REGION

NEWS FROM NORTHWEST LOWER MICHIGAN

TRVERSE CITY RECORD - EAGLE

Saturday, May 14, 2005
NEWS TIP LINE (231) 933-1472

CRAWFORD COUNTY

Warbler's song returns to north

Rare bird has summer home near Grayling

BY SHERRI MCGHIRTZER
Record-Eagle staff writer

GRAYLING — A couple thousand seasonal residents have returned to northern Michigan. The endangered Kirtland's warbler is back in protected habitat around Grayling.

Tours begin Sunday and are led by guides from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Huron-Manistee National Forests — and for the first time, the Michigan Audubon Society.

More than 1,000 people annually take guided tours, the only way to see the birds. Habitat areas are closed to public entry during the May-to-August nesting season.

"Most birds you can go and see them in various areas of the country, but not the Kirtland' s warbler. They're very unique, very rare," said Chris Mensing, a biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The birds nest only here, on the ground among the young jack pine trees, he said.

The birds migrate each year between Michigan and the Bahamas Islands. Last year a record number of singing males — 1,341 — were counted in Michigan. Less than 200 were counted as recently as 1987.

Joe Gomola, field biologist with the U.S. Forest Service, said serious bird-watchers come from all over the world for a chance to see an endangered warbler and hear it's song. He's guided people from New Zealand, Australia and places throughout Europe, he said.

"It defines what the northern Lower Peninsula is about — Grayling sands and jack pines. It is the one bird that specifically nests in that habitat," Gomola said.

The Kirtland's warbler evolved to prefer young jack pine forests that regenerated after wildfires. Controlled burns are not used to manage the bird's habitat because of the explosive nature of the very dry jack pine and the many homes within the habitat area.

Playing around

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist Chris Mensing said the Kirtland's warbler habitat is closed from May 1 to Aug. 15 and the best way to see or hear the bird is on an official tour.

Timber companies contract to clear-cut the trees instead, rotating out jack pines at about 30 years. The birds do not nest in jack pine grown beyond 15 or 20 feet. Mensing said.

Jack pine trees are then replanted.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service tours are at 7 a.m. every day beginning Sunday, to run through July 4. The free tours begin with a brief slide presentation at the Holiday Inn, 2650 Interstate 75 Business Loop in Grayling.

The U.S. Forest Service tours are 7 a.m. every day beginning Sunday, to run through July 2, excluding Memorial Day. The tours cost $5 per person and depart from the ranger station at 401 N. Court Street in Mio.

St. Clair CC votes down ethics code

Troubled teen in another