

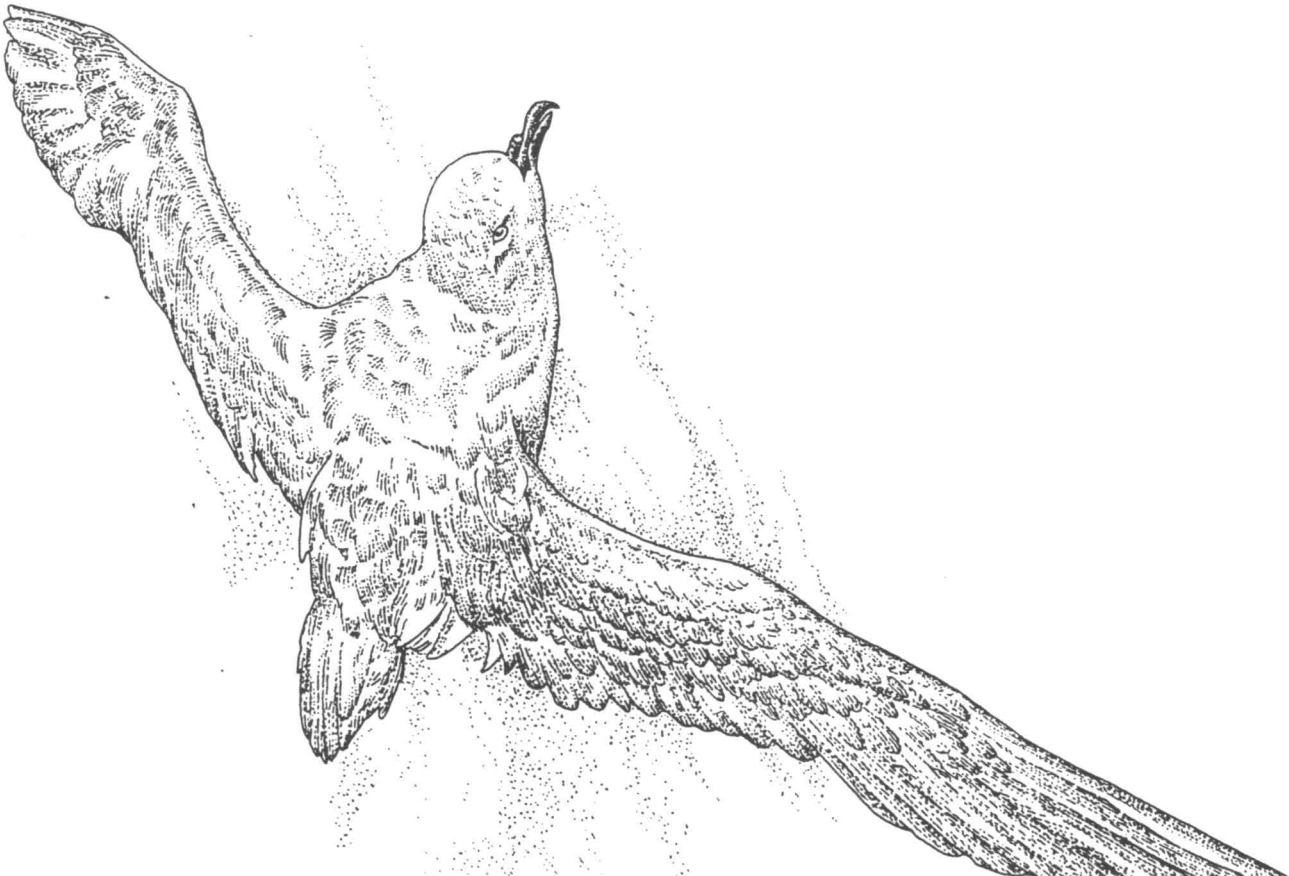
To Save a Bird in Peril

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The Quest of the Warbler

SMALL land birds, delicate, shy, and hard to keep track of, are among the hardest to help. In North America one for which much has been done is a tiny, rare gem of a songster, Kirtland's warbler (*Dendroica kirtlandii*). Bound, certainly, toward extinction, it has been the beneficiary of a long, costly, complex conservation effort, whose success—or failure—may soon be known.

