

DNR CENSUS

Warbler numbers fall

By TIM MARCINKOSKI
Free Press Special Writer

Michigan's Kirtland's Warbler population is down almost 11 percent, according to the annual survey conducted by the Department of Natural Resources. The survey reported 207 singing male birds in their northern lower peninsula breeding grounds, 25 fewer than the 1981 census.

The state Kirtland's Warbler census was first organized by Harold Mayfield in 1951 when 432 singing males were reported. The census was taken again in 1961 with an all-time high of 502 male Kirtland's. Mayfield decided to take a yearly count beginning in 1971 and coordinated the census through 1975.

Thereafter, the Kirtland's Warbler recovery team delegated the job to the survey and statistics section of the DNR's Wildlife Division. Since the inception of the yearly census, the male warbler population has dropped as low as 167 in 1974.

Despite the decreased population of singing males, Lawrence Ryel, who heads the DNR's census of the threatened species, refuses to panic.

"You have to take a lot of things into account," Ryel said. "The wet spring in Michigan that hampers breeding, and the possibility of bad weather in their winter homes in the Bahamas along with other unknown factors could all (contribute) to the low 1982 count."

Apparently storms during migration and extremely dry weather in the Bahamas — which kills the Kirtland's primary food, insects — contribute

strongly to the bird's mortality rate.

RYEL FEELS that the state management plan for the Kirtland's Warbler is the best plan functioning for any of the endangered species and, although there is always some concern for the possible extinction of the population.

"Our goal is 1,000 pairs forever, added Ryel. "And with all that we have going for us as far as a successful and established territory for the birds . . . you've got to be optimistic."

The Kirtland's Warbler, also known as the jack-pine warbler, breeds only in a limited range of Michigan's north-central lower peninsula. The 1982 census reported singing males in the counties of Oscoda (72), Crawford (67), Ogemaw (44), Kalkaska (17), Roscommon (five), Iosco (one) and Marquette (one), where the first discovery of a male Kirtland's was reported in the upper peninsula, near Gwinn.

The birds are found only in dense stands of young jack pines, which is the predominant tree in the federal and state managed area. The breeding season is generally mid-May to late August, depending on weather conditions. They then spend the rest of the year in the Bahamas.

"The census . . . is taken during a 10-day period in June when the males have by then established a nesting site," Ryel said. This year's survey was taken by taken 22 DNR people, 18 federal workers and seven other volunteers.

THE BIRDS are ground nesters (un-

der the jack pines) and once a male has staked out his nesting area, his mating call is vociferous.

"It's a loud, ringing song," Ryel said. "Very few birds are actually seen but the male's voice is unmistakable. We figure that each singing male has a mate, so you figure we had 414 Kirtland's in the state this past year."

In the past, the state has tried to increase the Kirtland's Warbler population by burning stands of larger jack pines and by trapping cowbirds.

Burning makes room for young trees, which the birds prefer to the old.

Cowbirds, which do not build nests of their own, lay eggs in warbler nests. The warblers unknowingly hatch and rear the cowbird chicks. As the cowbirds grow, they force the young warblers out of the nest to die.

The cowbird problem, the main factor in the population drop between 1961 and '71, has since been alleviated.

Ryel said that the Kirtland's breeding area consists of 74,300 acres of state land, 54,640 acres of national forest and another 7,500 acres used by the Michigan National Guard for training. During breeding season, the areas are posted against trespassing.

"We want to leave the warblers alone as much as possible," he says. "That's why we did away with the cowbird trapping as well as banding of the birds. During breeding season, signs are posted everywhere to keep the warblers in as natural an environment as possible."

