



# Kirtland's Warbler Recovery Team

Care of: **Huron-Manistee National Forests**  
**1755 South Mitchell Street**  
**Cadillac, Michigan 49601**

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Robyn Thorson, Regional Director  
U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Region 3  
Bishop Henry Whipple Federal Building  
1 Federal Drive  
Fort Snelling, MN 55111-4056

Dear Ms. Thorson:

In 2005, 1,418 singing male Kirtland's warblers were reported during the annual census, representing the highest number recorded since the census began in 1951. Although this number marks a remarkable conservation success, the continued recovery of this species depends on ongoing management activities, which include an intensive cowbird (*Molothrus ater*) control program. For this reason, the Kirtland's Warbler Recovery Team is deeply concerned about the unexpected and abrupt reduction in the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) cowbird control effort in 2005.

The FWS data presented at our summer meeting held July 11-12 showed that the program start date was delayed, fewer traps were operated and the traps were closed prematurely. The 2005 trapping effort represents a 51% reduction in trap days compared to the 10-year average from 1995 to 2004. Due to the lost opportunity to operate during the peak capture days in April, the impact of this reduced trapping time was actually greater than 51%. Only 40 traps were operated in 2005 resulting in 1,120 cowbirds removed as compared to the 10-year average of 64 traps and 4,017 cowbirds. This level of effort represents a 72% reduction in the number of cowbirds removed as compared to the 10-year average. Approximately 23 areas received no cowbird trapping because of this reduced effort. In 2005, more occupied habitat required protection than ever before, therefore, the 2005 effort should have been *above* the 10-year average.

Cowbird control is a crucial component of the Kirtland's Warbler Recovery Program. The cowbird control program and the habitat management program are two equal and inter-dependent components in the recovery strategy for this species. We wish to emphasize the on-going commitment by other agencies to manage habitat, because the success of these efforts depends on the commitment of the FWS to control cowbirds.

Historically, the cowbird control program was credited with stopping the

Kirtland's Warbler population crash that was discovered as a result of the 1971 census. The FWS cowbird control program, which began in 1972, stabilized the species until habitat management efforts began to take effect. In 1976, the first Recovery Plan under the Endangered Species Act provided the strategy for recovering the species. The Recovery Plan clearly outlined the need for a dual effort: it will require **both** habitat management and cowbird control.

Annual programmatic habitat management has been implemented by the Huron National Forest, Michigan Department of Natural Resources, and Fish and Wildlife Service. This habitat reached suitable age in 1987, and the warbler population has increased ever year but three since then. Currently, more than 95% of the Kirtland's Warbler population occupies managed habitat, which also benefits other plant and animal species. The combination of habitat management and cowbird control called for in the Plan is recovering this species!

Scientific research unequivocally shows that the Kirtland's Warbler population **will decline** without cowbird control. Prior to 1972, Dr. Walkinshaw's research showed that on average Kirtland's Warblers produced 0.8 fledglings per nest under cowbird parasitism. Recent research indicates that Kirtland's warblers must produce 2.5 fledglings per pair per year to replace the loss of adults due to natural mortality. Data collected from 1990 to 1992, under habitat management and cowbird control, indicates Kirtland's Warblers produce 3.5 fledglings per pair per year, providing surplus individuals for population growth. The brown-headed cowbird is now a common and widely-distributed species, so the annual removal of individuals has not caused a significant decline in cowbird numbers. Due to anthropogenic conversion the open landscape, favored by cowbirds, now extends from the Plains States to our Great Lakes States, as a result, cowbirds will always be present in the early-succession, open-land, jack pine ecosystem. Therefore, without a cowbird removal program, we can therefore expect an immediate return to pre-control parasitism rates. A decrease in this rate of reproduction, to 0.8 fledglings per nest caused by cowbird parasitism, would result in population decline.

Our judgment, based on the best available science, is the species will **always** require **both** cowbird control and habitat management. These elements were emphasized in the Kirtland's Warbler Recovery Team letter dated January 12, 2002 to FWS Regional Director, and the FWS response dated June 21, 2005 concurred with these objectives stating that "management techniques that are required on an annual and ongoing basis are timber harvest and brown-headed cowbird control." The ecological processes that historically maintained the early-succession, open-land, fire-dependent ecosystem will always require fire suppression due to human concerns. Thus, nesting habitat will always require intervention and the artificial creation of breeding habitat through management. Down-listing or de-listing of Kirtland's Warbler, a goal we all share, will be contingent on the perpetual commitment by the agencies involved in the species' recovery. Because the FWS is the lead agency for ESA implementation, we are concerned about the FWS commitment to the cowbird control program after the unexpected, abrupt and substantial cut in the program in 2005. If the FWS action in 2005 represents a long-term shift in FWS priority rather than a single unexpected event, the Kirtland's warbler population will suffer, and much of the hard work conducted over the past three decades will be undone.

Team members and other meeting participants from the habitat management agencies expressed their collective view that, without a perpetual commitment by FWS to cowbird control, their agencies may re-assess their commitments to the annual habitat management. Habitat management agencies spend approximately \$2-3 million per year creating suitable habitat for recovery of the Kirtland's Warbler,

whereas the FWS spends approximately \$100,000 per year (\$45,000 in 2005) on the cowbird control program. Cooperating agencies may not be able to justify the cost of their programs if the Kirtland's Warbler populations decline due to the lack of cowbird control. It would be tragic if the \$26 million dollars spent per decade were wasted due to lack of ongoing joint commitment.

The lack of cowbird control is as much a threat to the species as the loss of habitat creation. Neither is acceptable. As expressed in previous letters, we hope to embark on a Recovery Plan Revision in the near future, and a revised threats analysis section will certainly begin with the potential loss of either component of the recovery strategy: cowbird control and habitat management. The habitat management agencies have shown a stellar record of commitment to the Recovery Plan. In 1997, the FWS proposed to divert the funding for the program. At the time, the Recovery Team projected that it would take 7 years for the decline of the warbler population to reach the critical level of 100 breeding pairs due to increased cowbird parasitism. The money was then restored before the program sustained a reduction in effort. In following years, budget cuts at the Regional level resulted in slight cumulative reductions in program effort, some of which have been partially compensated by project modifications, volunteer effort and habitat management agency effort to assist with peripheral traps. The sudden and unexpected 2005 reduction in funding, of more than 50%, resulted in a massive loss of trapping effort both temporally and spatially. Many recently colonized Kirtland's Warbler Management Areas were not protected. Census participants, volunteers, and agency personnel reported high numbers of cowbirds in untrapped areas. It is the Recovery Teams judgment, parasitism occurred in Kirtland's Warbler Management Areas in 2005 representing an adverse effect. If allowed to continue, it will constitute a threat to the survival and recovery of the species.

The continued recovery and long-term persistence of the Kirtland's warbler depends on the ability of the FWS to commit to a long-term effective cowbird control program. The Recovery Team invites you, your assistant, and any other colleagues affecting policy and budgetary decisions, to join us in Michigan to discuss the future of this program. We would greatly appreciate the opportunity to show you the geographic extent and the highly inter-dependent and cooperative nature of the Kirtland's Warbler Recovery Program. We would like to discuss the continuation of inter-agency cooperation and the critical role that FWS plays. Please contact me to make arrangements to visit. I can be reached at the address above, or by phone (231-775-5023 ext. 8715), or by email ( ). Thank you for your attention to this very important matter.

Sincerely,

KENNETH REX ENNIS

Team Leader, Kirtland's Warbler Recovery Team

cc: Craig Czarnecki, Field Supervisor, FWS  
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