



Always a rare sight, the half-ounce Kirtland's warbler may now be truly on the way out

## Search for a vanishing breed

The Kirtland's warblers' soft, sweet song  
is fading from earshot in the Michigan countryside

by Judy Eldridge

Even in the summer, when the days are longest, 5 a. m. comes early; there is barely enough light to find your way from your campsite to the join.

This particular morning was cold and wet. It had rained eleven straight days.

Judy Alderson had been camped at Kneff Lakes National Forest campground more than a month. Craig Orr had been over at Mack Lake but had moved his tent here now. Bill Irvin's tent was next to Craig's and Jean Skellinger and Doris Lea were in Jean's trailer overlooking the lake; they had all come in over the weekend. Joe and Verna Beaver's orange nylon tent was down the hill, abandoned in favor of a warm, dry motel room in town.

I'd arrived the night before, with sleeping bag but no tent, and was relieved to have Judy ask me to bunk in with her in her tent trailer. I was meeting them all for the first time except Bill, whom I'd met briefly once before.

This morning Judy's alarm rang impossibly soon and we hustled into clammy clothes and out into the dawn for the jaunt up the hill to Kneff Lakes' modern bathroom facility; that is, flush toilets and cold running water.

From there it was over to Jean's trailer to be fortified with steaming hot coffee. And then we were on our way to the Au Sable State Forest and

the reason I had driven 150 miles to get here the night before after putting in a long day's work back home.

We were, believe it or not, going to count Kirtland's warblers, tiny blue-gray birds with lemon-yellow breasts and a loud, clear song, now on the endangered species list.

The warbler has been the subject of study since it was first identified in 1862. It always was known to be small in number, though it probably once "flourished" in comparison to today's population.

In 1951, a field census turned up only a thousand of them. Ten years later the number stood at the same mark but steps were being taken to protect them, steps like protecting areas of land where they were known to nest.

Then in a 1971 census, only 201 singing males were counted, making the estimated population 402.

Alarmed, the people who'd been keeping track of the warblers — from the Department of Natural Resources, U.S. Forest Service, Michigan Audubon Society and others — set up a yearly census.

In 1972, only 200 singing males were sighted. But in 1973, there was a small but encouraging increase — 218 were counted.

Now we gathered here to take part in the 1974 census, full of hope the count would be higher.

Ours was only one of several crews taking part in the survey. George W. "Bill" Irvine, U.S. Forest Service wildlife biologist from the Cadillac office, was our crew chief.

Jean and Doris are elementary school teachers in Cadillac. This was their fourth year on the census.

Judy recently graduated as a wildlife ecologist from the University of Wisconsin at Madison, her home town, and is working this summer for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as a guide to the warbler's grounds and as a cowbird trapper.

Craig will get his degree as a biologist next year from Central Michigan University. His parents now live in Perry but Craig is spending the summer as a guide, like Judy, and banding birds.

The Beavers, who joined us along the road to the nesting grounds, are "Birders," as they put it, from Evanston, Ill., where he is professor of linguistics at Northwestern University. Last year they came up to visit the Kirtland's warblers

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nesting range. This year they volunteered to help in the count.

So now at last we came to what had been puzzling me since I'd first written Bill and asked if I could join his crew.

That is, how do you count birds? How do you know you aren't counting the same one twice, or missing some?

By 6:30, we hunched down in our heavy jackets along a sandy road, waiting to set out into the rain-soaked jackpine barren in search of the warblers.

Bill spaced us out to cover all the likely terrain, for the warblers are very fussy birds as to where they will nest, making it easy to select the likely spots and eliminate the rest without fear of missing any birds.

First of all, the Kirtland's warblers now nest only in four counties across Michigan's mitten and nowhere else in the world. They were once found in eleven counties but as their number dwindled, their nesting areas shrank in toward the middle. Last year Bill found four warblers in Wexford County. The rest were counted in Crawford, Oscoda and Ogemaw counties.

Secondly, the warblers nest at the base of a jackpine, which is why they are often called the jackpine warbler. The Michigan Audubon Society uses this name for its state publication.

The jackpine, however, must be just so; not too small, at least five feet high, but not too big. "If it's too big for your living room, it's too big for the warbler," someone said at the symposium I'd attended on the warbler earlier this summer at Douglas Lake. The tree must not be crowded in too closely with others either but must have some cover for protection. When the trees in the nesting area become too large, the area is abandoned.

We set off across the barrens. The others' boots

never quite dried out from the day before. I wore walking shoes but after a few steps into the wet grasses we all were walking with a definite squishing sound.

I stayed close to Bill, since I was here not so much to count birds as to learn more about them, and their habitat — and the people who come to count them. They were more than mere bird-watchers, I knew already, for most of them were giving up some of their vacation time for these early morning tramps through the wet jackpines. As for the rest, Judy summed it up when she talked to me about her summer job. "I feel guilty taking money for it," she said.

Now, though I tried, it seemed impossible to sort out all the bird songs. And I soon found there were many my untrained ears didn't even hear. Often, during this day and the next, others shared identification, or questioned another's identification, of some bird call I missed completely.

Bill motioned for me to listen. I heard nothing. We moved ahead, stopping now and then for Bill to determine direction. And at last, I heard it too. "Wee, chee, chee, chee, chee," came the call.

Bill pointed to the top of a bare dead tree, called a snag.

The warbler was perched high up, and as I watched, he tipped his head back, pointing his beak to the sky, and sang his emphatic song. "Wee, chee, chee, chee, chee."

He was incredibly tiny. Even looking through Bill's field glasses, he was incredibly tiny. I was excited, and awed. All the people, the time, the effort, the legislation, the concern, to save this little bird weighing half an ounce.

All the Kirtland's warblers in the world would hardly fill one large grocery bag, someone said at the symposium.

Now I could believe it.

I wished I could photograph the bird, but he was too small and too far up in the tree for my camera lens. Anyway, photographing them in the field is frowned on as disturbing to their nesting. Even visitors are frowned on, except those brought here by summer guides like Craig and Judy.

I would have been content to stay here and listen to this warbler but we had to move on, the little warbler's song fading behind us.

And now I learned how you can count Kirtland's warblers with such accuracy. They are territorial birds, each pair having its own territory, adjacent to perhaps but not overlapping that of another pair. Sometimes, though, they confuse you, I was told. The warbler isn't a bold bird but he is curious. He may follow or even fly ahead to the edge of his territory so that you're not sure it's just one until you've passed beyond his range.

Soon we entered the territory of another singer.

It was to be a rare treat, however, one I would experience only five times in the two days.

The eight of us met in the center of the area to compare notes. Bill, Joe and Judy decided to backtrack an area where one was in doubt. Counts are not done by guess; if you are not sure, you go back over the area and listen again.

The rest of us stopped to look over a cowbird trap.

Cowbird trapping is one of Judy's main chores for the fish and wildlife service and one that earns her some kidding from the others. She was tending three traps, they were not hers.

Biologists have found the greatest hazard to the warblers probably is the cowbird, a parasite predator who lays its eggs in the warbler's nest, booting out the warblers' eggs and allowing the undiscerning warbler to hatch and raise the cowbird young.

To eliminate the cowbird from the warbler's



The nest of the Kirtland's warbler is at the base of jackpine trees — trees not too small, not too large.

