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Kirtland's warblers singing a happy tune

Endangered bird making a comeback

Revival efforts bringing species' numbers up to highest levels in decades

By John Flesher
Associated Press

TRAVERSE CITY — The Kirtland's warbler, an endangered songbird that nests only in northern Michigan, has made a strong comeback but still needs help to survive.

A census this spring recorded 1,085 singing males, the most since the first count was taken in 1951, scientists said Wednesday.

The adult population is believed to be at least twice as high, assuming a female partner for every male. Only the males sing.

The lowest number of singing males found was 167 in 1974 and 1987.

"This little bird is making great strides toward recovery," said Mike DeCapita, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist.

The Kirtland's warbler spends winters in the Bahamas and flies north in spring. Most stay in the northern Lower Peninsula, although in recent years a few have been discovered in the Upper Peninsula.

The warblers seek out large stands of jack pines 5 to 20 feet high. They lay eggs in ground nests beneath the trees.

Once the pines get too large, branches along the ground die and the birds seek younger stands.

Historically, naturally occurring wildfires ensured the area had enough young jack pines for the warbler. The heat caused cones to



DAVID KENYON/Associated Press

Coming back: The endangered Kirtland's warbler is making a comeback. More than 1,000 males were counted during a recent census, the most since the first count in 1951.

pop open and release seeds.

But as more people moved in and put out the fires, the bird's habitat and population shrank.

State and federal biologists and foresters now manage about 150,000 acres for the Kirtland's warbler.

They use controlled burns, planting and seeding to grow new generations of trees. When stands reach about 50 years old they are clearcut, providing habitat for a variety of

birds and game animals such as the whitetail deer, turkey and snowshoe hare.

More than 1,500 acres of jack pines were planted on state and federal land this spring and 1,000 more will be planted this fall. They'll be ready to host warblers in six to 10 years.

Scientists have said the bird would remain on the endangered list until the population stabilized at 1,000 or more pairs. But despite recent progress, it's unclear whether

the warbler can ever survive on its own.

"The number of birds is important, but what really counts is available habitat," said Pat Lederle, endangered species coordinator for the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. "If we stop managing the habitat, it will eventually become unsuitable for the birds and their numbers will go down again."

More also needs to be learned about the bird's activities in the Bahamas, he said.