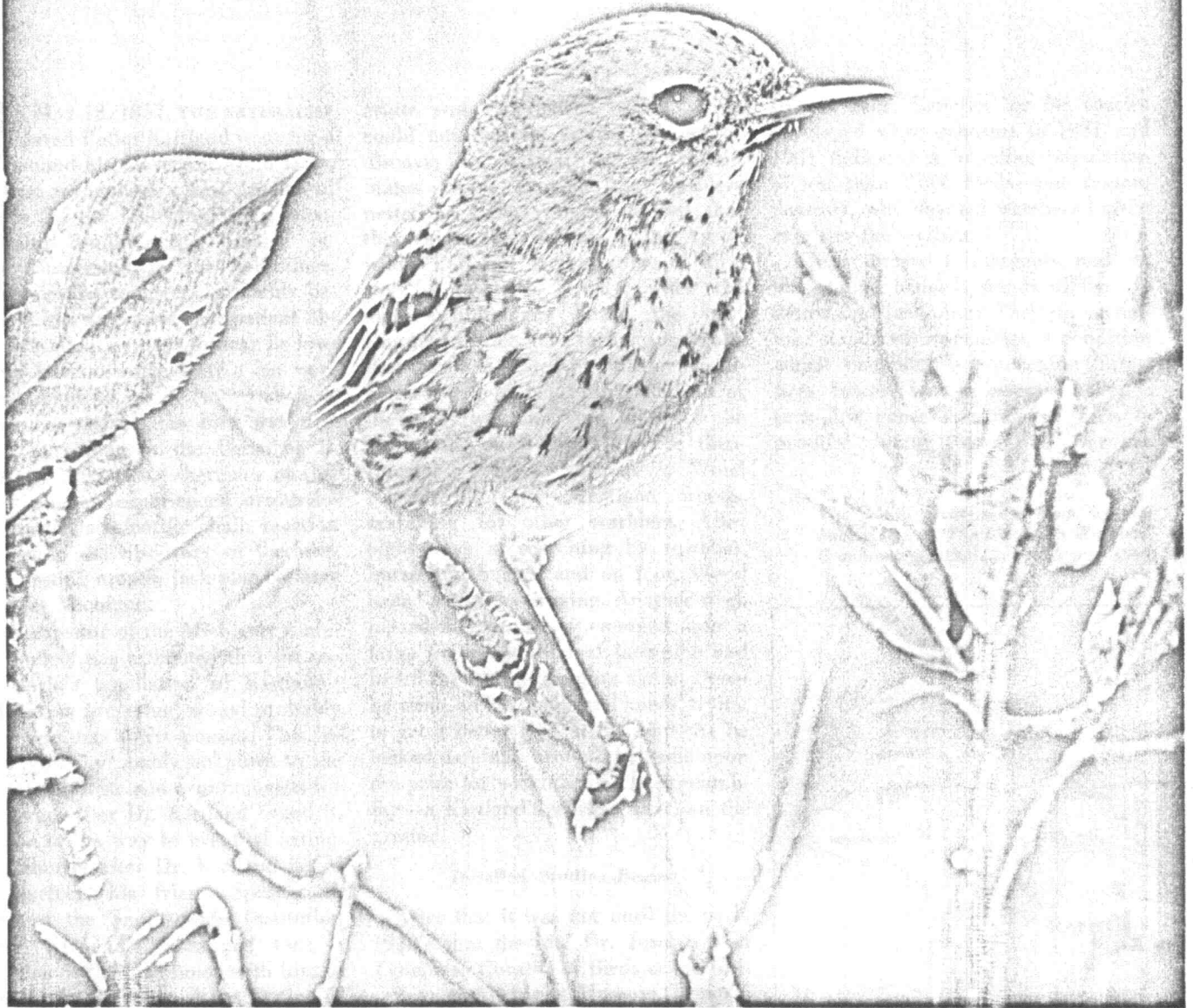


Kirtland's Warbler: Feathers and Flight

by Vera Strider



Photograph by Dow Chemical Co.

The pert and colorful Kirtland's warbler, *Dendroica kirtlandii*, was one of the species of birds first listed as "possibly in danger of extinction" in the Fish and Wildlife Service's news release on endangered species of native American animals. The bird nests only in Michigan's jack-pine country.

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By Verne Stricker

ON MAY 13, 1857, THE NATURALIST Jared Potter Kirtland went for a walk around his Cleveland, Ohio farm, and first recognized a new species of warbler. In the following years scientists and ornithologists became intensely interested in the half-ounce, lemon-breasted songster—probably because it was so elusive that patient observers waited for days to hear its low-pitched burst of song. Only a few were lucky enough to see it. Now known as Kirtland's warbler, the bird was first found to winter in the Bahamas in 1879; in 1903 two fishermen, one of whom was an experienced ornithologist, started a scientific chain reaction that led to the discovery of the warbler's nesting area in jack-pine country in Lower Michigan.

One director of the Michigan Audubon Society has estimated that the entire world's population of Kirtland's warblers, put together, would probably weigh less than thirty pounds. This little songbird, probably unknown to the bulk of scientists and ornithologists for fifty years after Dr. Kirtland found it, may be on its way to eventual extinction. Shortly after Dr. Kirtland heard the warbler, his friend Spencer F. Baird of the Smithsonian Institution visited Kirtland's farm and took a specimen of the bird home with him to Washington for study. A description of the species was published a year later, and it was found that ten years earlier, a specimen taken near the Bahama Islands was buried, unnoticed, in the specimen files of the museum. Before the turn of the century, scientists and laymen collected about 76 more specimens of the tiny bird, but even the most

astute and experienced ornithologists could not find its nesting ground or discover its habitat in the United States. Some thought the warblers nested in Cuba; others claimed that they raised their broods in the Arctic wilds. Patterns of migration, if any, were a mystery. Finally, when the angler-ornithologist heard the bird singing in Michigan, earlier suspicions that warblers nested in Ohio or Michigan seemed to be confirmed. One of the birds was shot and taken to the University of Michigan, where then-Curator of Birds Norman A. Wood rushed into the Michigan woods, searching for other warblers. After eight days of searching by rowboat, horse and buggy, and on foot, Wood heard a warbler singing. Another week passed before Wood emerged into a large fire-swept tract of jack-pine and heard the warbler singing again. Down he went, on his hands and knees, trying to get a better look at the bird. As he looked carefully around, he came upon the prize for which he had been searching—a Kirtland's warbler nest, on the ground.

Detailed Studies Begin

After that it was not until the early 1930's that the late Dr. Joselyn Van Tyne, also Curator of Birds at the University of Michigan Museum, began a detailed study of the seemingly mysterious Kirtland's warbler and its habitat. He and his field companion, Harold Mayfield, author of *The Kirtland's Warbler* (1960), spent over twenty years learning all they could about the little bird with the blue-grey head, bright yellow breast, and boldly black-

striped back. Concern for the species developed when censuses in 1951 and 1961 indicated a breeding population of less than 1,000 birds—one reason, possibly, why devoted watchers hardly ever saw the warbler.

These unique tail-waggers nest on the ground beneath stands of five- to fifteen-foot jack-pines. They prefer natural stands with openings, a condition which commonly occurs after forest fires. Intense heat is essential to open jack-pine cones and release seeds to produce young trees. But over the

The black areas show main warbler habitat. From "The Kirtland's Warbler," Cranbrook Institute of Science, 1960.

Map by the author

