

# michigan journal

## Grayling: Hey, you, get out of my nest!



by ERIC SHARP

**U**S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologists here are winning their war against the cowbird, a feathered freeloader which lays its eggs in the nests of the rare Kirtland's warbler and then goes off to enjoy the summer while the warblers hatch and rear the cowbird chicks. The experts are puzzled, however, because they can't see that their success in reducing cowbird parasitism has resulted in an increase in the number of Kirtland's warblers, a species so rare that its nesting areas are off-limits to humans from early spring through late summer.

Leonard Schumann, a senior biologist from the fish and wildlife service resource assistance office in East Lansing, recently loaded a couple of cages of cowbirds into the back of a pickup truck near Grayling. The male birds, in handsome plumage of iridescent dark blue and bronze, glared at the humans around them and used their sharp beaks on the smaller, drab-brown females to vent their frustration at being caged.

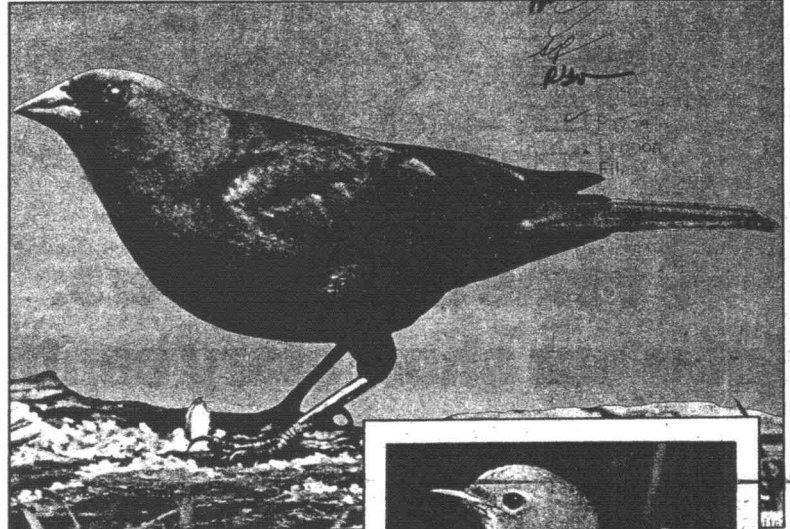
Essentially creatures of open spaces, cowbirds first came to Michigan on the heels of the loggers who stripped away the tall timber and the farmers who cleared what was left. They are wily and hard to catch, forcing biologists to go to a cowbird research center at Sandusky, Ohio, each

spring to obtain the first dozen or so to serve as Judas goats to lure in their Michigan brethren. The lure birds are put in big wood-and-chicken wire traps, each about 15 feet square and six feet high, which are left in open spaces in the pines where the warblers nest.

The lure birds decoy in others, most of which are destroyed except for a handful needed to keep the decoy system running. Schumann estimates the trapping program has killed about 3,500 cowbirds each spring, enough to make serious inroads into their numbers in the warbler nesting area but a figure which is virtually unnoticeable in the huge national cowbird population.

The cowbird, about the size of a robin, doesn't build a nest of its own. Instead, the female lays her eggs in the nests of other birds while the legitimate occupants are out looking for building materials or food.

Schumann says that if the owner of the nest has already laid eggs in it, the cowbird may toss out two or three to make room for her own. The cowbird chicks often hatch before the eggs of the rightful occupant, and the intruder chicks usually are bigger and stronger than the host birds' young. The result is that the host parents run themselves ragged raising the large-mouthed cowbirds while their chicks are



The cowbird, above, lays its eggs in the nests of the Kirtland's warbler, right, and then goes off to enjoy the summer while the warblers hatch and rear the cowbird chicks. The freeloaders leave no room in the nest for the young warblers, a species so rare that its nesting areas are off-limits to humans from early spring through late summer.



any insect-eating bird, but most species are well-enough established that the loss of a few of their young each year to cowbird chicks doesn't make any difference.

Things are different with Kirtland warblers. Last year biologists estimated there were only about 200 nesting pairs and a total population (fledglings and non-nesting adults) of perhaps 800 to 1,000. The loss of one Kirtland warbler chick to a cowbird brings the species a step closer to the extinction which naturalists have been fighting to save it from for several years.

The Kirtland warbler nests only in Michigan. In the past few years, a single male bird was sighted in

that these sightings were anything other than single birds which had strayed from their normal range.

Schumann says that before cowbird trapping began in 1972, cowbird eggs were found in as many as 60 percent of the Kirtland warbler nests. Last year, researchers found cowbird eggs in only one of 30 warbler nests inspected, the first case of cowbird parasitism in a Kirtland warbler nest in three years.

Kirtland warbler nesting areas owned by the state and federal governments are posted "Keep Out" to humans between April 28 and Aug. 15. The cowbird trapping program ends July 5, because while the warblers might lay two clutches of eggs in a sum-

Schumann says biologists don't know why the cowbird program has not resulted in a cause-and-effect increase in warbler population, especially since field researchers know that more young warblers are surviving the fledgling period.

"They winter in the Bahamas," he says, "and that's a long way to fly from Michigan (about 2,000 miles). Perhaps something is happening to them in the islands. We really don't know."

But he says the Kirtland warbler needs help if it is to avoid inclusion on that sad list of creatures which man has wiped from the face of the earth.

"That's the way it usually is," Schumann says.