

Gov. William G. Milliken Thursday presented a special award--an enameled copper sculpture of the Kirtland's Warbler--to the man most responsible for preserving this rare native Michigan bird: John D. Byelich of the Department of Natural Resources.

Byelich will retire Jan. 20 from the DNR's Wildlife Division, where he serves as Endangered Species Coordinator.

The Governor was joined by Mrs. Milliken for the presentation in the Executive Office.

Milliken, who directed the Michigan National Guard to postpone tank training exercises in the vicinity of the Warblers' nesting grounds in 1975 in order not to disturb the birds during a critical nesting season, said:

"The Kirtland's Warbler is a symbol of the dedication of the people of Michigan to provide a home for every species of wildlife native to this state. John Byelich is a state employee who has been serving this special dedication for a quarter of a century."

In the early 1950s, as district game supervisor at Mio, Byelich studied closely the rare Kirtland's Warbler, which nests only in Michigan's Lower Peninsula jack pine country and winters only in the Bahama Islands.

He assisted scientists and naturalists who came to study the species, kept records of reports about the birds and studied ongoing changes in the vegetation of the area which, if allowed to continue, would drive the species to extinction.

In the years that followed, he assisted in the establishment and management of refuge areas for the species on state land and in the development of management plans for the warbler on national forest lands. Yet, the species continued to decline. In 1974, only 167 singing males were heard during an annual census. It was on the verge of extinction.

In 1975, Byelich was appointed National Kirtland's Warbler Recovery Team Leader. The team, which consists of representatives of the U. S. Forest Service, Michigan Department of Natural Resources, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Michigan Audubon Society, promptly began implementation of a recovery plan to provide nesting habitat

for 1,000 breeding pairs of Kirtland's Warbler. Byelich also has gained support from the Michigan National Guard, which began a conservation program for the species on Camp Grayling land.

This year a count of 219 singing males brought new hope for the warbler, and there is hope that the species can be saved if his recovery plan is followed.

Despite his retirement, Byelich has no plans to change his career dedication. He has moved back to Mio, where he will continue as leader of the National Recovery Team. His knowledge of forest succession and habitat management and his ability to organize public agencies and private groups for a common cause are expected to serve Michigan's fight to save the Kirtland's Warbler.

He has been recognized before for his contributions in this area. He was named Wildlife Conservationist of the Year by the Michigan United Conservation Clubs in 1972.

Milliken said, "I am pleased to see that even though he is retiring from state employment, John Byelich is not retiring from the fight to save this unique Michigan resource.

"I wish him well and pledge the state's cooperation in preserving something that cannot be replaced."

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