

# Rising again, like a phoenix

AL MacLEESE  
 ■ THE SAGINAW NEWS

Between 1961-'71, the population of the endangered Kirtland's Warbler plummeted from 1,000 birds to 400. Since 1972, humans have done impressive work on behalf of the bird: the 1997 count was 1,460.

The Kirtland's Warbler migrates from the Bahamas each spring to its traditional nesting grounds, mainly in Oscoda, Ogemaw, Crawford, and Alcona counties in lower Michigan's pine barrens. The birds return to the Bahamas each fall.

The warbler, which generally has a lifespan of about three years, weighs about half an ounce, and is around six inches long. It's blue-gray on top with a yellow-breast.

In 1851, a mysterious dead bird was found near Jared P. Kirtland's Ohio farm. It was sent to Washington, D.C. where it was determined to be an unknown kind of wood warbler. It was named after Kirtland, a noted naturalist.

And, in 1879, the bird's winter range was pinpointed in the northern Bahamas archipelago. In 1903, the first nesting pair was found in Oscoda County. For 90 years, all nests found were within 60 miles of that spot — near the Crawford-Oscoda line and Au Sable River.

(Just recently, though, Christie Deloria, a biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Office in East Lansing, reported "pioneering" nesting pairs were seen for the first time in the Upper Peninsula.)



SAGINAW NEWS LANSING BUREAU

The Kirtland's Warbler winters in the Bahamas and spends spring and summer in lower Michigan's pine barrens.

In 1972, the perilous state of the Kirtland's Warbler rested on three horns: the bird's extremely specific requirements for breeding range; a progressive loss of that range due partly to logging and development; and parasitism by the Brown-headed cowbird.

Cowbirds do not build nests and lay their eggs in other birds' nests. Originally prairie birds, they migrated to Michigan after the decline of buffalo herds.

The Kirtland's Warbler has developed no defense against the cowbird invasions. A warbler lays about five eggs and, when a cowbird invades the nest, she may destroy a warbler egg.

Worse, more than one cowbird

may lay eggs in a single warbler nest. The warbler then hatches all eggs and nurtures whatever birds survive. Many warblers don't.

Cowbird eggs hatch quicker than warbler eggs, and the bigger interloper hogs food, and may even oust warbler chicks from the nest. In 1972, the wildlife service, the U.S. Forest Service, the state Department of Natural Resources, and the Michigan Audubon Society began killing cowbirds.

This reduced the rate of parasitism to less than 3 percent in the 1980s from 70 percent in the previous decade. The cowbird elimination program remains in place.

The warblers' loss of nesting range was unintentionally aided by the creation of the state Conservation Department, forerunner of the Department of Natural Resources.

A chief goal of the department, formed in 1920, was to reduce forest fires. It did a good job, but the jack pine barrens and the Kirtland's Warbler both depend on recurring fires.

The jack pines need regular fires to renew themselves. Often, the trees' cones require heat of about 112 degrees to pop seeds, which are tightly sealed by resin. The seeds can flourish in rich post-fire soil.

Kirtland's Warblers make ground nests of leaves and grass only under young pines created by the fires. And the birds want dense thickets of pines on 80- to 200-acres, with frequent grassy openings. The birds need trees between five feet and 18 feet tall.

When pines grow taller, they self-prune lower branches, and no longer shade the area. Warblers won't nest without the shade, and lower branches and allied undergrowth that protect them from predators.

So fires are regularly set to provide the desired habitat, and pine seeds are planted.

A Kirtland's Warbler Recovery Team was established in 1975. It's made up of the wildlife service, the forest service, the DNR, and several colleges and universities.

The goal is to establish a self-sustaining population of a minimum of 1,000 pairs through regeneration of habitat. The team hopes to eventually provide 40,000 acres of proper nesting areas yearly for the birds.

Most of the Bahamas islands where the Kirtland's Warbler winters are undeveloped; the U.S. Forest Service has said that habitat seems safe for now.

And, biologist Deloria said, the Kirtland's team hopes to enlist a member from the Bahamas. But John Terborgh, a noted ornithologist, has written that the fate of the Kirtland's Warbler may depend on commercial interests in the Bahamas — regardless of what occurs in Michigan.

Now, there are increasing sightings of stray warblers in Wisconsin, and Canada. And those breeding pairs in the U.P.

And the world's population of Kirtland's Warblers, 1,460 birds, weighs about 45 pounds. ■

## Care to see seldom-seen?

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The pine barrens where the endangered Kirtland's Warbler nests — between May 1 and Aug. 15, though sometimes as late as Sept. 10 — are closed to the public during that time. But free guided tours of about two hours in length are conducted to the jack pine plantations through early July.

The U.S. Forest Service runs tours departing from its District Ranger Office in Mio at 7 a.m. and 11 a.m. daily Wednesday through Sunday. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife

Service conducts daily tours leaving from the Grayling Holiday Inn, also at 7 a.m. and 11 a.m.

The tours are limited to 20 people; groups of more than five should call ahead for reservations. The wildlife service number at its East Lansing office is (517) 351-2555. The forest service's Mio number is (517) 826-3252.

Tourers can bring "spotting scopes" and cameras, although no special accommodations are made for photographers. Tape recorders and pets are not allowed, nor is smoking. ■