewater Forest where I lived and worked as a resident park ranger. We would spend evenings swapping experiences. When they mentioned that Kirtland's Warbler was as one of their favorites, I knew that I had to meet this rarest of warblers. But it was not until 1969 that circumstances allowed such a trip.

Following a detailed map provided by Powell, we drove through the night, arriving in Lovells at first light. Following directions down several sandy roads, we finally spotted a sign that read Kirtland Warbler Management Area.

The area was teeming with sounds. Woodcocks were *peenting*, Brown Thrashers began tuning up, Hermit Thrushes added their enchanting strains, then a multitude of others joined in, some familiar, others not. We had no idea what a Kirtland's sounded like. We tried to imagine it, from the description in Peterson. Then, suddenly, the loud burst of a staccato, musical string of notes we knew could only belong to one bird: a male Kirtland's Warbler!

As the minutes passed and darkness waned, we heard another and yet another. We were elated. Within several hours of sunup, we found three singing males, and all were carrying food, which meant they



Guided tours offer one of the best ways to view the endangered warblers. See page 48 for details.



Male Kirtland's Warblers sing to establish territory in Michigan's jack pine plains.

were feeding young at the nest or the incubating females.

Interestingly, whereas most warblers cease active singing or become silent altogether when feeding young or approaching the nest, Kirtland's sing continuously, even with a mouthful of food. And so, locating three active nests before noon couldn't have been much easier.

In those days, before passage of the Endangered Species Act, there were no restrictions on entering Kirtland's Warbler management areas or photographing nests.



Of the three nests we found, two still contained eggs, but the third, to our delight, held half-grown young: one young warbler and one considerably larger Brown-headed Cowbird.

Contrary to most published accounts of Kirtland's nests, which are described as extremely well-concealed among dense ground cover, this nest was remarkably open and photographable just as it lay, without the need to tie back any branches or bend aside a single blade of grass.

The adults proved so confiding that our

blind, six feet from the nest, proved unnecessary. We sat in the comfort of lawn chairs and fired at leisure as the adults arrived with food and departed with fecal sacs.

After the third day, having decided we had enough good shots of Kirtland's Warblers, we reluctantly packed the wagon and headed home.

Kirtland History

Kirtland's Warbler was not described until 1852, even though the first specimen

was collected aboard ship in the Bahamas 11 years earlier by Dr. Samuel Cabot Jr., en route to the Yucatan to study tropical birds. He became so engrossed with all of the spectacular new birds from untouched territory that the Kirtland's skin remained unnoticed in his collection for more than 20 years.

The species was actually described from a later specimen collected in Cleveland, Ohio, on May 13, 1851, by Charles Pease, who gave it to his father-in-law, Jared P. Kirtland, a well-known naturalist



of the era. Kirtland then gave it to his friend Spencer F. Baird, who described it the following year, naming it *Sylvicola kirtlandii* in honor of Dr. Kirtland.

Specialized Habitat Needs

Kirtland's Warbler is a classic example of a species so specialized in its ecological requirements that, in the wake of human invasion of the very restricted niche that it occupies, it can only survive, paradoxically, by careful management of its habitat — by humans. One of the first species to be listed upon passage of the Endangered Species Act in 1973, Kirtland's Warbler was known until recently to nest only in a few counties of northern lower Michigan among young jack pines and associated plant community that occurs only on grayling sand, a special type of very dry, sandy soil.

The nesting grounds were not discovered until 1903, by two trout fisherman from the University of Michigan fishing the Au Sable River, located within an area commonly referred to as the jack pine plains, in the counties of Crawford and Oscoda.

Historically, wildfires provided and maintained the warbler's breeding habitat. Fire is required to open the cones of jack pine and release the seeds. The ash provides the rich nutrients necessary for rapid regeneration. About eight years after a fire, when the young pines approach 5 feet in height, the first warblers appear.

By this time, a considerable number of small oaks and other trees are scattered among them, and a fairly thick ground cover has become established, consisting in part of blueberry, aromatic wintergreen, bearberry, sheep laurel and sweet fern. After about another 10 years or so, the pines reach heights of 15 to 20 feet, shading the ground cover. The lower branches die, rendering the area unsuitable for nesting, and the warblers abandon it.

