

DNR says it's home on the range for warblers

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The state Department of Natural Resources declined Monday to swap a forest with popular hiking and snowmobile trails for a little-used military firing range that is home to an endangered bird species.

The state Department of Military Affairs, which co-ordinates National Guard training at Camp Grayling, asked the DNR last summer to trade it 8,000 acres of Kalkaska County forest for the 8,000-acre artillery and bombing range in Crawford County. The military no longer can shell the range because Kirtland's warblers nest in its jack pine forest.

Spokesman Maj. Michael Johnson said the National Guard, which owns or leases about 150,000 acres of land in Crawford, Otsego, Missaukee and Kalkaska counties for military exercises, wanted more land to practice new weapons systems and a new battle strategy that involves fighting behind enemy lines.

But DNR officials said the Kalkaska County land that the DNR owns is too valuable to surrender. The property includes a popular hiking path connecting Lake Michigan and Lake Huron, the Blue Bear Snowmobile Trail and the Kalkaska Cycle Trail.

DNR Regional Director John MacGregor said that the military can resume use of the 8,000 acres it owns in no longer than eight years, when the jack pine forest the Kirtland's warblers

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nest in becomes too mature for the birds to use.

"I don't think we have a major conflict. Eventually they'll be able to use their land again and until then we'll try to work things out," MacGregor said. Last summer, he noted, the DNR provided the training units with an additional 20,000 acres of state forest for its exercises.

THE KIRTLAND'S warbler, a six-bluish gray bird, nests only in

northern Michigan jack pine forests where trees are 12 to 20 years old. The forests often develop after fires consume other stands of pine.

Only about 200 pairs of warblers, one of nature's more gifted singing birds with a 67-tune repertoire, still nest in Michigan, down from more than 500 pairs in the early 1960s. The state plants more than two million jack pine seedlings annually to provide a nesting habitat for the birds.

In 1984, the DNR issued an order closing about 8,000 acres, roughly di-

vided into two similar sized parcels northeast of Grayling, to the National Guard war exercises during the warblers' May 15 to Aug. 15 nesting season.

The Guard's Johnson said "it would have been nice" to get the land, but troop training will not suffer without it.

If war breaks out before the warblers surrender the property back to the National Guard, "we go as we are," Johnson said.

JULY 7, 1987
KIRTLAND'S KOUNT — The annual census of the Kirtland's warbler, the rarest warbler in the world and summer nesting habitue of northern lower Michigan, has turned up only 167 pairs, the lowest number since major censuses began in 1971 and matching a low count from 1974.

"It disappoints me, but it doesn't greatly worry me," said Harold Mayfield of Toledo, a world authority on the species. He noted that from 1971 to 1973 the Kirtland's census listed about 200 pairs, based on the number of singing males counted. The total dipped to 167 in 1974, but rebounded within a couple of years to roughly 200-210, where it remained until this summer.

Mayfield said that he is at a loss to explain the dip, but maintains that more needs to be known about the species' fate each winter down in the Bahamas.

Overall, jackpine nesting habitat for the Kirtland's, centered in northeast lower Michigan, is increasing nicely as the region recovers from the infamous Mack Lake fire, near Mio, a few years ago. That, Mayfield adds, is good news for the species.

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Warbler count drops

The population of the tiny Kirtland's warbler has plummeted to a record low this summer because of a loss of habitat, the state Department of Natural Resources (DNR) reported.

The annual survey of the endangered bird found only 167 singing males, which assumes the same number of pairs. That's a 20 percent drop from last summer's tally of 210, the DNR said Tuesday.

State and federal biologists expressed worry at the count, but noted they predicted population problems for the yellow-breasted songbirds in 1979 when it appeared the bird would lose prime habitat.

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