

ENVIRONMENT

Scorched forest shows signs of regeneration

Habitat forms after wildfire hit two weeks ago

BY SHERI MCWHIRTER
sherimcwhirter@hotmail.com

MIO — Grass shoots break free of blackened sands in the Huron National Forest, proof of the regenerative nature of jack pine forests.

About 6,000 acres of federal forest land in Oscoda County burned in a wildfire that began April 30 with an out-of-control campfire. The fire destroyed some structures in Oscoda and threatened homes in Crawford and Ogemaw counties, as well. It smoked and smoldered until quashed by recent rain and thunderstorms. The scorched landscape will for the most part grow

back without human intervention, said Philip Huber, wildlife biologist with the U.S. Forest Service.

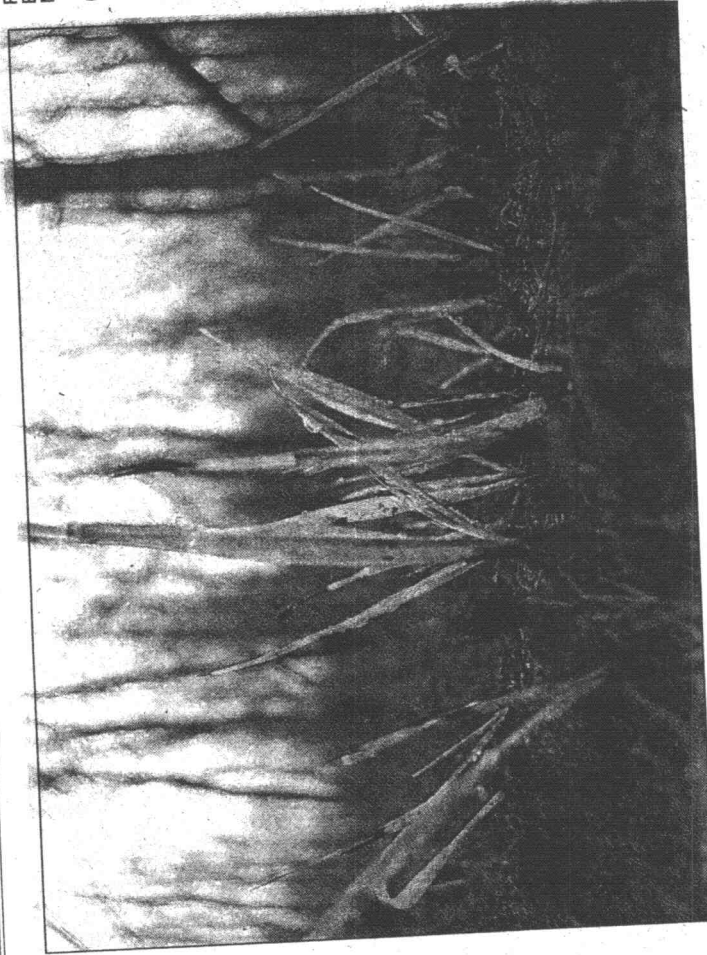
"All the species of animals and plants that evolved in the jack pine ecosystem rely on fire for their habitat and their long-term survival," he said. "It's a new beginning for that area. It will provide great habitat over the next several years."

Wildfires sparked by lightning historically ripped through northern Michigan's jack pine forests. Fires are now controlled to protect human life and property, Huber said.

Biologists currently use different methods to mimic the effects of wildfires, by clear-cutting and replanting jack pine trees, which otherwise need fire to release seeds from the cones.

Record- Eagle/Sheri McWhirter

2006
Grass is growing through the burned forest floor after a wildfire less than two weeks ago spread across 6,000 acres in the Huron National Forest.



The habitat is important to biologists because it is the sole breeding grounds of the Kirtland's warbler, an endangered species that annually returns in early May from wintering in the Bahama Islands. The birds build nests on the ground beneath young jack pine trees grown between five and 20 feet tall, hidden beneath lower branches. Last year, 54 pairs nested

in a prime 520-acre habitat area that was destroyed by the fire. It's that area that may get treatment from federal officials if good regeneration doesn't appear by this autumn, Huber said. "Fortunately, the birds weren't here yet, but they are now starting to arrive," he said. "There is uncoccupied territory that these birds can find in other areas of northern Michigan."

Huber said if not enough jack pine seedlings sprout to create proper Kirtland's warbler habitat on those 520 acres, officials likely will plant trees there next spring or in 2008.

Meanwhile, other birds and animals will thrive in the naturally-regenerated jack pine ecosystem, such as Eastern bluebirds, Black-backed woodpeckers and Spruce grouse.