

# THE MIO MODEL

BY BRUCE BABBITT

In some ways the town of Mio, Michigan, is like any other small town in the United States. The main street is marked by a modest collection of diners and motels, high school football is big and the residents all know and greet each other by name. But on the road into Mio, a three-foot statue of a gray-and-yellow bird on the Oscoda County Courthouse lawn attests to an unusual source of hometown pride.

The statue is of a Kirtland's warbler, an extremely rare migratory songbird that breeds only in the jack pine forests of three counties on Michigan's lower peninsula. This year, Mio celebrated the bird's return from its Bahamas wintering grounds by hosting a ten-day celebration complete with parade and ice cream socials. The first annual Kirtland's Warbler Festival followed immediately upon the annual census of the endangered warbler population, a cooperative effort involving federal and state agencies, the National Audubon Society, the Michigan Wildlife Habitat Foundation and a number of volunteers.

The Kirtland's warbler census and festival are just two of the most visible signs of the tremendous cooperation, innovation and dedication to saving the warbler demonstrated by these residents of Michigan. Local motels are advertising special Kirtland's warbler tour packages in birding magazines with tremendous success. A forest-management plan has been developed to cut and replant the forest on a 50-year rotation, providing plenty of the young jack pine habitat required by the warbler for breeding while allowing trees to mature to a size suitable for harvest. The U.S. Forest Service's Plant-a-Tree program is enabling individual and corporate sponsors

to help fund the purchase and planting of jack pine seedlings to create more warbler habitat. And local homeowners and Forest Service employees are working together to build a hiking trail through the forest, thereby balancing the desire for human use of the forest with the need to protect the land for the benefit of wildlife. All these efforts have been pivotal in helping the bird come back from the brink of extinction. The Kirtland's warbler population is now climbing at a rate of 15 to 20 percent a year. This year it totals at least 633 pairs, a dramatic increase from last year's 485.

The residents of Mio have created a success story in their community. But the pressures of habitat loss, which put the Kirtland's warbler in so much danger, continue to imperil many other species and ecosystems all over the world. This problem has no magic solution but a straightforward and practical one. We must learn to live more lightly on the land and to recognize the warning signs of distressed ecosystems. Only then can we avoid crises—what I have called train wrecks—like that in the Pacific Northwest where populations of salmon, northern spotted owls and many other species are rapidly dwindling.

The Mio model is one that offers hope that we can learn to use the Endangered Species Act as a tool for conservation consonant with the needs of local economies and private landowners. In the short time since President Bill Clinton took office, we've seen some

other important habitat conservation models that, like the story of the Kirtland's warbler, show how property owners and government can work together both to protect endangered species and to sustain economic development.

In the southeastern states, Georgia-Pacific and International Paper corporations signed agreements with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that will conserve the red-cockaded woodpecker while

allowing the companies to harvest trees. The agreements will conserve pine forest habitat in the birds' nesting and foraging range but permit logging operations outside that range.

In southern California, several counties, the state and the federal government have launched an unparalleled multi-species conservation ef-

fort to protect the coastal sage environment where the threatened coastal California gnatcatcher lives along with 130 other potentially endangered or threatened plant, animal and amphibian species. Private property owners and government officials together reached the conclusion that a conservation program to protect the gnatcatcher would be of little value unless it also protected other species in this ecosystem.

In the Florida Everglades, the Clinton administration recently entered into an agreement with Governor Lawton Chiles and local agencies that initiated the most ambitious ecosystem rescue effort ever attempted in this country. The agreement seeks to restore an ecosystem

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## BABBITT

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severely strained by competing demands imposed by agriculture and urbanization, by inadequate and polluted water supplies and by an ever-tightening grip of exotic plant life that crowds out native plants and fish. Such a rescue plan was desperately needed to prevent imminent collapse of the Everglades ecosystem, signaled most clearly by the devastated fisheries of Florida Bay.

In the Pacific Northwest, the forest management plan developed to break through gridlock is rooted in the need to conserve hundreds of species of fish, birds and other wildlife. In this region, as in the Everglades and so many other parts of the country, fish are proving to be extraordinarily sensitive environmental indicators. In developing conservation plans, it is vital to recognize that the quality of water and therefore our chances of restoring fish populations and the ecosystems of which they are part are truly dependent on the way every square yard of habitat and land within entire watersheds is managed.

The key to creating effective conservation programs is to include local property owners, local government and local organizations to broaden ownership of conservation objectives. Traditionally, the Endangered Species Act has been invoked at the eleventh hour when a species is driven almost to extinction by habitat degradation and loss. The results in too many cases are crises such as the disappearing salmon runs of the northeastern and northwestern states—and inevitably a politically polarized situation in which solutions are all the more difficult to achieve. Local partnerships with state and federal wildlife agencies can help move the discussion about habitat preservation to a more productive, consensus-building dialogue.

Success in preserving biodiversity will be measured by our ability to demonstrate that the Endangered Species Act is flexible enough to match the challenges of many diverse landscapes. At the same time that we prove that it is indeed possible to conserve species like the Kirtland's warbler, bald eagle or wolf, we also must demonstrate that we

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have the creativity necessary to respond to the needs of private property owners. The burden of conserving biodiversity must be shared equitably by all of us.

As we renew our efforts to protect biodiversity and build confidence in the Endangered Species Act, it is important to remember the consequences of failure. The loss of a species—be it salmon, the California condor or the coastal California gnatcatcher—is the loss of a unique part of our world that can never be replaced. If we fail to demonstrate both the importance and the viability of the Endangered Species Act, we run the very real risk that the only place our children will see today's rare birds and other imperiled animals will be in natural history museums.

As stewards of this planet, we have witnessed the demise of countless species. Our own country has already lost such fabied creatures as the passenger pigeon and the Carolina parakeet. Protecting biodiversity is a worldwide issue, but the job begins at home. We cannot hope to save tigers and rhinos beyond our borders unless we can demonstrate the wherewithal and creativity to conserve habitat in our own backyard. Mio, Michigan, is calling out to all of us to replicate its example. □

*Bruce Babbitt is Secretary of the Interior and former governor of Arizona. He also is a past president of the League of Conservation Voters.*

#### Correction

B. "Moose" Peterson WRP provided the Palos Verdes blue butterfly photograph and Jeff Foote Tom Stack and Associates the sidewinder photograph in the Spring 1994 DEFENDERS. The credits were transposed in the magazine.

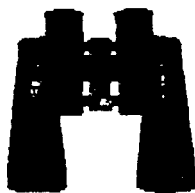
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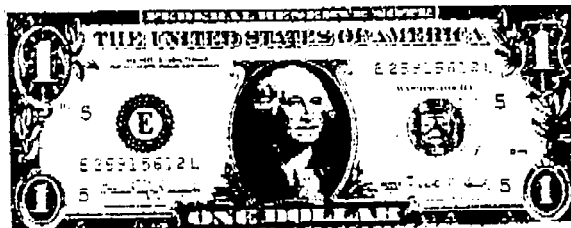
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