

# Tour offers rare glimpse of endangered warbler

If you have a free day between now and the Fourth of July, go to Mio and take the Kirtland's warbler tour available there. When my husband and I went with a couple of friends recently, we were rewarded with more than just a sighting of the warbler.

Kirtland's warblers are extreme habitat specialists, nesting exclusively in young jack pine stands where shrubby ground cover thrives. Once the trees mature enough to shade out that cover, the warbler moves on to another young stand.

The bird is known to nest only in an approximately 50 by 75 mile area within the boundaries of Crawford and Oshtemo counties.

This warbler is slightly larger than a chickadee. As with most species, the male is more brightly colored than the female, but their markings are the same.

Both have blue-gray backs and yellow breasts streaked with black.

Around Mother's Day the birds return from their wintering grounds in the Bahama Islands. Soon after that, each female chooses a mate and then selects a concealed site near a tree where she builds her cup-like nest of grass, leaves and pine needles.

Her mate doesn't help her build the nest nor does he assist during incubation, but he does help feed the nestlings once the eggs are hatched.

At present, breeding areas for the warblers are largely confined to pine forests on state or federal lands. Because the bird is an endangered species, breeding areas are closed to the public during the nesting season, but it is possible to see the bird by joining the tour offered by the U. S. Forest Service in Mio.

The tour we took was lead by Doug Munson, who has been taking people to Kirtland's warbler nesting grounds for fourteen years. He is a biological technician whose responsibility is to survey flora and fauna for the forest service.

His job, and an interest in birds that goes back to his childhood, have made him an expert on the fauna of northern Michigan. He knows every species of bird that nests in the district he serves by both sight and song.

A big man with a grizzled head and prematurely gray hair that is nearly white, Doug hardly seems like the kind of guy who would be inspired by birds.

But when he tal is about them, his passion is apparent

"I think birds sing for three reasons," he said.

"First, they sing to attract a mate. Secondly, they sing to keep competitors out of their territory. And I believe the third reason they sing is for our pleasure."

Although Doug's theory won't be found in any literature, those who have listened to the spring-time chorus of singing males would certainly agree with him.

After a short film about the life of Kirtland's warblers, Doug led us to the bird's habitat, about six miles from the forest service office. Group members parked their cars and followed him a short way down the road where he motioned us to stop behind him. Nearby, to our right, a male was singing.

But he wasn't on a snag as they often are; this male was down in the pines, several rows away. We waited about fifteen minutes in the hope he would come up for us. He did not oblige us.

Doug then led us a little farther down the road where we heard several males singing and we stopped again to wait for one of them to come up. While we waited we also heard the lovely, flutelike song of a hermit thrush behind us and a brown thrasher -umped up on a snag to serenade us with his song, similar to that of his close cousin, the mockingbird.

Failing to see the warbler at his second site, Doug then took us to another area of the young forest where the songs of several warblers blended with that of a couple of hermit thrushes.

While we waited, I asked what kind of success rate he has had in finding the warbler for those he has taken to look for it.

"I batted a thousand for three years running," he said. "But I've had a few misses since then."

It was beginning to look like that morning was going to be one of his rare misses. He asked if we wanted to try another spot. The answer was an immediate and enthusiastic "yes!"

And then, just as he picked up his spotting scope, a male hopped up on a snag, threw his head back and began to sing his exuberant song.

Doug quickly focused the scope on the bird for those who wanted a better look than they would get with their binoculars. Even though he has taken thousands of people from all over the world to get their first look at this beautiful bird whose future is still in question, Doug was obviously pleased that we were able to see it they day he took us out.

Later, he said he might be able to find a clay-colored sparrow for

## On the Wing



by Kay Charter

anyone who was interested. My husband, our friends and I were the only ones who were. The clay-colored sparrow is a "life bird" (one that is seen and identified for the first time) for all four of us.

When the rest of the group left we followed him down the dusty road where he stopped and told us the buzzy insect sound we could hear was from the sparrow.

He focused his scope on the bird and we all got a good look at the little brown bird with a streaked back, buffy breast and distinct brown ear patch under a white eyebrow.

As we walked back to our car, I asked him what attracted him to birding.

His response? "I figure it's the closest I'll ever get to an angel."

For information about the tour, call the U. S. Forest Service district office in Mio at (517)

Submit your essay on "My Favorite Place" to Summer Magazine, PO Box 632, Traverse City, Mich. 49685-0632.

Each week one essay will be printed in Summer Magazine, and at the end of the summer one essay will be selected by a panel of Record-Eagle editors to receive a \$100 prize. Essays must be typed and 500-1,000 words in length. All entries become property of the Record-Eagle.