

SINGING A HAPPY KIRTLAND'S WARBLER



Ron Austing



The first Kirtland's warbler nest was discovered in Michigan in 1903.

"All the Kirtland's warblers in the world wouldn't fill a bushel basket." This is a common refrain in parts of Michigan and probably was true 25 years ago, when the entire population of this rare and endangered songbird was estimated at about 400.

Today, however, the bushel basket would be overflowing. About 1,600 Kirtland's warblers will be returning to Michigan this spring after spending the winter in the Bahamas. Every spring, the young jack pine trees found in a small region of the northern Lower Peninsula seem to silently call these birds forth from their tropical island getaway. The jack pine ecosystem is vital to the existence of the Kirtland's warbler. They are one of the rarest songbirds in the world, and in this place—and almost nowhere else on Earth—they breed and nest in stands of trees between five and 20 feet high, with branches that extend to the ground.

The Kirtland's warbler, a small, blue-gray and yellow, sparrow-sized bird, was first described in 1851 when a migrating bird was collected near Cleveland. The species was named for the noted Ohio naturalist Dr. Jared P. Kirtland. For a time, the Kirtland's warbler population seemed to be stable. However, its continued existence was seriously threatened when, between 1961 and 1971, the population plunged, dropping by 60 percent. Scientists

TUNE POPULATION IS GROWING

by David J. Case and Rebecca L. Fitzmaurice



David J. Case



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determined two main causes for this decline, one of which was habitat loss caused by the modern practice of wildfire prevention.

Historically, the stands of young jack pine on the poor, sandy soil of northern lower Michigan were maintained by naturally occurring wildfires that frequently swept through the region. Fire opens jack pine cones, releasing the seeds to regenerate the species. Fire suppression programs altered this natural process, reducing the Kirtland's warbler habitat. The prevention of forest fires also allowed the existing trees to grow too old. In 1980, a wildfire burned 24,000 acres of jack pine, creating what has been a huge area of prime Kirtland's warbler habitat. But today, these same jack pine stands are approaching the end of their service to the Kirtland's warbler.

The other main cause for the warbler's population crash was nest failure caused by brown-headed cowbirds. The cowbird is a nest parasite. Female cowbirds lay their eggs in nests of other "host" birds who care for their young. Cowbird chicks are hatched and fed by these hosts, sometimes decreasing the survival of the host's young. Although some birds can recognize the imposter egg and eject it from the nest, the Kirtland's warbler lacks this natural defense against nest parasitism.

Controlling cowbirds with large live-traps has been an important

Above, when the Kirtland's warbler returns each spring to its nesting grounds near Mio, warbler watchers are not far behind. Left, a scenic overlook of the Au Sable River.

management technique since it began in 1972. Before trapping began, cowbirds parasitized 70 percent of warbler's nests. Since trapping, this figure is down to about six percent.

Of far greater importance to the recovery of the Kirtland's warbler has been the cooperative effort in restoring the warblers' nesting habitat. Wildlife biologists and foresters from state and federal agencies annually conduct a combination of clearcutting and controlled burning on public lands to simulate the effects of wild-fire. Then several million trees are planted on large plantations, which will provide nesting habitat for the warblers in six to 10 years.

Last June, 765 singing males were counted in Michigan during the official census. This count is the largest ever, and represents a 21 percent increase over the record number of 633 singing males established in 1994. According to Department of Natural Resources wildlife biologist Jerry Weinrich, 57 percent of the warblers

(439 males) were located in the areas specifically planted for nesting habitat.

Recovery efforts have been further enhanced by partnerships between government agencies, private organizations and businesses to aid the public's understanding of the importance of Kirtland's warblers and their ecosystem. In 1994, a 48-mile, self-guided auto tour through the jack pine ecosystem was opened to help the public understand why the warblers and jack pines are here, and what it will take to keep them here for future generations. Guided tours of the Kirtland's warbler nesting area also are available from mid-May through July 4. The free guided tours, which are limited to 20 persons per tour, are conducted by the U.S. Forest Service and Fish & Wildlife Service. Reservations are recommended. And the third annual Kirtland's Warbler Festival will take place on May 18-19 with the center of activities at Kirtland Community College near Roscommon.