When loggers moved across Michigan in the 1800s, vast sections were cleared, and wild fires burned out of control over thousands of acres — which prepared the way for extensive Kirtland's habitat. Warbler numbers in those days are thought to have been at an all-time high. As settlers moved in and claimed the land for various uses, new roads and fire-

breaks were built, and Smokey the Bear arrived on the scene. Fire control became so efficient that fresh habitat sites became fewer and fewer. Brown-headed Cowbirds also benefited from the various land-use practices and were to become what many biologists now consider to be the second most significant detriment to more productive nesting success for the Kirtland's Warbler.

Current Kirtland Status

Today, the fate of Kirtland's Warbler depends almost entirely upon the controlled guidance of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service, Michigan Department of Natural Resources and Michigan Audubon Society, in cooperation with countless volunteers. A select group of personnel from these agencies meet regularly to set the standards and state policy concerning management. They are known as the "recovery team." Habitat management and expansion and removal of cowbirds from nesting areas have been deemed essential and receive top priority.

Researchers learned that a minimum of



80 acres of nesting habitat was necessary to attract the warblers. More recently, it has been determined that much larger areas — 1,000 to 2,000 acres — attracted much higher percentages of birds.

Habitat is created with controlled burning and artificial plantings. Some 50,000 acres are managed today on a rotating basis. The goal is to provide several thousand acres of new habitat at all times.

Cowbirds are captured in large, baited wire cages from which they are removed at regular intervals throughout the day and dispatched humanely. To date, more than 100,000 cowbirds have been removed at a rate of more than 5,000 per year.

Habitat management began in 1957, well before passage of the Endangered Species Act. The area near Lovells, where we photographed the nest, was one of the first plantations where rows of jack pine seedlings were planted at the rate of 1,200 per acre in sections separated by grassy openings.

Site preparation involves clear-cutting, controlled burns or a combination of both. Mature trees are harvested over a 50-year cycle in some areas, providing some economic benefit.

Mio: Kirtland Capital

Local public sentiment toward the controlled burns remains mixed, especially around the Mack Lake management area near the town of Mio in Oscoda County, which contains the highest popu-

lation of nesting warblers. In 1980, a controlled burn roared out of control when wind conditions suddenly changed. More than 25,000 acres burned, along with numerous homes and buildings. More tragic, a young firefighter died. Ironically, this tragedy resulted in the creation of what was to become some of the most productive Kirtland's habitat during the last 15 years. Now many sections are reaching the point of maximum tree height, and sectional plantings will soon resume.

Beginning in 1951, Kirtland's Warblers were censused every 10 years by counting singing males in mid-June; 432 were tallied. In 1961, 502 were counted. In 1971, there were only 201. Annual censusing then began. The 1987 count recorded the fewest Kirtland's Warblers ever, 167, but since then (likely due to the extensive Mack Lake burn area coming of age), numbers have gradually risen. The 1998 count was 804. The goal of the recovery team is 1,000 breeding pairs.

The Nesting Cycle

The Kirtland's Warbler is unique because it breeds in such a restricted area, and winters only in the Bahamas.

FESTIVAL TIME!

A good time to join a tour would be during the Kirtland Warbler Festival, an annual outdoor event that provides information about the efforts being made to save the Kirtland's Warbler and the jack pine ecosystem. The festival is held at the Kirtland Community College near the town of Roscommon and is hosted by the Chamber of Commerce, community organizations, schools and the various governmental agencies.

The 1999 festival is scheduled for May 22. For information, call the Kirtland Community College at (517) 275-5121, ext. 347.

Kirtland's Warbler nests consist of leaves and grass, and are found on the ground or under the branches of young trees. Clutch size typically numbers three to five eggs.



About 90 percent of the population nests in the drainage of the Au Sable in Oscoda and Crawford County. Males arrive on territory in mid-May and immediately defend against rivals. Those individuals from previous years usually return to the same spot. Territories tend to occur in loose colonies.

The females arrive shortly thereafter and nest site selection and construction soon begins, at her discretion. It takes about four days to complete a nest, with the male close at hand, seemingly supervising the operation, and cheering on the female with constant song. The five-egg clutch requires about 14 days to hatch.

The male often brings food to the incubating female. After hatching, both adults share in feeding duties. As with most passerines, the fecal sacs are eaten on the spot for the first few days, then

later carried off some distance before being dropped.

