

QUEST FOR RARE AND ELUSIVE BIRD

by Woody Bracey

Several years ago I wrote an article on a trip to the south end of Abaco in search of the Kirtland's Warbler, a rare bird that only breeds in the confines of the understory of young Jack Pine forests of Central Michigan and is only known to winter in The Bahamas. In 1987 there were only 167 singing males (easy to census on treetops in their territories) known to be left. The last confirmed winter record of this bird was in the early 80's from Governor's Harbour, Eleuthera, although there have been sight records for various Bahama islands. The last was by Paul Dean who along with Eric Carey, conservation officer of the Department of Agriculture (and also president of the Society of Caribbean Ornithology), saw one feeding along the road to the abandoned sisal plantation of Alexandria, south Abaco, in early December of 1999.

Knowing this, I set out on 8th January 2000 with renowned bird shooter Hagen Peters of Treasure Cay and Memphis, who has spotted many birds but always over the head of his shotgun. His 3/4 ton Dodge diesel truck was more than a match for the overgrown pothole-strewn road to Hole in the Wall. We then walked the long dirt road to Alexandria. We found many species of birds along the way but not the one we were looking for. Fascinating, however, were the ruins of the old plantation that was abandoned in 1920. We took photos until we were driven out by mosquitoes. Our only place of refuge was the lighthouse high on the hill where the gentle breeze blew away

the biting monsters. Watching the sun set to the west overlooking the vast pine forests and coppice of south Abaco was a sight long to be remembered.

It was a new moon and out of the blackness of night one could see the lights of Nassau to the south and overhead more stars than one could count. Two Disney cruise ships, lit up like diamonds, sailed by on their way to Castaway Cay to the west of Sandy Point. It was a long 12 hours of darkness and hardness on the concrete base of the old lighthouse, which was completed in 1836. We were happy to crawl out of our snug sleeping bags at first light. Hagen broke camp while I biked up to the road junction near where the Kirtland's had previously been seen and, as I dismounted, I saw some motion under the sign that says New Williams' Road. I made a slight "pish" sound and out popped a bright male warbler, the object of my search for over 20 years! The curious bird flew to a dead shrub less than 25 feet in front of me so I could study it for a minute. All the field marks were there: dark back and head, yellow breast with black stripes on the sides, incomplete white eye-ring, distinctive tail pumping behaviour, and large for a warbler at five and three-quarter inches. I was convinced and elated. Then, zip! - he was off into the dense brush.

Hagen soon arrived in the truck and I told him what he had missed. I grabbed my camera but could not coax the bird out of the bush. We started down the road to Alexandria and about 300 yards in a Bahama Mockingbird came into view. I began photographing this denizen of thick vegetation and next to him perches a Kirtland's Warbler in bright sunshine! I shifted my lens over and shot several photos and Hagen got a good look at it before it shifted perches and disappeared.

This bird appeared less bright than the one previously sighted so I honestly think it was a different bird. Hagen seemed to delight in the shared success of the hunt even though the object flew away alive in the end. As you can from the photo, it probably wouldn't have been much of a meal anyway. The road beneath our feet was heavily littered with spent shotgun shells, but this was a fine day for another kind of hunt - for one of the rarest birds in the world - and our success is documented on film.



It may just look like a bird on a branch to you and me, but to Woody Bracey it was the culmination of a long quest to positively identify the Kirtland's Warbler on Abaco.