Kirtland's is a bird of entrancing beauty. Its colors—blue, flecked with black above, pale lemon-yellow below—are of breathtaking purity when it is seen close up on its breeding ground in the light of the summer sun. It is a perky, jaunty bird, a persistent tail jerker that in many ways is frustratingly elusive, yet is remarkably unconcerned by or unafraid of man.

Since its discovery in 1851, its numbers always have been incredibly few; its population has been counted in hundreds or low thousands rather than in the tens or hundreds of thousands in which some species of the wood warbler family (*Parulidae*) may be reckoned. While a Kirtland's is a large bird, as wood warblers go, it is still so tiny—the average breeding adult weighs less than half an ounce—and its numbers now are so low that its current chief



admirer and champion, Harold Mayfield of Waterville, Ohio, could remark that, as of May, 1974, "all Kirtland's in existence"—fewer than five hundred birds—"would fit into one large shopping bag."

Clearly, Mayfield said, Kirtland's is not of concern because of its biomass, which is inconsequential. Or its environmental impact, which is slight.

It is valued rather for other reasons. Its beauty. Its rarity. Its elusiveness. The frustrating challenges that it seems to impose on all who would know or assist it.

It has a romantic allure and kindles an intense, ascetic fervor in its admirers. Kirtland's champions approach it clothed in the religion of science. Their pursuit of its mysteries is reminiscent of the Arthurian knights' quest of the Holy Grail.

Whether they succeed or fail, Kirtland's has aroused—and sustains—in its admirers some of the most intense and ennobling feelings of the Western tradition.

The warbler is named for Dr. Jared Kirtland, a pioneer physician and naturalist in northern Ohio, on whose farm, near Cleveland, the type specimen was shot.¹ The date: May 13, 1851. Kirtland realized that it had not been previously described.

He gave the specimen to a friend, ornithologist Spencer Baird, who stopped at his farm to visit a day or so later. Baird, the assistant secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, wrote the official report of the bird's discovery. He named it for Kirtland in honor of "a gentleman to whom, more than any one living, we are indebted for a knowledge of the natural history of the Mississippi Valley."²

Kirtland had studied the birds of Ohio with great care. A century later, in a way that neither he nor Baird could have anticipated, his data were to contribute, importantly, to efforts to save his namesake bird.

The first reported specimen had been shot on northward migration. Thirty years passed before the wintering ground, whence it came, was discovered: the Bahama Islands. Only after fifty years, in June of 1903, was the breeding ground found whence it was bound.

An ornithologist from the University of Michigan Museum of

Zoology in Ann Arbor had gone to fish in the Au Sable River, in western Oscoda County, in the Lower Peninsula of Michigan; the area now is inside or just adjacent to the Huron National Forest. When he heard an unfamiliar bird, he shot it and fetched it back to Ann Arbor, where the museum's curator of birds, Norman Wood, identified it as a Kirtland's warbler. Wood, who was a taxidermist and a self-taught biologist, quickly retraced his colleague's steps to find a Kirtland's nest.

He reached a timber tract of several hundred acres that had been burned over by a forest fire several years before: New, young Christmas-treelike jack pines (*Pinus banksiana*) had sprung up in the ashes, between the charred, black snags. Here Wood's search ended. His excitement in his discovery is clearly revealed in jottings that he made in his pocket notebook. They have been transcribed and published by Mayfield in his authoritative—and excellent—life history, *The Kirtland's Warbler*. Wood wrote:

Leaving the river bottom I climbed to the top of the first plain and walked slowly along. . . . Suddenly I heard a new song, so rich, loud, and clear, I knew it must be the one I was in search of. I followed it around and heard it sing many times. . . . After a long time I saw him alight in a low bush and sing. . . .

I shall be disappointed if I do not find the nest low down (in a jack pine probably) or maybe on the ground. . . . I had hoped by watching the birds to find the nest, but found [it] hard even to see the bird after locating it by the song. . . .

I have just found a pair of Kirtland's warblers and, as I write, the female is three feet away, fluttering her wings. . . . The male is on top of a dead stub 20 feet high. . . . I saw him go down and went over there. I saw him come to the stub, and he had a worm in his mouth. . . . Down into the jack pine he went. . . . No bird and no nest!

I watched a few minutes longer and saw the female in the low jack pines. I watched her and she seemed very uneasy. I began looking carefully on the ground, as I had made up my mind it would be found there. Suddenly I saw the nest! . . . In [it] were two young birds a few days old, and, as luck would have it, one beautiful egg . . . pinkish

