

BIRD OF FIRE

by
Les D. Line



Suddenly I heard a new song, so rich, loud and clear, I knew it must be the one I was in search of . . . Its song is the most beautiful of any warbler, so wild and has such a ringing, liquid quality I feel well repaid for my trip by this one experience . . .”

This is the story of a great discovery, a momentous find which cost the University of Michigan the whole sum of \$36. It is the chronicle of an historic moment in the annals of ornithology, and of how two trout fishermen stumbled on the secret of a real-life phoenix, a bird which thrives in the aftermath of conflagration.

The date was July 2, the year 1903. Four days earlier, at 4 a.m., Norman A. Wood, curator of birds at the U of M had stepped onto the platform of the Michigan Central depot at the old lumber town of Roscommon.

There was just a faint hint of impending daylight over the crowns of the spruces, pines and birches which encircled the northern Lower Peninsula village. It had been, Wood later

told the scientific world, a tedious night's travel from Ann Arbor, with two changes of cars and a four-hour layover at Saginaw. But he was anxious, excited, hopeful. And by 7 a.m., without any rest, he had hired a row-boat and was drifting down the Au Sable River's south branch, his destination the Oscoda County farm of James A. Parmalee on the main stream, some 60 miles distant.

“In places the bank is low and covered with cedar and tamarack, birch and spruce, some elms and a few basswoods . . . I notice harebells, a red lily and a curious flower, like a morning glory in shape, which is white and grows on a short stem. I cast three flies and take about 20 trout, all brook, and beauties, but all under eight inches but two.”

This, however, was no ordinary trek to collect specimens for the museum. Northbound the afternoon of June 29 on a Toledo, Ann Arbor and Northern train, Wood penciled in shaky script in his three by five pocket notebook:

"Left at 4:55 on Monday p.m. with tools and supplies, bound for the Au Sable—the supposed home of Kirtland's warbler. If they are there I shall find them, and hope to see and describe their nest."

They were there, Wood did find them, and he did see their nest and tell the world that a mystery of more than five decades duration was solved. But it wasn't exactly that easy. Moreover, the missing piece to a puzzle which began on the shore of Lake Erie 52 years earlier nearly wound up in the drink of Big Creek.

A smattering of history . . .

The saga of *Dendroica kirtlandii*, Michigan's famous—and on occasion controversial—jack-pine bird began on May 31, 1851, near Cleveland, Ohio. There, at the farm of naturalist Dr. Jared P. Kirtland, a heretofore unknown warbler was captured. By coincidence, the Smithsonian Institution's Spencer F. Baird was returning to Washington from a scientific session in Cincinnati and had stopped to chat with his old friend.

Dr. Baird took the specimen to Washington and, when he published its description the next year, named the bird in honor of the physician-teacher-horticulturalist who compiled the Buckeye State's first lists of birds, fish, mammals, and reptiles. For the record, a snake, mollusk and fossil plant also bear the Kirtland name.

Ironically, a Kirtland's warbler had been taken on shipboard near the Bahama Island 10 years earlier but would repose unnoticed in a museum drawer until 1865. At least 71 more were subsequently collected in the Bahamas, pinpointing beyond a doubt the little yellow-breasted migrant's

winter residence. Yet the bird's breeding range was a matter for conjecture—which placed its summer home anywhere from Cuba to the Arctic.

In the next two decades, five more spring migrants were to be found, four in Ohio. The exception was a female collected at Ann Arbor on May 15, 1875. And its condition indicated eggs would be laid in about two weeks.

"In many discussions on this subject . . . I had decided that this bird would be found breeding in north Michigan. I was of the opinion that it bred in the Upper Peninsula, north of Mackinac."

Earl H. Frothingham, a native of Iowa, was a University of Michigan senior-to-be in the summer of 1903. He was an assistant in the museum and, in Wood's own words, "an experienced field ornithologist."

