



# The Onlooker

By JIM HOUGH  
Staff Writer

A 15-year-old Lansing boy has launched an all-out campaign to have the Kirtland Warbler named Michigan's state bird.

And, because the lad's proposals make a great deal of sense, he gets my vote.

Howard Hedlund, 7301 Old River Trail, says his campaign for the Kirtland Warbler began as a community service project to earn points toward his goal — an Eagle-Scout rank.

"But, it's much bigger than that now," Howard told me. "Now, I am quite wrapped up in the whole thing. We simply have to vote out the robin and vote in the Kirtland Warbler as our state bird. If we don't, I fear the Kirtland Warbler may become extinct."

Howard mailed about 350 letters to state legislators, radio and TV stations and newspapers.

His letter reminds us that a small tract in Michigan's Au Sable River Valley is the only place in the world where the Kirtland Warbler nests. Therefore, he says, the Kirtland Warbler is more justified as Michigan's state bird.

His letter says, in part:

"Now, mind, you, I like to see the robin, too. But, because the robin is also the state bird of Connecticut and Wisconsin and lives in almost all of the states of the union, including Alaska, it seems logical for this state to use something that is unique to our state.

"Earlier I stated that the warbler nests in the Au Sable River Valley. In this area, there are three state forests: Thunder Bay, Au Sable, and Ogemaw, also the Huron National Forest.

"For the protection of the warbler, the officials of these forests use different ways of managing the nesting area. One of these is prescribed fire. The reason for this seemingly drastic method is that the warbler will only nest in an area where the jackpines stand from six to eighteen feet high. Once the trees become taller than eighteen feet the area is no longer used by the birds. By using prescribed fire foresters and rangers can pick an area with the taller trees, burn and in about seven years the warbler will use it again."

By coincidence, I recently visited the warbler's nesting area. Sgt. Harold Janiszewski, State Police detective of West Branch and a longtime friend, took me on a tour of those forests.

"You know, Jim, I have never been much of a birdwatcher nut. I guess the only birds that interested me much were game birds, like pheasants. But, I have been studying the Kirtland Warbler and . . . well, I guess I'm getting to be a bird nut. There are less than 1,000 of those birds left. I guess the world can survive without them, but I also think we will all lose something important if those birds become extinct. Somehow, I will feel that the world has been made a little bit better if we can save the Kirtland Warbler. I think that boy in Lansing has the right idea," he said.

The history of our knowledge of the Kirtland's warbler begins in the year 1851 near Cleveland, Chic. On May 13 of that year Jared P. Kirtland, a noted naturalist, teacher, and physician found an unidentified bird on his farm near Cleveland. By coincidence a close friend, Dr. Spencer Baird, was returning to the Smithsonian Institute from a scientific meeting in Cincinnati, and he took the bird with him. When Dr. Baird published a description of the bird a year later, he named the bird after Mr. Kirtland--hence the name.

It wasn't until 1903 that the nesting area was discovered by two trout fishermen fishing the Au Sable river in Michigan. One of the fishermen heard a strange bird singing in the bushes. When he investigated, he found a Kirtland's warbler. He shot it and took it to University of Michigan's bird curator, Norman Wood. Mr. Wood hurried north on what became an eight day search for the Kirtland's warbler. Finally on July 8 Mr. Wood found a warbler in low branches. After further investigation he found a nest on the ground six days after he heard his first Kirtland's warbler.

This then is the bird that early Au Sable settlers called the jackpine bird because of its unusual nesting habits.

But just what is so unusual about the Kirtland's warbler nesting habits? Actually just about everything about the Kirtland's warbler is strange. It not only nests just in Michigan, but it will only nest in an area in which the Jackpines are no larger than eighteen feet high or shorter than six feet high. Although this sounds awkward, in that area of Michigan because of climate and wildfire the trees were kept at the right height by nature. But then "Smokey the Bear" came along and the fires--natural or otherwise--were stopped almost before they began. So "Smokey the Bear" was actually depleting the Kirtland's nesting area. Managing officials have now realized this and are taking steps to help the Kirtland's warbler with various types of management.

The most drastic of these management methods is prescribed fire. The rangers pick an area in which the Jackpines have gotten over eighteen feet tall and burn the stand that is too tall. The reason for this is that the seeds are in the cones and it takes the heat of a fire to melt the sap and "free" the seeds. The rangers burn a different stand every seven years to insure enough nesting area.

Another threat to the Kirtland's warbler is the cowbird. The cause of concern about the cowbird is that it builds a layer of nest materials on top of a Kirtland's warbler's

eggs and then lays her own so that the warbler incubates the cowbird's eggs, and her own freeze to death. Rangers are now depleting the cowbird threat to the Kirtland's warbler by trapping the cowbird. These two methods have proven very effective along with several other types of management which are not necessary to discuss here. These are the main two management processes and are notable.

