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Nature Scrapbook

By J. B. OWEN



KIRTLAND'S WARBLER

singing males. Multiplied by two, this would give a total of 864 adult warblers.

60 PER CENT DROP

Ten years later Mayfield led another census and got a total of 502 singing males. In 1971 the group of 48 census takers could find only 201 singing males — a drop of 60 per cent.

If the little firebird was to be saved from extinction, something would have to be done about the cowbirds. Large traps were designed and baited with grain. In the next nesting season, over 2000 cowbirds were destroyed and the number of young warblers produced in each nest returned almost to normal.

Mayfield started annual counts in 1973 and that year found 216 singing males. The small ray of hope was dashed last summer when, according to Audubon magazine, only 167 were counted.

The number and the bird itself were so small that Mayfield remarked that all the Kirtland's warblers in the world could fit into one large shopping bag.

COUNT IS UP

What would be the score this year? I phoned Mayfield at his home in Waterville, Ohio, just before writing this column and asked if the count total has been completed. The phone was silent a moment while he went to get the official figures. Then came the news that the number of singing males counted in 1975 was 179 — up 12 from a year ago.

Mayfield added that this increase was hardly more than the margin for error in such a count, but that at least the downward plunge has been stopped for this year.

The little "firebird" continues to flicker on the brink of extinction, but this summer marked at least a pause in the steady drop in its numbers that has been going on probably since man started controlling forest fires.

The bird, the Kirtland's warbler, lives nowhere else in world than in young jack pine forests of North Central Michigan. For centuries the little bird found its favorite size trees in areas where new growth was coming back after forest fires caused by lightning.

The jack pine — a runt among other members of the pine family — also thrives by fire. The seed cones could hang unopened on the tree for years, but after the area was swept by fire the seared seeds would sprout and little Christmas-tree-like pines would quickly spring up among charred snags.

The Kirtland's warbler nests in the dense growth on the ground in such an area as soon as the new trees are about five feet tall. The undergrowth thins out as the trees become taller, and by the time they reach 12 to 18 feet the warblers abandon the area.

AREAS BURNED

Man's protection of the trees from fire was a blow to the little firebird but for several years now state and Federal forestry officials have regularly burned appropriate size areas to insure that the Kirtland's warblers will have suitable nesting grounds.

But by the time the habitat problem was solved, a second danger threatened the existence of these little yellow-breasted warblers.

The cowbird had built up a good-sized population and was finding the Kirtland's warbler a new and easy victim. Over 15 years ago warbler nests which were parasited by the cowbirds lost 78 per cent of the warbler eggs, either by the eggs being thrown out by the cowbirds or by the young warblers starving in the competition for food with the baby cowbirds, according to Harold Mayfield, author of the book, "The Kirtland's Warbler," and leading authority on the rare bird.

At its peak, the Kirtland's warbler never numbered more than a very few thousand, but no effort was made to count the birds until 1951 when Mayfield and 32 others visited all the colonies and counted 432