

June 20, 1993

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Dear Ron:

I am sorry you will not be at the Kirtland meeting this week at Grayling. You make a valuable contribution.

I have read the PHVA report on the Kirtland's Warbler with interest and feel an obligation to let you know that someone read it. I know how these things go out into the darkness like Noah's doves from the Ark and usually nothing returns.

I think this meeting was a worthy idea. It forced a lot of people to think about the ingredients that go into the success or failure of the species. That is, it is a worthy educational experience. But I have to admit that modeling like this is not my cup of tea. As someone who was tempted to make a career in mathematics in my youth, I intuitively cringe when people make elaborate calculations based on sloppy data. Carrying a guess out to the third decimal point startles me. You will remember the old saying, "Figures don't lie, but liars figure." Mind you, I am not implying that anyone is deliberately misleading us here, but just that they spin a fine web with their love for the computer.

So I concede that it may be stimulating to see how the manipulation of some of the variables can effect populations long-term, but this is not necessarily real life. In view of the bite of compound interest, a very small error introduced at the beginning of repeated calculations can pyramid into enormous error at the end of the line. Let's face it. Field data are never very good (including my own). Figures look so exact (especially when carried out to various decimal points), but in reality they are always somewhat misleading. The error is always plus or minus several points. In many cases the error may be at least 10 per cent. If so, and the computation is repeated seven times, the error becomes 100 percent!

Or consider the factors that are unknown!!! Who puts in the unknowns in their computer? I consider it virtually a certainty that some very important factors in the survival of the Kirtland's Warbler are not yet identified. What will be their effect over the long haul? Of course, no one knows. How does that effect our predictions? No one knows. It does not reassure me to ignore these problems. In view of these real problems, where are we in our predictions? I am uneasy.

This is not a new theme with me. Dealing with inexact data as though ~~they~~ were precise runs through all reports based on field work, which as I have said, are almost universally sloppy. We see it every day in percentages carried out to several decimal points when the data are to some extent guesses. I have often thought it would be helpful if authors would preface their comments by "I betcha..."

My comments on the details of the report are trivial. First, I found the page numbering to be a puzzle, with several sets of separately numbered pages and some unnumbered pages. This makes the set hard to refer to in correspondence. For example, on page 57 of one of the sets, I am quoted as saying "cowbirds were not present in Canada until 1950." I wish it were so. Actually, they were not present in Ontario until 1850. What difference does 100 years make if nobody reads the report! Yet there is always a sharp-eyed person out there who will pick this up and recognize it for the error it is.

Ron, I know you are looking for some response to this major effort. Add this to the slender pile.

Best regards,

Sincerely,