

SINGING A HAPPY KIRTLAND'S WARBLER



Ron Austing



The first Kirtland's warbler nest was discovered in Michigan in 1903.

“All the Kirtland's warblers in the world wouldn't fill a bushel basket.” This is a common refrain in parts of Michigan and probably was true 25 years ago, when the entire population of this rare and endangered songbird was estimated at about 400.

Today, however, the bushel basket would be overflowing. About 1,600 Kirtland's warblers will be returning to Michigan this spring after spending the winter in the Bahamas. Every spring, the young jack pine trees found in a small region of the northern Lower Peninsula seem to silently call these birds forth from their tropical island getaway. The jack pine ecosystem is vital to the existence of the Kirtland's warbler. They are one of the rarest songbirds in the world, and in this place—and almost nowhere else on Earth—they breed and nest in stands of trees between five and 20 feet high, with branches that extend to the ground.

The Kirtland's warbler, a small, blue-gray and yellow, sparrow-sized bird, was first described in 1851 when a migrating bird was collected near Cleveland. The species was named for the noted Ohio naturalist Dr. Jared P. Kirtland. For a time, the Kirtland's warbler population seemed to be stable. However, its continued existence was seriously threatened when, between 1961 and 1971, the population plunged, dropping by 60 percent. Scientists

TUNE POPULATION IS GROWING

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determined two main causes for this decline, one of which was habitat loss caused by the modern practice of wildfire prevention.

Historically, the stands of young jack pine on the poor, sandy soil of northern lower Michigan were maintained by naturally occurring wildfires that frequently swept through the region. Fire opens jack pine cones, releasing the seeds to regenerate the species. Fire suppression programs altered this natural process, reducing the Kirtland's warbler habitat. The prevention of forest fires also allowed the existing trees to grow too old. In 1980, a wildfire burned 24,000 acres of jack pine, creating what has been a huge area of prime Kirtland's warbler habitat. But today, these same jack pine stands are approaching the end of their service to the Kirtland's warbler.

The other main cause for the warbler's population crash was nest failure caused by brown-headed cowbirds. The cowbird is a nest parasite. Female cowbirds lay their eggs in nests of other "host" birds who care for their young. Cowbird chicks are hatched and fed by these hosts, sometimes decreasing the survival of the host's young. Although some birds can recognize the imposter egg and eject it from the nest, the Kirtland's warbler lacks this natural defense against nest parasitism.

Controlling cowbirds with large live-traps has been an important

Above, when the Kirtland's warbler returns each spring to its nesting grounds near Mio, warbler watchers are not far behind. Left, a scenic overlook of the Au Sable River.