Thomas G. Gale, a native of Big Rapids, was a year younger, and a classmate, fraternity brother, and roommate of Frothingham. Moreover, they shared a love for fishing.

It was Gale who suggested a vacation trip to the AuSable. And it was Frothingham who packed a .22 rifle with fine shot ammunition to collect small rodents for the museum. That proved a providential afterthought.

Thus the two students left West Branch the morning of June 13 by buckboard for the Parmalee home near Butler Bridge—Parmalee Bridge today—which spans the river on the Luzerne-Red Oak road, four miles east of the Crawford-Oscoda County line.

The morning of June 15 found the young men hiking among jack pines

on a ridge near the AuSable, contemplating a campsite at a scenic kink in the stream called Lovsey's Bend — about three miles upstream from Parmalee's. And it was here that Frothingham first heard an unfamiliar bird song, a resounding burst of melody which he traced to a strange warbler, one of several singing in the vicinity.

Natives labeled this the Four-Mile Plains, and it had been swept by fire in 1897. Which means the young jack pines had just reached the size known today to be acceptable as nesting habitat to the finicky Kirtland's warbler.

Still hunting a satisfactory niche for their borrowed tent, the anglers — with Parmalee along to bring back the team — left the farm just before noon for Blonde Dam on Big Creek, near the junction of today's Down River and Lovells roads. En route through a vast stand of jack pines, they frequently heard Frothingham's new bird singing. And near the Crawford County border, Gale took the gun and shot one from a towering pine stub.

"I asked him why he did not take more, and he said 'I knew they had nests and hate to take breeding birds. I never thought of it being Kirtland's warbler.' This is not to be wondered at, on account of its rarity."

Remnants of Blonde Dam — used by river crews to flush logs downstream into the AuSable's north branch in spring — still remain. It was here that Frothingham made a study skin of the bird and dangled it from a tent flap to dry. And it was here, when camp was broken several days later, that Gale suggested tossing the then bedraggled carcass in the creek.

But the trained naturalist's desire for an accurate identification by curator Wood prevailed. Which proved a providential forethought.

And which prompted Wood's urgent AuSable journey. Where this narrative began . . .

Wood's first stop was Camp Douglas — near where Mason Chapel greets modern South Branch canoeists. A dollar bought him supper, a bunk for the night and a lumberjack breakfast before resuming his float down "a river full of trees," where he lured "some fine rainbow trout in good looking places" with his fly rod. He added two bald eagles, blue herons, "plenty of cedar birds" (waxwings) and a junco to his running list of birds seen along the stream. And dusk found the ornithologist at Butler Bridge, where James Donnelly — father of Mrs. Parmalee — offered lodging.

Dawn, July 2 . . .

"I started out this morning to find Dendroica kirtlandii . . . Crossing the river bottom I came to a steep terrace which forms the edge of the plains. This slope is very wet and in places fine springs seep out . . . Climbing it I found a rather level plain, the ground covered with a mat of wintergreen, sweetfern and trailing arbutus . . . As I wandered slowly along I suddenly heard a new song . . ."

"We-chee chee-chee-chee-r-r-r!"

That's how Norman Wood described the song of his first Kirtland's warbler, mingled with the music of song sparrows, juncos, vesper sparrows and other birds of the barrens. Birders ever since have marveled at the voice of this songster, so unlike the buzzing or trills of other warblers. And persistent! Indeed, one sang

The nest is small . . .



. . . but the mouths are many.

2,212 times in a single day.

"I tried to get sight of the singer but failed, on account of his keeping low down in the bushes . . . He seems to have the power of ventriloquism . . . Then I was so near I was amazed at the volume of sound. He sat quite erect, threw forward his head and the wonderful song rang out . . . Sorry to say I shot the beautiful singer and carried his body away — in the interest of science."

Wood's ultimate goal was to discover a Kirtland's warbler nest with eggs or young birds — the indisputable proof this was really their breeding locale. He spent the next day in the rain in a futile search near the mouth of Lower Big Creek, downstream from Butler Bridge and north of Luzerne. He found no warblers and returned to Four-Mile Plains.