An article in Michigan Out of Doors, the publication of the Michigan United Conservation Clubs, aroused my interest in the protection of this unusual bird. My research began when I called Mrs. Joan Brigham, President of the Lansing Audubon Society and naturalist at Fenner Arboretum in Lansing, Michigan. Besides providing me with much information, she also suggested that I contact Senator William Ballenger who is also the state senator of our district. He sent me information by Harold Mayfield, who is an authority on the Kirtland's warbler. (See literature at end of report.)

After going over the information given to me by Senator Ballenger and Mrs. Brigham very thoroughly several times, I felt that I could go on with my project.

I decided that the best way to publicize my efforts would be to send letters to the appropriate people. I composed six different letters. After having them photocopied, I then started preparing to send them to every state senator and representative and all the radio and television stations besides all the daily newspapers of the state. This was the time in my project when I involved other people under my direction. I gathered a group from my patrol, a neighbor, my sister and brother, and my parents. I directed these people in stuffing, sealing, addressing, and putting postage on a total of 388 letters. On May 25 came the glorious day when we sent the letters on their way.

It didn't take long before I started getting some responses from my letters. May twenty-fifth was on a Saturday and by the following Tuesday I was receiving letters in acknowledgement from state legislators. Although I don't know how many newspapers printed my letter, I do know that the Lansing State Journal, the Grand Ledge Independent, and the Cadillac paper all did.

Charletta Davis of WJIM-TV in Lansing came out and interviewed me at my home right after they had received my letter. Because of that interview many of the Lansing area residents had a chance to hear of my plan. I know this because

of the heavy response that friends, school mates, and others gave to me in person. In July of this year I went up north to Grayling, Michigan to be on a radio program there. Vivian Nichols of WGRY radio, after reading my letter, asked me to be on her talk show on July 17. The interview went very well. We made a tape of the program for our own use. I hope it gave some awareness to Grayling area residents.

On August 25 a new display concerning the Kirtland's warbler is to be unveiled at Fenner Arboretum in Lansing. It will be accompanied by a slide presentation. I have been invited to attend and answer questions at this program.

As I stated at the beginning of this report: although I realize I can't do this all by myself, I am glad to have had a part in this worthy cause. Even if the Kirtland's warbler does not become the state bird, my Eagle project will ~~will~~ at least have secured a place in Michiganders hearts for this little bird, and that is important for all nature and wildlife throughout the world.

## KIRTLAND'S WARBLER NEEDS - MORE BIRDS, MORE KNOWLEDGE

The rarity of the Kirtland's Warbler has focused attention upon it. People who have never seen it know about its distinctive summer home in northern Lower Michigan, its winter sojourn in the Bahama Islands, and the threat to its existence from the Brown-headed Cowbird.

Indeed, our considerable knowledge about the bird may discourage the search for a deeper understanding. Would-be researchers may turn their attention elsewhere, believing that all the essential information has been discovered. This is far from true. Here, as in so many other scientific situations, knowledge does not close a subject but rather opens new vistas.

Consider for example one of the most obvious attributes of the Kirtland's Warbler, its requirement of a special habitat that is characterized by Christmas-tree-size jack pines. This fact was recognized by Norman Wood in 1903 when he discovered the first nest of the species. But this observation by itself is superficial. The bird builds its nest on the ground, not in the branches of the jack pine. It does not feed exclusively in the pines. There must be a unique combination of factors here that we do not understand. Jack pines grow from British Columbia in the west to Nova Scotia in the east, and from Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Ontario in the south almost to treeline in the north. The warbler occupies only a dot on the vast range of the tree. What is unsuitable about the sandy jack pine plains of Minnesota, Wisconsin, Ontario, and the Uper Peninsula of Michigan?

Years ago Harold Wing pointed out that nearly all Kirtland's Warbler nests have been found on soil of one type, Grayling Sand, a particularly sterile and permeable material. But what does this mean to the bird? Excellent drainage for nests imbedded in the ground? An impoverished fauna with few predators and competitors? A sparse ground cover that is yet adequate to conceal the nest? Or something else?

Only one ornithologist with botanical interests, Dale Zimmerman, has studied the Michigan jack pines with the Kirtland's Warbler in view (The jack pine association in the Lower Peninsula of Michigan: its structure and composition. Ph. D. Thesis, University of Michigan, 1956). No one has made a detailed comparison with other similar areas.

