

Warbler may be endangered forever

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Squeezing between tight rows of jack pines, Sarah Rockwell unfurled what resembled a finely meshed badminton net suspended between two metal poles. It was a perfect device for capturing a rare Kirtland's warbler for study without injuring the delicate songbird.

But the wily female the scientists were targeting steered clear of the net — despite the lure of a recorded male's rapid, melodious chirp piping repeatedly from a boom box.

"Sometimes it happens," Rockwell said with a sigh after a fruitless half-hour.

Her luck wasn't always that bad. The doctoral student with the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center in Washington, D.C., and her colleagues netted about 130 Kirtland's warblers this summer in the sandy flatlands of northern Michigan, part of a decades-old effort to spare the endangered creature from extinction.

It's a mission that, despite considerable progress, may never end. The Kirtland's warbler appears destined forever to need human assistance for survival.

The half-ounce bird, which sports a yellow breast and bluish-gray head and tail plumage, has such strict habitat requirements that it nests and breeds in only a handful of places — primarily jack pine stands in Michigan's northern Lower Peninsula.

Those forests are managed to meet the warbler's needs, while a campaign is waged to limit the population of its ene-



JOHN FLESHER/Associated Press

Sarah Rockwell, a doctoral student with the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center in Washington, D.C., puts up a net May 19 intended to trap an endangered Kirtland's warbler in a jack pine forest near Mio, Mich. Scientists trap the birds to gain information to keep the species alive.

my, the brown-headed cowbird, which lays eggs in warbler nests.

"We've gotten the bird to more sustained levels, but it's still a battle every year," said Chris Mensing, a biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in East Lansing.

That may be the case for most of the 1,353 animals and plants on the federal endangered species list.

While the Endangered Species Act calls for helping them reach the point of living and reproducing on their own, it's easier said than done. Just 22 have been removed from the list since the law took effect in 1973.

Among them: the bald eagle and gray wolves of the western Great Lakes region, which were dropped last year.

Before delisting a species, government biologists must conclude their populations have recovered, with sustainable numbers and distribution. Also, threats must have been

eliminated or controlled.

Mike Scott, a biologist with the U.S. Geological Survey and the University of Idaho, contends the Kirtland's warbler illustrates why it no longer makes sense to think of endangered species as simply recovered or not recovered.

He proposes a new category of conservation-reliant species, which could be removed from the endangered list but still get long-term protection.

"With all the habitat loss and invasions from nonnative species, you'll see more and more cases where the threat cannot be eliminated, it can only be manipulated," Scott said.

In a report to Congress this year, the Fish and Wildlife Service described only 8% of listed species as improving, meaning their numbers are rising or threats have abated.

The Kirtland's warbler was among them — a triumph for a bird once on the brink of oblivion. A census in the 1980s turned up only 167 singing

males. (Females don't sing, but biologists assume there's one for every singing male.) This summer, 1,792 males were found, putting the estimated population at 3,584.

It was the seventh consecutive year the number has exceeded 1,000. Five consecutive years was a longtime recovery goal, but no one is declaring victory yet.

"It could get up to 5,000 and I'd still be nervous about delisting," said Dave Ewert, a Kirtland's warbler specialist with the Nature Conservancy.

Fans of the Kirtland's warbler are discussing an endowment fund to ensure a permanent funding source for the recovery program, said Phil Huber, a biologist with the U.S. Forest Service.

For now, Mensing of the Fish and Wildlife Service estimates the cost of protecting the warbler at \$1.5 million to \$2 million a year — a figure partially offset by revenues from the jack pine harvest.