

The Outdoor Scene

The Kirtland's Warbler

By JACK HAYES
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KIRTLAND'S warblers, a songbird that under the full load of a meal weigh no more than an ounce or two, apparently fly by the seat of their feathers.

They have no known air route out of the Bahama Islands to their mating sanctuary in the pine forests of Michigan's northern Lower Peninsula. And their estimated time of arrival is flexible because they are rarely seen taking off.

Furthermore, it's unknown whether they are a dawn patrol or they are night flyers, and if they fly in formation and with a flight leader.

And so, with all this secretiveness among these warblers, it's tempting to make them predictable by laying a wager of them.

Up in Grayling and Mio, the two district headquarters for officials who are

guardians of these endangered songbirds, they get up a pool with dates and time of day the first Kirtland's warbler will be sighted among the jack pines.

They hadn't been seen by early last week, but Lynda Van Allsburg, of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, is credited with being the first to hear one of them singing. She heard his mating call early last Monday morning.

"It was the first time I ever heard a warbler singing," she said. "He is hard to imitate, but he has a bouncy, happy song."

Ray Perez, a Michigan division of wildlife biologist, said the warblers usually arrive within a three-day period of May 9 to 12.

"But we don't know when they leave the Bahamas," he said. "Rarely does anybody see them take off, but then there are so many islands in the chain and the countryside is so thick with brush that it is hard to get through to where they winter."

Perez said they don't know whether these little warblers on their international flight make periodic rest stops along the way and whether they fly only when they have a tailwind.

Nevertheless, they now are on their Michigan nesting grounds, the only habitat in the world where they fall in love, incubate four or five eggs, raise their families, and then in September make a return flight to the Bahamas for another winter.

Grayling and Mio are 32 miles apart and located on a stretch of the Au Sable River, and in this area Kirtland's warblers live a sheltered life in kind of a welfare state.

This is a restricted outdoor warbler habitat and even the cowbirds have been chased out. Cowbirds, a free-spirited species indifferent to family responsibilities, lay their eggs in the warblers' nests as if putting them in a foster home.

The cowbird eggs are bigger and also are first to hatch. The industrious warblers bring food to them, thinking they are their offspring.

"The warbler never has learned to differentiate between its eggs and cowbirds' eggs," Bill Thurne, a Michigan division of wildlife biologist, said.

"They will incubate both species of

eggs, even though the cowbirds' are twice as large. Then when all the eggs are hatched, the baby cowbirds hog all the food and the little warblers go hungry and die.

"So we had to get rid of the cowbirds, and you won't find any around here anymore."

In fact, there aren't many Kirtland's warblers either. Thurne said there were only 250 pairs last year nesting in Michigan's glacial sands under the low-hanging branches of the jack pines.

And to protect them during their mating season, the area is off limits to the public from May 1 to Aug. 15, except for guided tours.

These tours began Saturday and will continue through July 4, but there is no assurance a Kirtland's warbler will be seen, though they may give themselves away with song.

Thurne said they sing for two reasons — one as a love call and the other as a kind of a battle cry to defend their territory.

But they don't sing in the Bahamas, Thurne said, and maybe that's why they are so hard to track down in the island tundra.

"By then," he said, "they already have mated and there's no need to do any more singing."

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Observed at Kirtland Community College, Roscommon, Mich., in the heart of Michigan's jack pine forests, this day's purpose is to promote the survival of the 200 nesting pairs of the Kirtland's Warbler in their native nesting area. The first of the species was identified in 1851 on the farm of Dr. Jared Kirtland near Cleveland.

Blade ★ ★ ★ May 22, 1982

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