The key to success, Wood believed, would be locating a female Kirtland's. That chore was three days in the doing. The morning of July 6 found him exploring the vicinity of Lovsey's Bend, where the adventure was born

three weeks earlier.

"I have just found a pair of Kirtland's warblers and as I write the female is three feet away, fluttering her wings and seems very anxious . . . I am near a small heap of brush and logs and maybe the nest is here . . . The male comes as close as five or six feet, and as I go around on my hands and knees the female keeps very near . . ."

"She is now in the jack pines, low down, twisting and turning and all the time catching and eating flies and moths . . . The male is on top of a dead tub 20 feet high, singing. Near the top is a small hole and it may be the nest is there . . ."

But Wood was to be frustrated. He returned to the same area on the 7th, only to be foiled again. Moreover, he tried to photograph "Mrs. K" but couldn't "get her to keep still long enough." Thus he decided to visit a new "warbler ground" on the plains some seven miles west of Parmalee's, where the jack pines stood three to 10 feet high. "I have been

over hundreds of acres of this kind," he added in his notebook.

The breeze was from the northwest, the sky clear and the day already hot — 100 degree temperatures oftentimes bake these barrens by a summer noon — when Wood and Parmalee finished breakfast on July 8 and hitched a horse for the day's exploration. They reached the latest colony of Kirtland's warblers by 10 a.m. And they were about 250 yards from the county line — just north of the present Old River Road Truck Trail — when a handsome male was spotted atop a blackened tree skeleton, a big green worm in his mouth. Wood stopped the buggy to watch, certain a nest was nearby. Perhaps, as he had opined earlier, on the ground.

"He sang a number of times but never dropped the worm. When he saw me he seemed quite uneasy and worked his tail and gave an anxious tone to his song . . . Down into the jack pine he went!"

Wood rushed over. And found neither bird nor nest! Moments later the elusive warbler was back at his old place on the stub with another worm. And again he dove down. This would be the greatest moment in Norman A Wood's long life.

"Suddenly I saw the nest, at the foot of a jack pine six feet tall, partially covered with low blueberry bushes and sweetfern plants. In the nest were two young birds a few days old and, as luck would have it, one beautiful egg, pinkish white and thinly sprinkled with chocolate brown spots gathered in a wreath at the larger end."

It's easy to understand Wood's excitement. The tail-wagger whose nest

he had finally uncovered is one of the most attractive of "the butterflies of the bird world," as America's warblers have been dubbed by naturalist Roger Tory Peterson.

Wood's trophy was a neat and compact depression in the ground, thickly lined with fine dead grasses and pine needles and a few hairs from a horse's mane or tail. "I will predict," he wrote in his journal that night, "that these birds always choose dry, sandy plains covered with a low growth of jack pine." Wood still felt *Dendroica kirtlandii* would be found breeding in the Upper Peninsula as well. Only on this point was he to be proven wrong. For every Kirtland's warbler nest since has been logged within 60 miles of this very first location.

The University of Michigan curator would remain on the AuSable another week, studying this nest and a second found just across the Crawford County line, collecting birds and mammals for the museum, taking photographs.

He returned to Roscommon — a 30-mile overland trip this time — on a cold and cloudy July 16. To his earlier expenses he added 75 cents for a bed, haircut and shave, \$12 for horse hire, \$8 for 10 days' lodging at Donnelly's and \$5.45 for train fare home — in all, a total expense of \$36.

A half-century later, a monument would be erected to the creature which was Norman Wood's claim to fame. And the state and federal governments would set aside large tracts of land to ensure the cherry songsters' continuing good health.

Les Line is outdoor editor of the Midland Daily News. He credits Fern M. Holden of Grayling and Harold Mayfield of Toledo, two Kirtland's warbler authorities, for the material that made this article.