The endeavor to conserve the Kirtland's warbler has been successful so far. And the number of singing males has increased every year since the record low count of 167 in 1987. Still, there is a long way to go to reach the primary objective of the Kirtland's Warbler Recovery Plan adopted in 1976, which is to "Reestablish a self-sustaining wild Kirtland's warbler population throughout its known former range at a minimum level of 1,000 pairs."

For more information on the Kirtland's warbler, contact the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, Wildlife Division, Natural Heritage Program, Box 30180, Lansing, MI 48909-7680. ✻

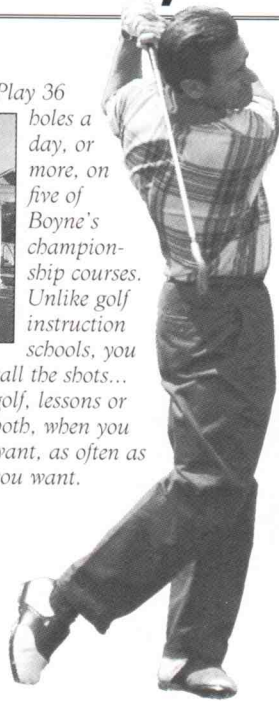
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COUNTING KIRTLAND'S

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. ✻

Put Something **WILD** In Your Life

The picturesque jack pine forests that cover the hills and valleys of northern Michigan are home to Michigan's rarest bird, the Kirtland's warbler. The Jack Pine Wildlife Viewing Tour is a 48-mile, self-guided auto tour loop through this dynamic, ever-changing landscape that harbors an amazing diversity of plant and animal species.

The auto tour passes through a variety of habitats and provides opportunities to see bald eagles, bluebirds, loons, beavers, grouse, white-tailed deer, wild turkeys and other wildlife. However, chances are you will not see a Kirtland's warbler while driving this auto tour because these birds usually stay within their dense jack pine nesting habitat.

The tour route is marked with special designating signs, and there are 11 specific stops which offer several scenic overlooks of the Au Sable River, Michigan's world famous trout stream, and access to hiking trails.

Although there are no guarantees that you will see any wildlife while driving this tour, here are a few suggestions that should make your trip more enjoyable and rewarding.

Drive the tour in the morning or evening when wildlife are much more active. Be patient—don't expect to see everything in the first five minutes after you arrive at each spot. Make sure you bring along binoculars, spotting scopes and cameras, and take field guides to help you identify what you see. Be quiet—walk and talk softly. Loud noises often will frighten wildlife away.



Ron Austing

THE JACK PINE WILDLIFE VIEWING TOUR

from mid-May through July 4 by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and Forest Service. The best period for seeing the Kirtland's warbler is from about May 20 to June 20. Upland sandpiper, clay-colored sparrow, Brewer's blackbird, black-billed cuckoo and the Lincoln's and vesper sparrows are some of the other species that may be seen in the Kirtland's warbler nesting areas. All tours, which are limited to 20 persons, are guided by expert wildlife professionals. For more information, contact the Fish & Wildlife Service at (517) 351-2555 or the Forest Service at (517) 826-3252.

The Jack Pine Wildlife Viewing tour is supported through a partnership of concerned people and organizations who care about preserving the jack pine ecosystem, which is critical for the survival of the endangered Kirtland's warbler.

Never chase or harass wildlife—your goal is to observe nature without changing animal behavior. Wear earth tone colors. Bright colored fabrics are easily seen and may cause wildlife to leave. Finally, be prepared for insects. Blackflies are common, so bring along some insect repellent or wear a headnet.

Visitors also should know that the Kirtland's warbler nesting areas are closed to public entry during nesting season, which lasts from May 1 to September 10. Closed areas are posted with signs. Please do not enter posted areas on foot or drive off public roads.

Free guided tours to the Kirtland's warbler nesting areas are offered