

The short jack pines, each looking like a clone of the other, stretched out in a monotonous green carpet broken only by the ribbon line of the dirt road I was walking. The little bird's call coming from nearby was a high-pitched and piercing *chip - chipchip chipchipchipchip*.

From way off to the north came a deep, rumbling *WHOOM*, like distant thunder only brief, not drawn out and rolling. The bird's incessant *chip-chipchipchipchip chipchip* seemed almost frantic. Another *WHOOM* of exploding artillery rumbled ominously from the big cannons.

The antithetical sounds of rude artillery and bird song, violence and innocence, gave me an eerie feeling deep inside. Here amidst the makings of war was one of the world's rarest birds perched on a sun-bleached, gnarly log and singing his heart out.

A tiny, dapper fellow, his gunmetal blue back and mustard breast glowed in the midday sun. I paused to murmur a little prayer, thankful this was not a real war zone but the National Guard training camp near Grayling. This area is the summer home of the Kirtland's warbler.

Last year I spent the better part of a month in this area photographing Kirtland's and became determined to learn more about them. Of course, I knew all the commonly published facts: they're an endangered species; Northern Michigan is their sole nesting and summer range; they nest only in large stands of young jack pine; and they migrate to the Bahamas for the winter.

But several recent events have brought up other questions. What's with their expansion into the Upper Peninsula? What about the recent sightings in Wisconsin and Ontario? Have they ever inhabited areas other than Michigan?

The Kirtland's warbler was officially dis-

With a total population of about 2100, Kirtland's warblers are one of the rarest birds on the continent.



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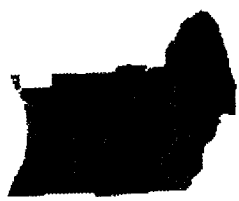


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is the third in as many years in Michigan and will conclude this summer. Walling notes that locally raised mallards make up the majority of ducks harvested by Michigan hunters. Biologists estimate that nesting success in Michigan is 15 to 17 percent.

Veteran duck hunter Dave Dickman of **East Tawas** reports seeing a common eider, a bird most often seen on the Atlantic seaboard, on the lower **Tawas River**. He saw it in March when **Tawas Bay** was still ice-covered but the river was ice-free. "Amazing, after hunting ducks in these parts for 40 years or more, I'd never seen one," Dickman said. In April, this reporter heard a grouse drumming on a moonlit night, when all that appeared to be awake was a pond full of spring peepers.

An 83-acre parcel on the **Jordan River** will soon belong to the public. Purchased from the Dearborn Woods and Water Club for \$250,000 by the Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy, the land will be turned over to the state. Hunters, anglers, and other recreational enthusiasts should appreciate the tract, which has 3,200 feet of frontage on the Jordan River and railroad right-of-way that will become a public trail.

The Michigan Wildlife Conservancy will hold a day-long cougar tracking seminar Saturday, May 17, at the Traverse Area Conservation Club south of **Traverse City**. The session will focus on cougar biology as well as identifying scat, tracks, and other sign. The cost is \$50 for conservancy members and \$75 for non-members, and includes a box lunch. For information, phone 517/641-7677 or e-mail wildlife@miwildlife.org.

Mid-Michigan residents are being asked to watch out for sickly ash trees this spring. Dead areas at the top of a tree, D-shaped holes in the trunk, and sprouts or shoots coming out of the trunk are all possible symptoms of infestation by emerald ash borer beetles. "This is the first year we're really going to see a lot of it," said Sara Linsmeier-Wurfel, spokeswoman for the Michigan Department of Agriculture. Ash borer disease has been found in **Livingston, Macomb, Monroe, Oakland, Washtenaw, and Wayne counties**. Half of those counties' 12 million ash trees are already dead or will be dying from the disease by this summer's end. The larvae of the metallic-green Asian beetle bore under the trees' bark and within a year or two the trees wilt and die. Michigan has about 700 million ash trees. To report an ash that may be infected, phone the Department of Agriculture hotline at 866/325-0023.

Pierce Cedar Creek Institute for ecological education near **Hastings in Barry County**, in partnership with **Pennock Health**, has kicked off a new program called "Trees for Life." All babies born in Pennock Hospital receive a complimentary certificate of a container and tree. The program was set up by the...