The young fledge in 12 to 13 days, when their tails are barely showing and they are not yet capable of flight. They are carefully tended by the adults for several weeks until they become self-sufficient.

Range Expansion?

It's been exciting tracking the evidence of Kirtland's Warblers actually expanding their range in recent years. In 1995, a nest that fledged young was found in Michigan's Upper Peninsula; another was recorded in 1996. A census there in 1997 revealed 24 singing males and four females, and 15 males and six females in

1998. The habitat there is similar to that in the Lower Peninsula. About two-thirds was created by wild fire; the rest are Sharp-tailed Grouse managed areas.

My Personal Kirtland Quest

After 30 years, I retired from the Hamilton County Park District in 1983, and finally found time for a bit of international travel, as well as fill in the gaps in my photo files on certain local species. Video was a new medium for me, and although I was itching to return to Michigan to get new Kirtland's shots and record the bird and its voice on video, other opportunities kept coming up, and my Kirtland's quest was con-

stantly put on the back burner.

In 1992, I made four trips to the Upper Peninsula at Whitefish Point and Sault St. Marie to videotape the northern owl invasion. On the final trip in May, when we finally got Boreal Owls, my companions Fred Alsop and Chester Massey proposed that we stop at Mio on our return home in hopes of seeing an early arrival Kirtland's Warblers. And so we did.

At the Mio office of the U.S. Forest Service, we met biologist Phil Huber, who confirmed that, indeed, the first warblers had just arrived. He provided a map and showed us exactly where to go: the Mack Lake burn area. But it wasn't like the "old days." Entering the habitat during the nesting season was not permitted; the areas were closed, and the use of tape recorders was strictly forbidden. We would have to remain alongside the sandy roads.

The Mack Lake burn area is about 6 miles south of Mio on Route 604, running east off M33, which intersects Mio. The entire area is crisscrossed three or four times by section roads, which are at times very sandy and unstable. The territories of numerous males are intersected by the roads, and we finally found a singing male right next to the road. The wind was so fierce that photography was impossible, but the sight of that bird and the sound of his call pre-empted all of my spring plans for years to come.

I returned to Mio a month later, checked out several hotels in town and chose to stay at the Mio Motel, which aside from offering superior accommodations at reasonable rates, is conveniently located just across M33 from the Forest Service office and the Au Sable River Restaurant. Glen's Supermarket, adjacent to the motel, is just a 100-yard walk.

Various references to Kirtland's War-



Within a management area, Kirtland's Warbler habitat is protected with controlled burns, logging of mature trees, replanting of seedlings and removal of Brown-headed Cowbirds.

TOURING KIRTLAND'S HABITAT

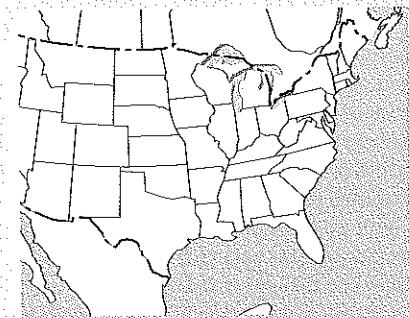
Perhaps the best way to see a Kirtland's Warbler, especially if time is limited, is to join one of the tours provided by the U.S. Forest Service, both in Mio and in Grayling, from mid-May through June.

The Mio tour begins with a brief orientation and video about Kirtland's Warblers. Participants then follow the tour guide in their own vehicles to a nesting area in hopes of locating a singing male. Because the nesting areas are now closed to public entry, this is the best chance to see a Kirtland's. In fact, it would be unusual not to see at least one bird, because the guide already knows established territories. Be sure to bring binoculars or a spotting scope! Cameras are permitted, but no special efforts are made for photographers. Tape recorders, pets and smoking are not permitted.

Mornings can be cold, so be prepared. Most important: Black flies are locally abundant, bring repellent! No reservations are required for individuals, but groups of five or more should contact the appropriate office.

