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LANSING---This spring's census of Michigan's unique and endangered Kirtland's warblers turned up a total of 230 singing male birds, down 5 percent from last year's total of 243, the Department of Natural Resources reports.

Biologists assume for counting purposes that a female warbler is present for every male tallied. Thus the total 1981 breeding population is estimated at 230 pairs, or 460 individuals.

Although down slightly from the 1980 number, this year's tally is still above the low mark of 167 pairs counted in 1974, and indicates that energetic efforts during the past decade to preserve the species may be slowly succeeding. There were 432 pairs counted in 1951 and 502 in 1961.

Kirtland's warblers are known to nest only in young jack pine forests in six northeastern Michigan counties. Most of the population is concentrated in Crawford, Oscoda, Ogemaw and Kalkaska counties, with scattered pairs in Roscommon and Iosco.

A special Kirtland's Warbler Recovery Team, headed by retired DNR biologist John Byelich, is working to preserve the species. Management efforts include forestry practices to provide suitable jack pine habitat, predator control, and measures to protect the birds' privacy during the critical nesting season.

The long-range goal of the Recovery Team is to build a population of 1,000 pairs, more than four times the present number. It is believed that many are needed to insure against extinction from some such disaster as a violent storm during the warblers' long over-water migration flight to their wintering grounds in the Bahama Islands.

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This year's census was a cooperative venture of the DNR, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and local Audubon Societies. Dr. Lawrence A. Ryel of the DNR's Wildlife Division coordinated the count.

The census search included jack pine stands in the Upper Peninsula, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Quebec and Ontario, but no Kirtland's warblers were located in any of them. In past years a few male birds have strayed into those areas, but no breeding populations have been found.

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