

Kirtland's Warbler: Indiana's first fall record

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September 24, 1994, was one of those dismal gray days that accompany autumn cold fronts. Though the dawn showers had stopped, a threatening overcast loomed overhead rendering it prudent to keep rain gear close at hand. Our day's birding began with an early morning search for Yellow Rails at Willow Slough; the effort proved fruitless, so a group of five dejected rail-seekers opted to try the lakefront. Each member of the group needed specific birds to round out annual lists and the lakefront is clearly the best location for migrants. Our expectations were not high as the weather did not appear conducive for heavy passerine movement.

We were wrong. The Migrant Trap vegetation, still wet from morning rain, contained a surprisingly large number of warblers, especially the weed patches and low shrubs. This suggested that a fall-out might have accompanied the inclement weather. Accordingly, after lunch the group elected to try Whiting Park, which is located on the lakefront perhaps 2 km east of the Trap.

Whiting Park was teeming with birds; every tree seemed to contain at least three warblers and one rather substantial maple hosted a remarkable 10 Redstarts. Despite this multitude the manicured park vegetation produced only one target bird: a Solitary Vireo, which was sought by Clyde Fields and myself. In quest of the Connecticut Warbler John Cassady sorely needed, Jeff McCoy's LeConte's Sparrow, and the Black-throated Blue that Ed Hopkins had all but given up on, we decided to bird the outer side of the south wall that partitions the Park from the railroad tracks.

The outer wall is choked with knee-high grass, thick weeds, and dense shrubs,

providing exactly the habitat for skulkers such as Connecticut. At the outset precious few birds were located, but about half way along the wall I spotted a female Black-throated Blue Warbler. I called to the others and to my surprise, Ed Hopkins answered, "I have a Palm with so many bands I can hardly see it!" Everyone maneuvered into position to view Ed's discovery. The bird's legs were indeed decorated like Christmas trees. The left leg had a light yellow band above a bright blue band, and the right leg displayed silver above pale blue.

As we pondered why any warbler would possess so many leg bands, Ed mumbled something about Kirtland's Warbler. With Ed's words the warbler plunged deeply in the shrubs, frustrating our efforts to get a confirming look. Jeff McCoy then announced that the warbler had resurfaced on the opposite side of the thicket; and sure enough, there was a tail-pumping warbler with pale yellow underparts (much softer than the intense yellow of nearby Magnolia Warblers) perched adjacent to the Black-throated Blue. The tail-wagger appeared slightly larger and plumper than the latter.

As the gravity of this discovery permeated our thoughts I broke out the notebook, recorded the time (1:50 pm CDST), and began logging field marks: broken white eye ring, flanks heavily streaked with black, gray-brown face, blackish back stripes, white under-tail coverts, and two thin white wing bars. The eyes, legs and feet were all black. John Cassady's superb artistry captures most of these marks in Figure 1 (unfortunately this black and white reproduction fails to show the subtle plumage tints).

Throughout much of the observation the sun was obscured by clouds and the bird was shaded by vegetation; periodically, however, the clouds would break allowing delightful views of the warbler in direct sunlight. This warbler was unlike the breeding plumed Kirtland's shown in the field guides and the excitement of seeing a new plumage intensified our efforts to detect every field character. After considerable study and deliberation a consensus was reached that the bird's upperparts were gray-brown, and strikingly different from the beautiful blue-gray of spring birds. We did however, detect a patch of blue-gray feathers on the lesser wing coverts and concluded the bird was an adult. Following a half hour of intense scrutiny my Peregrine eyed companions were still ferreting out subtle plumage marks: very fine dark streaks on the forehead and exceedingly faint malar stripes.

Considerable effort was expended attempting to determine the bird's sex. A poorly defined band of spots traversed the upper breast (see Figure 1); in spring plumage this mark often appears on males. In contrast, the lores were the same gray-brown tint as the upperparts; spring males have black lores. Lacking information about fall plumage we were unable to reach a conclusion in the field. Later, in reading the *Identification Guide to North American Passerines*, (Pyle et al., 1987) I learned that fall males do indeed possess black lores. Our bird was a female.

The Kirtland's foraged low in the shrubs and goldenrod, rarely exceeding one meter above the ground. On one occasion she briefly flew into the nearby cottonwood about five meters above the ground. She was remarkably tame often approaching within two meters of the observers while foraging through the goldenrod. Despite close proximity the bird was often obscured by vegetation and remarkably hard to see. We finally terminated our vigil at 2:56 pm. Birders arriving early the following morning discovered noticeably fewer warblers and no Kirtland's.

Though several previous Kirtland's Warblers have appeared in Indiana, the Whiting Park bird constitutes the state's first fall record. This pattern is consistent with observations

throughout the Midwest where autumn Kirtland's are very rarely encountered.

Recognizing that the colored leg band combination contained the requisite information to determine where the bird was banded we were eager to learn about her past. Thanks to a tip from super librarian Susan Thompson, I reached members of the Kirtland's recovery team in Lansing, Michigan and was informed that the bird had been banded by Paul Sykes, who resides in Georgia. I also e-mailed the band color combination to Mary Gustafson at the Bird Banding Laboratory in Laurel, Maryland.

Within a few days Mary called to report that the bird was banded on the breeding grounds July 16, 1992. She also urged me to call Paul Sykes. Mary's recommendation proved quite fruitful as Paul's comments were most enlightening. On the above date Paul, Carol Bocetti, and Mike Petrucha banded the bird (band #202064041), an adult female with brood patch, in the Ogemaw Management Unit, Ogemaw County, Michigan. Further, the bird was recaptured in the same area July 22, 1992, but was never seen again— until she reappeared at Whiting Park. But Paul's most exciting news involved results of the 1994 annual singing male survey on the Michigan breeding grounds. This year's tally of 630+ males, surpassed even the initial counts made in 1950 and 1960 and far outstripped the minimum of 167 in 1987. Like our pert female, the Kirtland's population appears hearty and hale.

Thus, our lady was at least three years old and clearly not a novice at fall migration. It is intriguing to contemplate what element of chance brought her to Whiting Park (well west of a direct path from the breeding grounds an the Bahamas) and into our birding world.

Meteorological conditions constitute the most plausible explanation, but whatever the reason she provided our group a nugget of birding platinum. Indeed, though the lakefront trip yielded only half of our target birds, there were no complaints from my companions.