

Spring Forest Fires Planned

Kirtland's Warbler Needs Help

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Outdoor Editor

U.S. Forest Service to burn more than 350 of the Huron National Forest this spring in a multi-year effort to save Michigan's rare "bird of fire," the Kirtland's warbler, from extinction.

In Byelich, Department of Natural Resources wildlife planner and chairman of the recovery team, says the warbler's population has been declared endangered species — and is only 167 breeding birds left in the world.

"I BELIEVE we have saved every one," says Byelich. "That represents a drop of 500 pairs in 1961. The recovery team for the Kirtland's warbler now weighs 20-25 pounds."

Byelich says the birds, which inhabit the entire breeding range within 10 townships of Huron, Ogemaw and Oshtemo counties, are endangered because of loss of habitat. "We're taking steps this spring to post the areas and get people out during the nesting seasons," he explains. "We're driving into areas to remove cameras and tape recorders — a big problem."

"I'M NOT condemning the warbler, but we feel we had better do everything possible now before it's too late," he says. "I think people will cooperate if they know the prob-

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Meanwhile, Byelich says the recovery team is assigning responsibilities and preparing a step-down plan for habitat, protection from cowbirds and research.

Cowbirds lay their eggs in Kirtland's nest and the little wood warblers hatch and rear the young cowbirds which outcompete their own young for food.

"THE U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has been trapping cowbirds in the Kirtland's breeding range since 1971," he points out. "Before that Dr. Nicholas Cuthbert of Central Michigan University trapped them to check the effectiveness."

"Nests checked in the vicinity of cowbird traps have been almost free of any cowbird parasitism," he explains. "Nests away from the influence of traps have been parasitized 60 to 70 per cent."

Bill Irvine, U.S. Forest Service wildlife biologist for the Huron-Manistee National Forest, says 300 acres northeast of McKinley and 55 acres south of Luzerne will be burned this spring to create new Kirtland's habitat.

KIRTLAND'S REQUIRE not only jack pines from about seven to 20 feet but also a specific combination of ground cover — grassy

patches with bluestem, wild oat and other grasses, sedges and various broad-leaved forbes and patches of blueberry, bearberry, sand cherry and other shrubs and exposed sand areas with some reindeer moss and other lichens, he says.

"The primary purpose of the fire is to reduce the accumulation of organic material left on the ground after cutting and prepare the soil for the succession of grasses, sedges, forbes and shrubs to provide suitable ground cover," Irvine notes.

KIRTLAND'S, ALSO known as the Jack Pine warbler, have been called the bird of fire because fire opens jack pine cones and reseeds the area. It has been suggested as the state bird.

Meanwhile, the DNR has named the Kirtland's the first featured species of Michigan's Living Resources Program aimed at raising funds for habitat improvements and research for designated endangered wildlife and plant species.

Dick Lehman, Information and Education Division chief, says the department hopes to raise at least \$20,000 this year from sale of 16 by 20-inch posters, shoulder patches and vinyl decals carrying the Kirtland's portrait.

HE SAYS the poster, made from a photograph by Bob Harrington, DNR wildlife photographer, and the patch and decal designed by Chuck Schafer, I & E artist, should be available sometime in July. The patch will sell for \$2 each or \$1.50 for the poster and decal, together, explains Lehman.

Merrill "Pete" Petoskey, Wildlife Division chief, suggests that proceeds of the first sale be used exclusively for habitat improvement for the Kirtland's warbler.

THE MICHIGAN'S Living Resources Program was authorized by the Legislature last year, notes Lehman. The department hopes to keep the program within reach of school children and plans to feature a different species each year.

"A free brochure on the life history of the Kirtland, its current status and what is being done to help it survive will accompany each item," he says. "We hope to appeal to bird watchers, hunters, fishermen, environmentalists and especially youngsters."

BYELICH SAYS Michigan's highest population occurred in the 1885-early 1900s: The birds were largely ignored until the 1930s when Harold Mayfield, now-retired Toledo industrialist and author of "The Kirtland's Warbler" and Josselyn Van Tyne, U-M ornithologist, began working with the birds.



Poster portrait of Kirtland's warbler

They were joined by Dr. Larry Walkinshaw, Muskegon dentist, and the late Verne Dockham, long-time Oscoda County conservation officer, both amateur ornithologists, who collected a lot of data on the warblers in the 30s, 40s and 50s.

Byelich, who now heads up the recovery team designated

by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, began research on the Kirtlands with Dockham while working as a young biologist at Mio.

WITH DOCKHAM, he was successful in getting the DNR to set aside three four-square-mile areas — 7,600 acres for the Kirtlands.