

COUNTING KIRTLAND'S

by Margery Guest

I arrive at the Pine River Campground at 6 a.m., as arranged. We're about 15 miles west of Harrisville off M-72 in Alcona County in the middle of some very dense jack pine forest. We're here to participate in the annual Kirtland's warbler census. There are about 12 of us, maybe slightly more than half are volunteers. The non-volunteers work for the U.S. Forest Service and Fish & Wildlife Service. Each volunteer will be teamed up with a more experienced volunteer or a wildlife biologist.

While the biologist in charge draws off sections on individual maps, I have a brief conversation with the guy standing next to me. He tells me he freelances for the Fish & Wildlife Service, checking cowbird traps. The traps are baited and lure in all kinds of wild birds. The person checking traps has the responsibility to free all but the brown-headed cowbird, which is destroyed because it is a nest parasite. This is one of the more controversial, but necessary, practices for promoting the survival of the endangered Kirtland's warbler.

I've been assigned to a section quite likely to result in a view of a Kirtland's. If I see one, it will be my first. I'm teamed up with a guy who's about 6'2", named Rex. It's a little intimidating. He looks like he takes long strides. I decide his surname should be Tyrannous.

He turns out to be a nice guy from Missouri. When we arrive at our section, Rex marks it into five "chain" segments; each segment is 66-feet long. He takes a reading on the compass. It's a cloudy morning. Once we enter the woods, it will be impossible to tell which direction is which. It's all scrubby jack pine, about 15 feet tall.

Keeping up with Rex takes concentration. He's done this before and he's fast. The laces on my new boots keep coming untied, but I wait until the end of the five-chain segment to tie them, when we stop for about five minutes to listen for the Kirtland's song.

The ground is uneven and sandy. Lots of bracken and small brush. The trees (planted several years before as two-year-old seedlings) are very close, so the

entire way it's trudging, batting jack pine limbs out of the space ahead of you as you walk.

We see and hear chickadees, goldfinches, a hermit thrush, a brown thrasher, a common flicker and lots of Nashville warblers. "They're more plentiful here than the Kirtland's," Rex said. A black blob about 60 feet up in a nearby oak tree turns out to be a large porcupine. I drink in the familiar smell of sweetfern.

Rex has to visit the men's room. "I'll meet you in that clearing," he said, pointing. After only a few minutes, I begin to wonder how I would do if for some reason Rex never returned and I had to find my way out of here. Not so well, I decide. Maybe I would survive. But I certainly wouldn't be sane.

Soon we're out of the woods. I spot the truck just a little ways up the road. Once rejoined with the others, we animatedly discuss what we've seen and heard. Rex and I have been unlucky. Most of the other groups have at least heard some Kirtland's this morning, and several have seen two or three. Apparently the jack pine in our section wasn't dense enough. Could have fooled me.

The count is 27 total—seen or heard—for this area. Our leader says the total count is very good this year—well over 700 singing males which equals more than 1,400 birds. Continuing an overall rising trend, it may be a record. I ask if it is due to cowbird control. "Some," Rex said, "but mostly providing habitat."

I'm given a little pin which has a picture of the Kirtland's and says KW Census Survey Team on it. But I've got my eye on the nifty T-shirt worn by another member of the team. "Oh, you have to come back year after year to get one of those," Rex tells me. And you probably have to have seen a Kirtland's warbler at least once, too, I figure.

Editor's Note: The Kirtland's warbler survey is conducted over a 10-day period each year during the first two weeks of June. Citizen volunteers, who are willing to become a long-term census taker, should contact Jerry Weinrich at the DNR Houghton Lake Wildlife Research Station, (517) 422-6572, or Phil Huber, Huron-Manistee National Forest, Mio Ranger District, (517) 826-3252. ♣