

FOREST
Cowbird
roundup
will help
warblers

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GRAYLING — Chris Mensing stood inside a chicken-wire cage, reached out and nabbed a Brown-headed cowbird from the air.

Mensing is a wildlife biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and spends much of this time of year checking more than 50 cowbird traps scattered across nine northern Michigan counties. The program is part of rehabilitation efforts in place for more than three decades to help the endangered Kirtland's warbler.

Cowbirds are a major threat to warblers, as they evolved to lay their eggs in other species' nests and leave the host bird to raise cowbird chicks. Often, the subterfuge occurs at the expense of the host bird's own young.

"Cowbird parasitism is ingenious, really. The female cowbird stalks and waits by a nest and times it so her eggs hatch about one day before the Kirtland's warbler eggs," Mensing said.

Cowbird babies are four times the size of warbler chicks by the time they hatch and the loudest chick is generally fed first. If more than one cowbird chick hatches in a warbler nest, none of the endangered species typically survive, Mensing said.

Cowbirds are not native to Michigan, but moved into the area following deforestation during early logging years. Female cowbirds can lay 20 and 40 eggs



Record-Eagle/Sheri McWhirter

Federal wildlife biologist Chris Mensing catches and holds a brown-headed cowbird in a trap in prime Kirtland's warbler habitat of young jack pine trees in Crawford County.

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Chris Mensing, wildlife biologist

own nests.

Mensing said about 4,000 cowbirds each year are removed from the jack pine forests of northern Michigan, the sole breeding grounds for Kirtland's warblers. The birds are protected as a migratory species, but are a threat

to an endangered species here.

"If we hadn't started the cowbird control program, the Kirtland's warbler wouldn't have survived to today," he said.

There were about 200 singing male Kirtland's warblers counted in the year

before cowbird trapping began in 1972, while last year more than 1,400 singing males were identified — an all-time record.

Trapped cowbirds are euthanized on site and the carcasses are used in a separate research project, Mensing said.

Similar cowbird removal programs operate in California and Texas, for other endangered species, such as the Golden-cheeked warbler and the Black-capped vireo.

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