

# Warblers Worth Saving

*Rare species reminds us of Michigan's unique natural wonders.*

By Ann Bailey Dunn

The Costa Rican rain forests and the Florida Everglades do not have a monopoly on rare bird species. One of the rarest in the world nests only in northern Michigan.

The Kirtland's warbler, during the nesting season, is confined to young jack pine trees growing in a forest of special sandy soil. This habitat is found in only a few counties in the northern Lower Peninsula and eastern Upper Peninsula. The bird winters in the Bahama Islands in low, brushy vegetation.

In last year's census of the endangered species, state and federal wildlife workers and citizen volunteers counted 728 singing males, up from 692 in the spring of 1996. A female is presumed to be present for each male as the birds prepare to nest.

The census has been conducted each June for the past 26 years. The record count was 765 singing males in 1995. The fewest counted was 167 in 1987.

Dressed in a blue-gray suit with a bright yellow breast, the six-inch warbler has a habit of constantly twitching its tail while perched on a pine tree limb. The male's unforgettable song is rich, loud, and clear.

Preferring to nest in colonies in jack pine tree forests larger than 80 acres with plenty of small, grassy openings, the Kirtland's warbler will build its nest only on the ground among grass or bushes.

In the nesting area the jack pine trees must be from five to 16 feet tall and spaced far enough apart to let the sunshine reach the lower tree branches and undergrowth to keep them alive so the warblers can nest safely beneath the trees.

When the trees grow larger than 16 feet, the sun is kept from reaching the lower tree branches, causing them to die and forcing the warblers to find another nesting area.

The Kirtland's warbler lays four brown-spotted white eggs in a nest of vegetable fibers and bark strips lined with pine needles and grass.

The type of jack pine tree forest that is needed by the Kirtland's warbler is created by fire. Fire is a natural occurrence in the forest, and the trees depend on the fire's heat to release seeds by opening the jack pine cones so new trees can grow.

Before the 20th century, wide-



spread fires created huge nesting habitat for the Kirtland's warbler. In the 1800s lumberjacks moved across Michigan, and after they cut down the jack pine trees, wildfires burned thousands of acres—helping to create more nesting areas for the Kirtland's warbler.

When the lumberjacks left the lower portion of Michigan, settlers made it their home. It was necessary for the settlers to protect themselves and their homes from fire. By building new roads and firebreaks they accomplished this feat. But with fewer fires, the Kirtland's warbler was unable to reproduce due to the lack of jack pine tree forests.

Michigan's forest managers came to the bird's rescue. By setting aside special areas, imitating wildfires by carefully setting fires on purpose in controlled settings, and planting approximately 1,200 jack pine tree

seedlings in each acre, the Kirtland's warbler is assured a nesting habitat for life.

With several million seedlings planted and controlled wildfires set every year, the Kirtland's warbler is still in danger of becoming extinct.

The jack pines must be five feet high and about eight years old before the birds will nest in the forest. And after the trees reach 16 feet—about 20 years old—the forest is abandoned for younger trees.

Waiting until the jack pines are about 50 years old to cut them down, forest managers ensure a continuous nesting habitat for the Kirtland's warbler. In return, the trees provide valuable particle board, fuel, wood chips, and paper.

When the trees are cut, new ones are planted and a new generation of jack pine and Kirtland's warblers begins.

With no more than 1,500 Kirtland's warblers left in the world and such a unique nesting habitat, they are seldom seen. But Michigan has set aside a 48-mile self-guided auto tour so the Kirtland's warbler can be viewed in its natural habitat.

From mid-May through July 4, guided tours to see the warblers are available. Tall snags, or dead trees, are placed in the middle of the young jack pine forests so onlookers can get a better view of the birds, which otherwise might only be heard. With the tours being so popular, reservations are recommended.

For more information, contact the Chamber of Commerce of Oscoda County, 800/800-6133; the Department of Natural Resources district office in Mio, 517/826-3211; the U.S. Forest Service Mio headquarters, 517/826-3252; or the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service office in East Lansing, 517/337-6050.

Some people have expressed reservations about spending so much time and effort on this small bird. But considering the fact that this species not only is endangered but is unique to Michigan, the Kirtland's warbler could become a symbol of the state's natural wonders. That fact alone should make the species worth saving.