

Two rare warblers wow Mentor birders

JAMES F. McCARTY
Plain Dealer Reporter

As if the thrill of the spring migration weren't enough to keep Northeast Ohio birders dazzled last week, a one-day visit by two Kirtland's warblers at Headlands Beach State Park was a true cause for celebration.

Waves of warblers and migrating songbirds, buffeted by warm southern winds, arrived in a steady flow across the region, with fresh reinforcements touching down nightly.

By dawn, they were singing their little hearts out. All I had to do was step outside my back door to see and hear Canada and hooded warblers, an Eastern wood-pewee and great crested flycatchers, as well as the reliable chorus of Baltimore orioles, all in bright breeding plumage and prime vocal form.

Ray Hannikman and Suzanne Wagner were birding the fisherman's trail at Headlands in Mentor about 7:30 p.m. May 10, when they found the first Kirtland's warbler hopping on the sandy path. Jerry Talkington arrived a short while later and found a second bird.

It didn't take long for news of the twin male Kirtland's to spread via cell phones, e-mails and Internet postings. By lunchtime, a crowd had gathered to admire the rarest and most-coveted of all North American warblers.

About 1,400 pairs of the tiny yellow-breasted, blue-gray-backed songbirds exist in the world, and the Kirtland's remains an endangered species. As recently as 1987, only 167 singing males were counted. They nest almost exclusively in the jack pine forests of northern Michigan and spend winters in the Bahamas.

The birds were named for Dr. Jared Kirtland, who lived in Lakewood and on whose property the first Kirtland's warbler was collected in 1851. The birds seen last week were the first-ever Kirtland's sightings at Headlands and only the sixth and seventh sightings in Northeast Ohio since 1950, according to "Birds of the Cleveland Region."

As we watched and marveled at the Headlands birds, we were struck by their fearlessness and

single-minded attention to feeding. Hannikman and Wagner found the birds sluggish in the cool morning, but by the heat of day they were vigorous and sharp. They hopped about, pumping their tails and gleaning insects nonstop from low-growing shrubs. Occasionally, they belted out a low, rich bubbling song, which caused them to give chase.

One of these mad dashes took the birds past the birders, and one brushed its wing against the arm of John Pogacnik, Lake Metroparks naturalist. He was the envy of the group, as if he had been personally greeted by LeBron James.

Wagner lent a religious perspective to the event in an e-mail report: "To have been at the initial sighting of each of these birds was an experience I will never forget, and a blessing upon my life."

Other sightings and events

■ Although the Kirtland's warblers stayed for only a day, Headlands and surrounding areas provided abundant numbers and species of other migrants, notably prairie warblers — a Northeast Ohio rarity — and Cape May, Northern waterthrush and Wilson's warblers, veery and sandhill crane.

■ I spent an enjoyable Saturday morning on a bird census at the

Cuyahoga Valley National Park with Larry Rosche and Jeff Wert. Highlights included blue-winged and hooded warblers on the Horseshoe Pond trail and the songs of bobolinks gurgling in the Coliseum grasslands.

■ The magic of the Magee Marsh boardwalk trail in Ottawa County never seems to wane. Last weekend, smaller-than-normal crowds of birders, kept away by the weather, sighted more than two-dozen species of warblers. If the birders who stayed home had only known what riches they were missing. Imagine being close enough to reach out and touch a golden-winged warbler singing "bee-bzz-bzz-bzz" from a branch at eye level.

"It's been here for four days," said Jon Dunn, awestruck, while leading a tour group to the Top 10 birding site. Other close encounters were with mourning, parula, Nashville, Blackburnian, black-and-white, black-throated blue, black-throated green, Cape May, chestnut-sided, bay-breasted, ovenbird, Northern waterthrush warblers and more magnolia warblers than imaginable.

■ After Pogacnik found the prairie warbler at Headlands, he returned to his lakefront home to find a whippoorwill, both cuckoos, all of the thrushes and hooded and orange-crowned warblers.

■ Barbara Gulley found a black-billed cuckoo perched in her

Brook Park back yard and took its picture.

■ Urban birding was productive last week, especially at Erie Street Cemetery in Cleveland, where Paula Lozano and Bob Finkelstein saw a sora, veery and wood thrush, indigo bunting, scarlet tanager, Lincoln's and swamp sparrows and warblers: Nashville, chestnut-sided, black-throated blue, black-and-white, Blackburnian and ovenbird. At Burke Lakefront Airport, Lozano found a short-eared owl and Northern harrier.

■ Chris Spagnoli found mourning, Blackburnian, magnolia and chestnut-sided warblers at Elmwood Park in Rocky River.

■ West Creek Reserve of the Cleveland Metroparks produced 15 warbler species for Gabe Leidy, including Canada and hooded.

Questions or comments on this column may be sent to: homes@plained.com