UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Faculty of Forestry and
Landscape Architecture

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RARE BIRD FOUND IN ONTARIO

The Kirtland's warbler (Dendroica kirtlandii) is one of the world's endangered bird species, verging on extinction. Its population has fallen from about 1,000 birds in 1961 to an estimated 440 birds in 1977. The reason for this reduction in numbers is not known. It could be due to habitat change, parasitism by cowbirds, death from storms during migration, or other causes.

A small North American songbird, the Kirtland's warbler winters in the Bahama Islands and migrates to and from its only known breeding grounds in the State of Michigan. Until now, it has been considered a rare visitor to Canada. It was last seen in Ontario in 1967.

Professor Paul L. Aird of the Faculty of Forestry and Landscape Architecture and the School of Continuing Studies at the University of Toronto believes that breeding grounds for the rare Kirtland's warbler could exist in Canada. His analysis of early-1900 bird migration records, combined with soil survey and forest survey information, recently led him to search for the Kirtland's warbler near Petawawa in Renfrew County, Ontario.

Dr. Aird received permission, through Vice-Admiral R.H. Falls, Acting Chief of Canada's Defence Staff, and Brigadier-General A. Christie, Commander of the Canadian Forces Base at Petawawa, to begin his search for the Kirtland's warbler on the Petawawa Base. An informal research agreement was made with Lieutenant-Colonel B. Gilchrist and Captain P. Jenkins whereby the University of Toronto would provide the search team and the Department of National Defence would provide a truck and some helicopter support for a thorough search of the Petawawa area.

The search procedure consisted of visiting potentially suitable areas and listening for the Kirtland's warbler song. The song is very characteristic and loud enough to be heard from one-quarter mile away. Amplified recordings of Kirtland's warbler songs, taken from the Federation of Ontario Naturalists' "Warblers" record, were played at each stop to stimulate birds to sing.

On June 9 a mature male Kirtland's warbler was discovered in a young jack-pine forest on the Canadian Forces Base at Petawawa. Its behaviour and its habitat were studied closely for the next five weeks. It is believed that

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this bird is a resident and not an accidental visitor. This belief is supported by two previous sightings of Kirtland's warblers on the Petawawa Base, one in 1916 and another in 1939. However, it is not known if the species is still breeding in the area since no eggs or young have been found.

The fact that Kirtland's warblers have been seen on the Canadian Forces Base at Petawawa in 1916, 1939 and again in 1977 is considered a major ornithological finding. It suggests the real possibility that this endangered species may be breeding beyond Michigan, and an expanded programme to search other areas should begin soon.

A news release on this finding was delayed to coincide with the release from the Government of Ontario that the Kirtland's warbler has been added to the list of endangered species receiving protection under the Endangered Species Act.

Some of the people who have helped Professor Aird in his search for the Kirtland's warbler include Dr. J. Bendell and Dr. B. Falls, University of Toronto; Dr. J. Barlow, Royal Ontario Museum; Mr. J. Bouvier, Algonquin College, and his wife; Mrs. M. McIntosh and Mrs. J. Wright, Quebec Society for the Protection of Birds; Mr. G. McKeating and Dr. D. Euler, Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources; Mr. M. Brigham, Ottawa; Mr. R. Barnhurst, McGill University; Mr. W. Walker, Atomic Energy Commission; Mrs. K. Selander, Deep River; and representatives from the Canadian Forces Base at Petawawa, the Canadian Forestry Service at Chalk River, and the Kirtland's Warbler Recovery Team in Michigan.

Professor Paul Aird, a professional forester, believes that the armed forces training activities have helped to maintain the Kirtland's warbler in the Petawawa area. The frequent disturbance from vehicles, trenching, felling trees, artillery installations, and the like, coupled with natural disturbance from fire and insects, have helped to maintain the young forest conditions that these warblers need.

Professor Aird states that the excellent cooperation and support received from Canadian Forces Base personnel at Petawawa have contributed greatly to the success of this University of Toronto research project. He hopes that through better understanding and research on the problems of survival we can help to reduce or offset the rate at which some of the world's endangered species of fauna and flora are diminishing.

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