Upon first acquaintance with the Kirtland's Warbler almost everyone wonders if it has a special food requirement that only the jack pine country yields. If so, we have never identified it. The bird seems to eat whatever insect food is most abundant - and even blue berries when they ripen in late summer. But these foods do not seem significantly different from those available in the surrounding forest. And the bird seems to have no difficulty getting all it wants for itself and its young throughout the warm days of summer. It still has plenty of time for loafing and dozing. However, what about its subsistence in the first days after its arrival on the nesting ground in spring? Late May is often quite wintry in the pinelands of Michigan. Snow sometimes covers the ground briefly. At such times the warblers stop singing and are very hard to find. What do they eat? No ornithologist-entomologist has ever looked into this.

One of the most intriguing questions about this bird is its relationship with the cowbird. Everyone who has studied the warbler has given attention to the cowbird, and one scientist, Nicholas L. Cuthbert, has devoted several years to it although his main findings have not yet been published. Nevertheless, an important aspect of the problem still baffles us. Do some cowbirds use the nests of Kirtland's Warblers exclusively? Insight into this question would be provided if we knew whether female cowbirds reared by Kirtland's Warblers returned in later years to lay their eggs in warbler nests and whether the cowbirds laying in Kirtland's Warbler nests also lay eggs in the nests of other species nearby. Perhaps this puzzle will yield to a group effort by several people studying intensively all of the birds nesting along with the Kirtland's Warbler in one area. Or perhaps someone can find a new approach to the problem.

Our interest in most songbirds runs highest in the nesting season when they are most conspicuous and attractive. We know birds best in this phase of their existence and tend to think of their survival mainly in terms of the nesting season. As a matter of fact, most birds spend a much larger part of their life on the wintering grounds than on the nesting grounds, and there is evidence for many species that the most severe limiting factors on their populations operate in winter. Is this true of the Kirtland's Warbler? Certainly it appears to us that the mortality of free flying Kirtland's Warblers is low as long as they stay in the jack pine country in summer.

Is there an unknown problem on the wintering ground? No one knows because no one has been able to study the bird's habits in its

winter home. No one who has gone to the Bahama Islands looking for it has ever found it. Josselyn Van Tyne and I spent five weeks in 1949 searching for it systematically on ~~the~~ ~~islands~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~Bahamas~~ without success, and I have spent brief periods since that time on ~~the~~ ~~islands~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~Bahamas~~ without finding it. In March, 1960, Lawrence H. Walkinshaw, one of the most active students of the Kirtland's Warblers since the 1930's, spent two weeks on Andros Island netting birds but not finding the Kirtland's Warbler. Most recently Bruce Radabaugh, a long-time student of the bird, spent several weeks early in 1972 looking for the warbler in the Bahamas. Yet a number of ornithologists have had fortuitous and fleeting glimpses of the Kirtland's Warbler in the Bahama Islands in recent years. Nevertheless, the difficulty of finding it is illustrated by John Emlen's experience on Grand Bahama where the largest number of recent sightings have occurred (Because the greatest number of people have visited this place?). He spent an average of three hours a day in the field from the first of January to mid-May in 1969 and did not see a Kirtland's Warbler (nor in the previous year either), while not far away on the same island Paul Fluck netted one in April, although he had not seen any in the field.

We would expect that a bird so selective about its nesting habitat might occupy some very special niche on its wintering ground too. If so, we have not yet identified it. The bird seems to occur in many situations on many islands. The universal accompaniment of the situation seems to be low broad-leaf scrub, but this generalization does not help much because low scrub occurs almost everywhere in these islands. (Mayfield, Wilson Bull., 84:345-7, 1972)

If the warbler actually requires vegetation that is low and sparse, as seems possible, then it may be benefited by the cut-and-burn system of agriculture used by local people for small garden plots. After a few years of use, each of these plots grows back to bush. However, only a small fraction of the area is farm land now or recently. Also the scrub growing in the pinelands may be thinned and set back periodically by forest fire, but only four of the northernmost islands have any pines. And finally the scrub may be kept low on islets and exposed shores which are subjected to salt spray, like Athol in Nassau harbor where a specimen was taken in 1897.

I detail some of these circumstances to encourage the interest of vacationers in the Bahama Islands who might happen upon this bird and seize the opportunity to add to our knowledge of it.

It will be noted that all of the topics mentioned here may be subjects for research without disturbing any nests or risking the chances of survival of any warblers. The population is now at such a precarious level that the need for more birds may have to take precedence over our need for more facts when these two needs come into conflict. For this reason the Kirtland's Warbler Advisory Committee of the Michigan Audubon Society is now discouraging any research that seems likely to cause harm to any individuals of this species.

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