



## Kirtland's warblers choose Habitat Foundation project

The Kirtland's warbler continues to increase in numbers and expand its range as a result of habitat management, and the tiny song bird has found another new home on private land northeast of Grayling in Crawford County.

At least four nesting pairs have used a 300-acre habitat along the AuSable River, owned by Trout Unlimited, for the past two years. The Habitat Foundation and Trout Unlimited restored habitat there through a 1994 project that marked the first major effort to manage

private lands for the endangered species.

Except for a few in the Upper Peninsula and Wisconsin, the world's entire population of the Kirtland's warbler nests on jack pine plains in the northeast Lower Peninsula. In most years, more than 80 percent of breeding pairs are found in just three counties—Oscoda, Ogemaw, and Crawford. Researchers began counting singing males in 1951 and have recorded fairly steady increases since a low of 167 in 1987.

The Kirtland' warbler is a small, blue-gray and yellow, sparrow-sized bird which usually nests on the ground on well-drained sand under stands of jack pines between five and 20 feet high, with branches that extend to the ground. Historically, these stands of young jack pine were maintained by naturally occurring wild-fires that frequently swept through large areas of Northern Michigan. Fire suppression programs altered this natural process, reducing the Kirtland's warbler habitat.

The warbler also suffered because of the expansion of the brown-headed cowbird, a prairie species, into the north country when loggers cleared the forests. The Kirtland's warbler has evolved no defense against this newcomer, which lays its eggs in the warbler's nest. The quicker-hatching and larger cowbird chicks are fed by the unwitting warbler at the expense of its

own offspring. This nest parasitism is a major cause of reproductive failure in the Kirtland's warbler.

For decades, wildlife biologists and foresters have used a combination of clear-cutting, controlled burning, and replanting to mimic the effects of wildfire. Millions of jack pines have been planted on over 150,000 acres of state and federal lands under a management program aimed at providing habitat for warblers and timber on a 40 or 50-year rotation. But until the effort along the AuSable, no private property was managed for Kirtland's warblers.

Foundation staff, working with Trout Unlimited's Michigan Property Management Board, proposed the project which involved clear-cutting an over-mature jack pine stand, then planting 2-year-old pines 1,100 to the acre. The trees were not planted in rows or randomly, but in wavy, parallel bands to form figure eights. This pattern mimics how jack pines grow after a wildfire.

Trout Unlimited used the profits from the timber sales for the project fund, and the Foundation provided additional funds and technical assistance. The US Fish and Wildlife Service and Detroit Edison also helped pay for the program. The Michigan Department of Natural Resources contributed technical assistance and may install cowbird traps on the property.

"We are very pleased that Kirtland's warblers have occupied the Trout Unlimited property," said Mike DeCapita, Michigan Endangered Species Coordinator for the US Fish and Wildlife Service. "The Fish and Wildlife Service contributed



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The endangered Kirtland's warbler requires dense stands of young jack pines on well drained sands for nesting. Older jack pine were harvested from 300 acres along the AuSable River in 1994 to prepare the site for this Kirtland's warbler habitat restoration.

\$9,000 to the reforestation of the property specifically to benefit the Kirtland's warbler."

Trout Unlimited is dedicated to the conservation of coldwater fish and their habitats. But the non-profit organization took advantage of a rare

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opportunity to help a rare bird. Hopefully, more private acres will be managed for unique species and their habitats in the years ahead.

### KIRTLAND WARBLER SURVEY

The Kirtland's warbler survey is conducted over a 10-day period each year during the first two weeks in June. The surveys are joint efforts of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, the U.S. Forest Service, the Michigan Department of Military Affairs, and citizen volunteers.

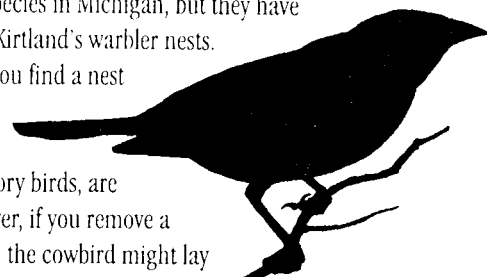
The lowest count of singing males was 167 in 1987. The count was 1,085 in 2001.

Tours of Kirtland warbler nesting grounds are conducted by trained guides. For information call 517-351-2555.

## THOSE PESKY COWBIRDS

Success of Kirtland's warbler fledglings can be reduced by as much as 75 percent from nest parasitism by brown-headed cowbirds, according to Lawrence Walkinshaw, noted ornithologist. Cowbirds parasitize the nests of more than 40 species in Michigan, but they have a strong preference for Kirtland's warbler nests.

What can you do if you find a nest parasitized by cowbirds? Nothing, legally. They, along with other migratory birds, are protected by law. Moreover, if you remove a cowbird egg from a nest, the cowbird might lay another egg in the nest or the nest's owner may notice the missing egg and abandon the nest. It has been reported that some people put a pinhole in the cowbird egg and replace it in the nest. The hole makes the egg susceptible to bacteria growth and likely will kill the developing cowbird. If you feed birds and see a lot of cowbirds at your feeding station, you can help matters by not feeding, or by feeding only thistle and sunflower seeds, which are less-preferred by cowbirds. \*



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*In Memory of*  
*Henry Kruger*  
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