Michelle Skedgell, executive director of the institute.

Close to 35,000 baby steelhead trout and another 317,000 coho salmon were released into the **Grand River** this spring. The release was part of an annual effort by the Department of Natural Resources. Bob Eggleston, Fisheries technician for the DNR, said he wouldn't be surprised if some of the trout and salmon reached **Lake Michigan** in just a few days. Anglers can expect the coho to return to the river to spawn in about 1½ years and the steelhead to do the same in two years.

A computer class at **Grace United Methodist Church in Lansing** got a real surprise one sunny afternoon. "Would you look at that," the instructor said as a very large tom turkey strutted on the lawn, not 10 feet outside the window, as class members scurried to get a look. The proud bird, resplendent in breeding colors, sported at least three beards, one nearly a foot long and another curved like a...



When the birds mature, they begin to sing for territory and to attract females. Males sing in a series of notes and whistles.

number of singing males. All males sing to declare their territory and the number of males runs close to equal number of females and females. In the 1960s, the population of singing males was around 432.

The Michigan DNR soon began monitoring Kirtland's and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service followed suit in 1971. Over the next two decades the warbler population managed to stay reasonably level, about 450 to 550 males. But then came the shocking census of 1971.

For 201 singing males were found that year meaning only 400 Kirtland's

Tout and Tour For Rare Birds

Few, if any, states have a bird they can call entirely their own. The Michigan Audubon Society, Michigan Rotary Clubs, and others have joined forces to change our state bird from the robin to the Kirtland's warbler.

They point out that the robin, elected by public vote in 1930 when few had even heard of a Kirtland's warbler, is one of North America's commonest birds. Several other states claim the robin as their state bird.

Proponents point out that state bird status would help ensure adequate Kirtland's funding. To learn more about this initiative or register your support, call the Michigan Audubon Society at 517/886-9144.

Though there are no guarantees, the chances of seeing a Kirtland's warbler are excellent on morning tours offered by two federal agencies, especially during June when activity is highest.

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service tours out of Grayling begin May 15 and continue daily through July 4. For information, call 517/351-2555 or visit <http://midwest.fws.gov/EastLansing/tour.html>.

The U.S. Forest Service tours from Mio also begin May 15 and run through July 2. For information, call 989/826-3252 or visit <http://www.fs.fed.us/r9/hmnf/pages/kirtland.htm>.



warbler, considered the rarest bird on the planet. In 1971, the Kirtland's warbler was considered a near-extinct bird. It was found on the newly established Kirtland's warbler sanctuary and a

Every goal was declared at 1,000 pairing males collected over five consecutive years.

The Kiriland's also had another dire problem. With the land opened up by logging, the brown-headed creeper, normally a species of the open prairie, moved in. Coyotes evolved to roam with the buffalo, eating bones stirred up by their hooves. With the buffalo constantly on the move, the creeper had no time for large clumps, so they had to dig in. The creeper had to be eliminated to allow the warblers to flourish.

Over the years, the Kiriland's warblers were protected by state and federal laws. In 1973 a federal refuge was established throughout Kiriland's nesting areas. Today, about 1,000 nestbirds are removed from Kiriland's habitat each year.

At first it seemed we might have been too late, for over the next two decades Kiriland's numbers remained stuck at around 500 pairs. Finally in 1990 the numbers started a steady upswing. In 2001, Kiriland's finally popped over the 1,000 mark with 1,085 males. The 2002 census showed a slight decline to 1,050, but that still was above the recovery goal.

Today, 140,000 acres of public land are under Kiriland's warbler management, which should be adequate for 1,000 pairs. Also, studies are now under way on the Bahamian wintering grounds to see what can be done at that end as well.

But Kiriland's will forever depend on habitat maintenance and crowbird control. One fears that if the recovery goal is met and the warblers are removed from the endangered species list, critical funding will be channeled elsewhere. Also, it appears federal wildlife funding may soon be targeted for severe cuts that could affect Kiriland's management. With government funding being so fickle, all agree a private endowment of some sort is the ultimate answer.

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