

Can We Save

Waning

Warblers?

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MIO — There are only 15 pounds of Kirtland's Warblers left in the world. That's how much 400 of the little songsters would weigh if all could be put on a scale at the same time. By this time next year there may be even fewer.

Known also as "Jackpine Warblers," the feathered migrants nest only in specific areas of Michigan's north-central lower peninsula. Winters they are found in the Bahamas, a far flap from their summer quarters.

During recent years, under a concerted effort by the U.S. Forest Service, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources and hosts of organizations and individual bird lovers, the little yellow-breasted warbler seemed to be making fine progress. This summer, however, a survey showed these birds had suffered a 60 per cent decline since the last census ten years ago.

No finger of guilt can be pointed at any single cause unless it is at people in general. Wildlife experts feel the drop in warbler numbers is due to a combination of insecticides, cot-

tage builders, the national guard, and possibly, cowbirds.

Proper habitat is extremely important to Kirtland's Warblers. As their other name indicates, these birds insist on nesting under jackpines of a specific size. Preferences run to trees 8 to 20 years old in the 6 to 8-foot size range but with just enough scattered openings. Once trees reach 16 to 20 feet, the warblers stop nesting there.

In past years, when an occasional forest fire would run across Michigan, conditions were ideal for re-seeding of new jackpine stands. For some reason, this tree reseeds best after the cones are subjected to the heat of fire. Now, however, pruned forest fires have been nearly eliminated. This is why fires are now being set on purpose by the DNR and the USFW in the areas where the only Kirtland's Warblers in the world like to nest.

Back in 1963, a 4,000-acre block of the Huron National Forest in Oscoda County was dedicated as a special management area for the birds. The same summer a 4-foot-high replica of the unique warbler was dedicated on the courthouse

lawn in Mio. Among those present for the ceremonies was Roger Tory Peterson, probably the world's foremost songbird authority.

Prior to the federal action, DNR had set aside three separate land tracts in Crawford, Oscoda and Ogemaw counties for intensive management of habitat for Kirtland's Warblers. Both the DNR and USFS action came about at the urging of the Michigan Audubon Society.

In 1961, when an intensive survey was made from Ogemaw County north to Presque Isle County and from Lake Huron west to Kalkaska County, 1,000 of the warblers were counted. Ten years later, despite the best management techniques available, the census showed only 400 were left in Crawford, Iosco, Montmorency, Ogemaw, Oscoda and Otsego counties.

Where they had formerly nested in 86-square-mile sections a decade ago, they are now confined to only 27 sections. By next summer they could be squeezed down to an even smaller area. At its September meeting, the Michigan Audubon Society called for an annual census of the rare bird, rather than one every 10 years. No endangered species should be sur-

veyed only once in every decade, declare Audubonists.

During the past 10 years the country around the Kirtland's favorite nesting areas has undergone great changes despite the efforts of state and federal agencies, people pressure has been increasing at a tremendous rate.

New cottages are being built, new subdivision, new roads, utility right-of-ways are being cut and oil and gas interests are now in the general area. The National Guard even held war games in some of the warbler nesting areas until finally pressured by outraged bird lovers to move out.

The actual influence of pesticides is suspected but unknown. Surveys of cowbirds, which lay their eggs in the ground nests of the warblers, are also checked periodically and there is little doubt the cowbirds are doing their part to endanger the survival of young Kirtland's.

Can the jackpine warbler be saved? Nobody knows for sure but a lot of people are hoping and willing to make the attempt. Visitors are being kept out of the forest service's area except by permit during the time the birds are nesting. Habitat is also being juggled.

The USFS area was recently in-

creased by 125 acres, while several hundred acres of marginal nesting area was eliminated from the dedicated section and a like amount of good nesting area was added.

Ken Adams, District Supervisor for the Huron National Forest, feels the changes will benefit the warblers by giving them a better, more protected nesting site. The 125 acres added has now been cut and a rolling chopper used to break up the ground before being seeded with jackpine. Obviously this won't become nesting cover for a number of years, though.

In the past couple sessions of the Michigan legislature efforts have been made to name the Kirtland's Warbler as the official state bird. Supporters feel such a step would help emphasize the aid needed by the little bird. The move, however, has gone nowhere. Possibly lawmakers feel it is all a lost cause.

There are many in Michigan who won't agree with that viewpoint and are stubbornly slugging it out with the forces that are the greatest threats to this bird which nests only in our state. Should the Kirtland's Warbler be allowed to disappear, Michigan will be a poorer place to live.

We can't let that happen.

