

Rare warbler is hard to see but gets a lot of attention

By MIRE WILLIAMS
Free Press Environment Writer

MENTOR TOWNSHIP — Clutching almost to the ground and clutching a compass a few inches from his face, Mike DeCapita pushed and twisted his way through a thicket-like mass of jack pine trunks and branches.

"There," DeCapita said just after dawn Friday, stopping suddenly. "That's a warbler, possibly two."

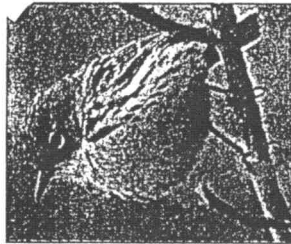
With visibility varying from three feet to three inches, DeCapita was going by ear alone.

But that wasn't a problem for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist participating in the annual census of Kirtland's warblers.

"It's easy to count them because it's such a distinctive sound," DeCapita said.

That's a good thing, because there are plenty of other birds in this patch of the Huron National Forest in Oscoda County, where about 60 percent of all Kirtland's warblers, one of the world's rarest birds, were counted in 1983. Fewer than 1,000 of the birds are known to exist.

Brown thrashers, upland sandpiper, mourning doves, field sparrows, crows and probably a half-dozen others make a bewildering racket any given moment.



THE BIRD

- Weight: Less than an ounce.
- Length: About six inches.
- Habitat: Jack pine forests.
- Identified by: Jared Kirtland in 1858. Kirtland, a physician and zoologist, also studied the silkworm moth and freshwater mollusks.

No matter. The little warbler gets all the attention.

"This is one of our bright, shining jewels," said Charles Wooley, who heads the Wildlife Service's warbler restoration project. "It's one of the success stories of the Endangered Species Act."

The act can use a few success stories. It has been attacked through-

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out the country in recent years by people charging that it tramples on private property rights for the sake of animals.

But Kirtland's warblers generally are hailed by people in Oscoda and the seven nearby counties where the birds nest. That, plus the bird's recent population gains, brings smiles to the government officials charged with preserving the bird.

"I think it's wonderful that we have that bird around here," said Connie Thompson, 76, who lives in Mio, about 10 miles northwest of the warbler's main Huron Forest habitat. "It's part of us here."

Awareness of the bird isn't an overnight phenomenon in Oscoda County. The county courthouse in Mio sports a monument with a three-foot-high war-

bler erected in 1953. But over the last few months, some folks have gotten downright boosterish.

On Friday, while DeCapita and others bashed through the forest doing the census, Mio kicked off its first Kirtland's Warbler Festival. The 10-day celebration features guided tours to see, or at least hear, the warblers.

Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt canceled his appearance, but the tours did a brisk business anyway.

The festival is an unembarrassed attempt to bring tourist dollars into the county, which already has a well-established warbler trade. Federal officials see that as a healthy development.

"People are starting to understand that having a species this unique in their backyards is an asset, not a liability," said Joan Gullfoyle, a spokeswoman for the Wildlife Service in Minneapolis. "They are starting to

understand this is something to protect and preserve."

Of course, not everybody feels that way. "I hate that bird. I hate it because they keep setting fires for it," said Tony Ballowski, 65, whose Mack Lake home backs onto the Huron Forest's warbler reserve.

In 1980, when Ballowski was a captain with Mentor Township's volunteer fire department, he fought 26 hours to save his home and others when a controlled burn designed to create warbler habitat went haywire. Ballowski's home survived, but the fire burned more than 25,000 acres and destroyed 28 homes. A federal wildlife biologist, James Swiderski, was killed.

That fire was set because Kirtland's warblers only live in jack pine forests, and the cones of jack pines need the

high heat of a fire to open.

The tragedy led to a national reassessment of federal policy on controlled burns, said Paul Schmittke, fire management officer for the Huron National Forest. Safety procedures ignored at Mack Lake in 1980 now are mandatory, and fewer controlled fires are set because new jack pine lumbering techniques make them less necessary, he said.

"Since the Mack Lake fire, we have not had any escaped fires at all in the forest," Schmittke said.

Ballowski and his neighbors still worry when they see smoke. They also grumble at the strict restrictions against entering the warbler reserve between May and September, the bird's breeding season.

"I walk a few feet past my back property line and I can get a \$500 fine," said Gertrude Lequier, 70.

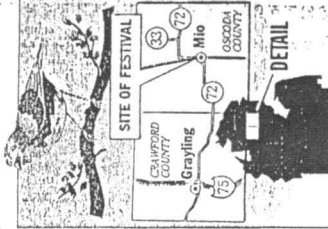
Town's festival honors return of a feathered friend

The warblers, which winter in the Bahamas eventually will abandon their Mack Lake nesting grounds, because they prefer forests with jack pines that are six to 22 years old. Too young or too old, and the trees don't provide the right kind of cover.

For now, thanks to the deadly Mack Lake fire, this is the best warbler habitat in the world. The birds like the tree density, which can reach 8,000 per acre. Planted jack pine plantations seldom have more than 1,200 trees per acre.

Back at the census Friday, DeCapita tried to figure out the direction of the warbler calls so he could plot them on a map. The map will be compared with those of other census takers who walked parallel routes.

Where locations agree, that's presumed to be a bird. Two, actually, since only the males sing and singing males



are assumed to have mates. Last year 485 singing males were counted. DeCapita admitted it's hard to be sure. Some birds sing louder than others, and the volume varies with the bird's location. They fly around a bit, too.