

[IMAGE]

NO TRIP'S TOO LONG TO HEAR A WARBLER SING

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Yesterday I began a story about my recent trip to Grayling, Mich., to visit the breeding grounds of one of the rarest birds in North America.

The Kirtland's warbler, which winters in the Bahamas, breeds solely in jack-pine forests in a three-county area near Grayling.

Birders can visit the breeding grounds only on tours led by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service guides. My group of about 20 birders met our guide, Charma Dudley, at 7 a.m. at a Grayling hotel, where a short slide program on the warbler was shown.

Then Dudley led an auto caravan 15 miles to the breeding grounds where, if things went right, she would show us a beautiful Kirtland's warbler.

It would be the first time most of us would see a Kirtland's, including a Texas couple that journeyed to Michigan hoping to see the bird. Wildlife officials are battling to prevent the species from going extinct. It once numbered less than 500, but conservation efforts might have boosted the population to a couple of thousand.

Dudley led us down a sandy path bordered by jack pines. Blueberry bushes were plentiful. Bird's-foot violets added a touch of color to the undergrowth.

"There's one singing!" Dudley said.

No bird could be found, though.

Then, as if on cue, a Kirtland's warbler flew across the path between the birders. "There's one!" a birder gasped.

The cooperative bird perched atop a dead tree about 40 feet away and began singing for a female.

"He's beautiful," one birder muttered. "This is a life bird for me," added another. We gawked through binoculars and spotting scopes.

Dudley said each male has a territory of as much as 30 acres.

We watched the bird for about 30 minutes as it flew from one perch to another, searching for his elusive mate.

As we walked happily back down the sandy path toward the cars, we agreed that regardless of how far each had come, it was well worth the trip.

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