

THE ST. IGNACE NEWS

Kirtland's Warbler Population on Upswing

According to the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, Michigan's population of the endangered Kirtland's Warbler is up from last year.

Biologists, volunteers, and researchers counted 728 singing males during the official 1997 census in early June, compared to 692 counted in 1996. The 1997 survey was a joint effort of the DNR, USDA Forest Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Michigan Department of Military Affairs and citizen volunteers.

The census was started in 1951, repeated in 1961, and has been conducted annually during the first two weeks of June since 1971.

A record high of 765 singing males was established in 1995; the record low was 167 in 1987.

The birds are counted by listening for their songs.

In June, the male Kirtland's Warblers establish their territories and use their songs to help fend off rival males. The songs can be heard over one-quarter mile away, providing a method to count birds with a minimum amount of disturbance. The females do not sing. The total population is assumed to be double the number of singing males.

The number of singing males found in ten northern Lower Peninsula counties are as follows: Alcona, 50; Clare, 5; Crawford, 119; Iosco, 23; Kalkaska, 23; Montmorency, 2; Ogemaw, 187; Oscoda, 264; Otsego, 26; and Roscommon, 10.

A record 19 singing males were found in three Upper Peninsula counties: Delta, 4; Marquette, 8; and Schoolcraft, 7. This is the highest number counted in the Upper Peninsula since the first bird was found there in 1982.

The production of young was confirmed in the Upper Peninsula in 1996. At least four females were observed with the males, indicating continuing nesting activity in the Upper Peninsula. An additional five singing males were located in northern Wisconsin.

"This is only the third consecutive year that mated pairs have been found outside the traditional nesting areas in the northern Lower Peninsula," said DNR Endangered Species Coordinator Thomas Weise. "It was especially significant to confirm the production of young in the Upper Peninsula last year. It will be very interesting to see how these birds do in following years."

Kirtland's Warbler numbers are directly related to the amount of available nesting habitat. The warbler is a small, blue-gray and yellow, sparrow-sized bird whose nests have been found only in jack pine stands in northern Michigan. A ground nester, the Kirtland's Warbler selects stands of trees between five and 20 feet high with live branches that extend to the ground. Historically, young jack pine were maintained in these pine-barren areas by naturally-occurring wildfires that frequently swept through northern Michigan.

Fire suppression programs altered this natural process, reducing Kirtland's Warbler habitat.

Wildlife biologists and foresters from the state and federal agencies conduct a combination of clearcut-

ting, burning, seeding, and replanting to mimic the effects of wildfire. More than 2,500 acres of jack pine trees were planted on state and federal lands in the spring of 1997. More than 1,000 additional acres will be planted in the fall. These plantations will provide habitat for warblers in six to 10 years.

"The proportion of Kirtland's Warblers counted in plantations specifically created for nesting habitat increased from 63 percent last year to more than 69 percent this year," said DNR wildlife biologist Jerry Weinrich of the Roscommon Lower Peninsula Field Headquarters. "Even though new habitat will become available each year for the next several years, it will not immediately make up the difference in the loss of large habitat areas that are becoming too old for use by Kirtland's Warblers. Their numbers are expected to remain about the same level until larger areas of new habitat become available in about five to six years."

"The success of the Kirtland's Warbler management program shows that scientific wildlife management works," said Gary Boushelle, field operations supervisor of the DNR Wildlife Division. "The cooperation among the DNR biologists and foresters, USDA Forest Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Department of Military Affairs in restoring the warblers' nesting habitat is exemplary."

"In addition to providing warbler habitat and forest products, the jack pine barrens provide valuable habitat for a wide variety of songbirds, game species, and plants."

This program is partially supported by contributions made to the Nongame Fish and Wildlife Fund.

More information on the Kirtland's Warbler may be obtained by contacting the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, Wildlife Division, Natural Heritage Program, P.O. Box 30180, Lansing, MI 48909-7680.

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