

The secret life of Michigan's 'bird of fire'

What You Don't Know About Kirtland's Warbler

by Larry Lyons

Last year I headed north on a mission to photograph Kirtland's Warblers. Just for a few days, you know. Yea, right. Nearly a month later I was still there, fully engrossed in the endeavor. With access into nesting habitat forbidden, my best hope was to find birds whose territories encompassed roadways and wait for them to come to me. At first I cursed this time consuming anchor. However, I soon realized that this benign approach was allowing me into the life of the Kirtland's warbler at a level few have been and see things we just don't hear about.

The first thing that became apparent was that the males seem to be non-confrontational, at least once territories are established. Though invisible to us, the territory borders are very defined. There also appeared to be a buffer zone at least one hundred feet wide between territories that neither bird entered except under dire circumstances. Even with this buffer, when one male approached the edge of his territory the neighboring male always retreated from that adjacent edge of his.

Thinking I might pull off the old "catch 'em at the waterhole" trick, I donned camouflage and watched roadside mud puddles for hours. Entertainment included everything from sandpipers to gangly fawns but nary a Kirtland's. What I did notice when watching an individual bird is that several times a day it would fly straight up until just a speck in the sky, then make a beeline flight completely out of the habitat area. It would go the same way every time and be gone for as long as two hours. Both males and females did this and I speculate they were likely going to some distant water source.

I eventually focused on one pair with a quite small territory. One day the female disappeared, presumably now incubating eggs. There was one tiny area of their territory right next to the road that the male



Kirtland's Warbler was long known to northern Michigan natives as the jack pine bird and it took nearly half a century to make the connection.

only occasionally frequented and never sang in. "Aha! Perhaps the nest site?" I set up a little blind at road's edge and began vigile of this quiet zone. My suspicions were right. Every two to three hours dad's singing would abruptly cease and soon thereafter he would ghost into this area and give one, barely audible chirp. That was mom's cue that it was time for a break from her monotonous duty. At least with this couple, the male did not bring food to the incubating female like some people suggest. She would slip off and be gone anywhere from forty-five minutes to two hours. During this time dad would stay in the area, nervously flitting about without a sound. Eventually I had a pretty close idea as to the nest location. As near as I could tell dad never went to the nest. Upon mom's return they would socialize for a few moments.

"Hi mom, how was lunch?"

"Fine, dear."

"Everything going okay? You feel alright?"

"Yes dear."

"Okay, then I'm going back to work." Off he would go, back on singing patrol and she would disappear until her next scheduled break.

All that changed, though, once the eggs hatched. From then on both were constantly on the go rounding up delectables for the

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youngsters. Perhaps the biggest mystery of all my observations is that at least half of what the adults brought to the nest appeared to be pink jack pine buds. Chris Mensing, a USFWS Kirtland's biologist, said these buds aren't known to be a food source. Was there an insect of some kind along with each bud? Don't know.

However, feces analyses has shown that Kirtland's occasionally consume pine sap. Several times I saw Kirtland's hover at the tip of a jack pine branch just like a hummingbird, presumably eating sap. Chris had never heard of this behavior, either. Was this unique to just a few birds or common practice?

Something we seldom think about is that science and real life are not always on the same page. For instance, we all know Dr. Kirtland discovered the bird of his name in Ohio in 1851, right? Not according to the voluminous book *Birds of America* published in 1917, Dr. Samuel Cabot captured one of these birds in the Bahamas ten years prior. Had this been recognized by science we would not only have the Cabot's Warbler, we would have saved decades of searching for their Bahamian winter grounds.

Similarly, we all accept that our first inkling to the Kirtland's summer range was when Norman Wood found the first nest near the Au Sable River in 1903. Perhaps this was the scientific community's first clue but northern Michigan locals had long known of this bird, calling it the jack pine bird. It just took a half century to make the connection.

And inevitably comes the question, did Kirtland's ever enjoy a larger range? Again referring to the antiquated *Birds of America*, by

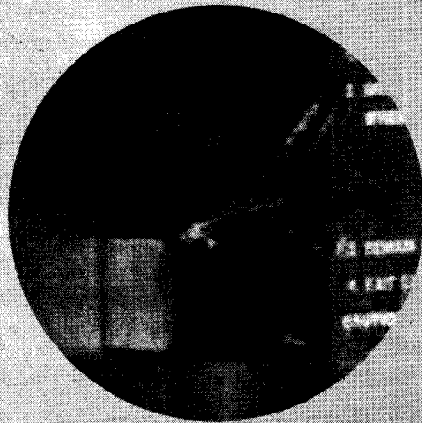
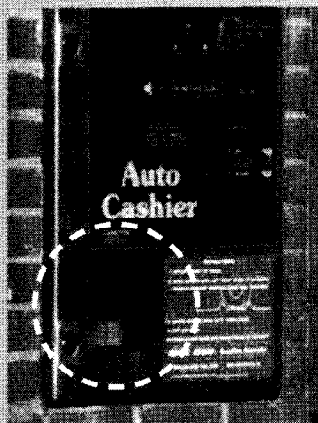
1917 Kirtland's had been sighted in virtually every Eastern state. Obviously, most were migrating birds. But what about those early sightings in Minnesota and Wisconsin, well out of the logical migration route, that continue to this day? The experts attribute this to an innate desire to disperse. I wonder, though, if these adventurers might be guided by remnant genes from long ago ancestors. We know there has been occasional nesting in Ontario at least as far back as 1916. Jack pines are native to Minnesota and Wisconsin, too, so why not? Obviously, we shall never know.

Unfortunately, biologists don't have time to just sit and watch and anecdotal observations such as these have little scientific value. Therefore, many of the little nuances of rare species such as the Kirtland's go unrecorded. But then that may not be all bad, for isn't it the veil of mystery that really captures our hearts? 🐦

Editor's note: For the latest information on Kirtland's Warbler, including insights from the experts, see Larry Lyons' article in the June issue of *Michigan Out-of-Doors* magazine.

Vulgar Indeed

This is a true story of a car wash theft ring operating in Frederick, Maryland. The owner complained to the company that installed the car wash that he was losing money to unknown thieves that must have keys to the change machines. Together they installed some monitoring equipment and here is what they caught on film:



Hard to believe, but true. The thieves were multiple male starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) using the quarters to seduce females into mating. Over \$4,000 in quarters were retrieved from rooftops and trees. Who says a quarter won't buy anything these days!

Source: <http://www.dscc.edu/kjones/carwash.htm>