

One of World's Rarest Types Of Birds Now Nesting in State

BY JAMES A. O. CROWE

Mio - (A) - The pine barrens north of here are beginning to echo in their remotest reaches with a strange, shrill bird call.

The new sound heralds the annual return of one of the world's rarest birds to its nesting grounds.

The Kirtland warbler (locally called the Jack Pine warbler) nests no where in the world but a small region of the northern Lower Peninsula north of the Au Sable river, centering in northern Crawford and Oscoda counties.

Stranger than that, this almost unknown bird will nest within that restricted area under only the most specialized conditions.

They build their nests on the ground in the open spaces between jack pines that must be between five and 18 feet high. If the stand is below those limits it is ignored. In 15 years when it gets to 18 feet and the branches meet over the open spaces, the birds leave it.

NESTING SEASON.

During the nesting season which runs from mid-May to the last of June, the males sing almost constantly, apparently warning trespassers away from the nest.

The nest is built on the ground under a bower or archway of grass. The male shuttles back and forth feeding first his mate and then the young birds. He has even been observed singing lustily while carrying a fat caterpillar to the nest.

The males are strikingly marked. Lemon-yellow on the underside, they are blue-gray on the back and streaked with black. The males carry a black mask. The females are less brilliantly marked and lack the black mask.

The bird was first recognized as a new species by Dr. Jared Potter Kirtland, Cleveland physician and naturalist. A neighbor boy had shot a strange bird on May 13, 1852. Dr. Kirtland, unable to find it described gave it his own name. It later was officially listed as "Dendroica Kirtlandii," establishing Dr. Kirtland's claim to its discovery.

For 13 years nothing was known of where the new species came from or was going. In 1865, however, specimens were located in the Bahama Islands and the species wintering grounds were established.

But where did it nest? For 50 years, the species simply disappeared in the summer. Speculation as to the breeding grounds ranged from Alaska to Hudson bay.

FOUND NEST.

Finally in 1903, a University of Michigan ornithologist on a fishing trip on the Au Sable river heard a strange birdcall. He finally shot one of the singing birds and brought the skin back to Norman A. Wood, curator of the ornithological collection at the university museum.

Wood instantly spotted it as the mysterious Kirtland warbler and headed straight for the northern Michigan pine barrens.



THE KIRTLAND WARBLER—The Kirtland Warbler (above), one of the rarest birds in the world, at the entrance to the nest which is built on the ground and roofed with a grass bower. The bird nests only in three Michigan counties under jack pines not over 18 feet in height. (AP photo).

mon and boat down the Au Sable on July 1, 1903, it took him 10 days to find the nest.

He has recorded that the thrill of being the first to examine the nest of the rare species was indescribable.

The drama of the migration and strange nesting habits of the bird, which was going on unknown to man long before Dr. Kirtland, is being enacted again today as the birds return to their Michigan breeding grounds.

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