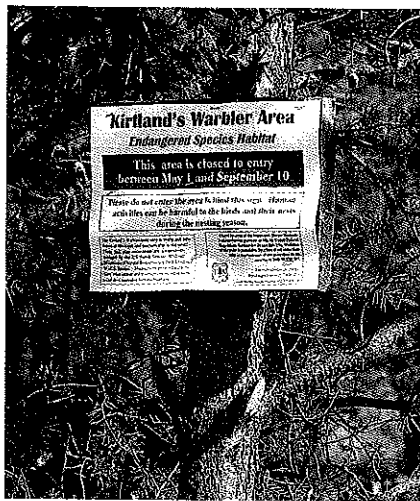
Mio tours are offered Wednesday through Sunday from the Forest Service office across from the Mio Motel at 7 a.m. On Saturday and Sunday, an 11 a.m. tour is also offered. For information, call (517) 826-3252.

Grayling tours operate daily, at 7 a.m. from the Holiday Inn. For more information, call (517) 351-2555.



Breeding range, generally in spring and summer

STACEY FREEMAN



bler may be seen at several businesses, but the most prominent icon stands in the center of town, a 3-foot-tall replica of a male Kirtland's Warbler encased in glass and surrounded by stone. Dedicated in 1963 by Roger Tory Peterson, it serves as a memorial to those who have endeavored to save this highly endangered species.

Heading down 33 and east on 604, I soon found myself in the heart of the Mack Lake burn area. I spent the entire day slowly crisscrossing the area, listening for close-to-the-road calls as I tried to locate favorite singing perches. The following days were spent waiting for hours, at the various places. Sometimes, I would get some shots.

Over the years, I slowly accumulated a fairly good variety of stills and video of Kirtland's Warbler, but I hesitate to hazard even a ballpark guess at the actual cost of each frame or clip. For example, in 1993, it suddenly became unseasonably

cold — the high was in the low 40s for many days — and the birds all but quit singing. I packed up and went home! You can never predict the weather.

In 1995, my friend Jim Fisher came along, and we watched the rain almost every day. In 1996, Richard Wagner and I began roasting by 11 a.m. and were forced back to the air-conditioned car until late afternoon. Birds with compressed feathers and open bills don't make appealing photo subjects.

What I like most about the Mack Lake area, aside from being able to observe in a different context the many species that I know around home as migrants or winter visitors, is the lack of human traffic. There is only the occasional birdwatcher; I've never encountered another photographer. How different from places like the Venice Rookery in Florida where 40 or 50 photographers line up elbow to elbow each morning, backs to the rising sun, aiming their "big glass" at the same herons, egrets and Anhingas, perched on the same nests and branches!

Last year, I made a brief side trip back to Lovells to see if I could find that old site where we had photographed and virtually lived with that family of warblers for three days in 1969. I wanted to sit and reflect, but unfortunately, it seemed everything had changed. I couldn't remember the exact location, and Powell's map was long gone.

At least I still have the photos and the mental images, which are just as sharp and clear today as they were 30 years ago. **WB**

Ron Austing is a veteran birder and bird photographer from Dillsboro, Indiana.

OTHER AREA BIRDS

A unique 58-mile auto tour, the Jack Pine Wildlife Viewing Tour, winds through the scenic Au Sable river valley and jack pine ecosystem, providing an overview of the entire area. Various clear-cuts and management areas may be observed along the way, and interpretive signs are stationed at several pulloffs.

Bald Eagles are often seen along the river, and turkeys are likely at the Wild Turkey Viewing Side Trip. Take the Ruffed Grouse Walk, a self-guided 4,000-foot-trail (which is handicapped-accessible).

The auto tour begins at Mio, although it can be accessed at any point along the way. Brochures are available at many businesses in town or directly from the Forest Service office.

Other interesting birds to look for in Kirtland country are nighthawks. The male's courtship dive is spectacular — his primaries ripping through the air as the bird pulls out of its stoop.

Other characteristic birds at Mack Lake include Nashville Warblers, Brown Thrashers, Vesper Sparrows, Lincoln's Sparrows and Hermit Thrushes. Somewhat less common but easy-to-locate birds include Clay-colored Sparrows, Yellow-rumped Warblers, Upland Sandpipers and Prairie Warblers. Merlins are sometimes seen or heard, as well as Wild Turkeys, Northern Harriers, Northern Goshawks and Spruce Grouse. Many species utilize the dead snags for perching or nesting, especially Northern Flickers, Black-capped Chickadees, Tree Swallows, Eastern Bluebirds and American Kestrels.

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