

Saving the Warbler's Song



On a narrow dirt road in the Huron National Forest, retired wildlife biologist John Byelich brings the blue pickup truck to a slow halt. Cautiously opening the door, he steps out into the middle of the road.

The air is rich with sounds. The high-pitched trills, staccato chirps and warbles of a dozen bird species blend in a forest symphony. But like Beethoven — the great master of other symphonies — this man who depends on his ears in his work is losing his hearing. Leaning forward, the

The call of the endangered Kirtland's Warbler grows faint for John Byelich, its 40-year champion. But there are more birds now than ever, thanks to a fire that got out of hand.

BY SALLY EISELE

PHOTOGRAPH—MANNY CRISOSTOMO (L); BILL COATES (R)

75-year-old Byelich cups his ears with his hands and strains.

"Do you hear it?" Byelich asks hopefully. "Do you hear any sounds at all?"

Knowing he means the distinct call of the Kirtland's Warbler, I shake my head. He climbs back into the truck, careful not to slam the door, and guides the vehicle along the unmarked trail to try a different spot.

IN NORTHEASTERN MICHIGAN, about six miles south of the tiny town of Mio, in Oscoda County, is the area known as the Mack Lake Burn. A federally funded

Warbler Recovery Team has been working for years to establish the charred acres as a nesting area for the literally golden-throated songbird. Byelich heads the team, trying to save the state's most endangered bird from extinction.

For decades, it has nested some 30 miles to the west, on the military training base of the Michigan National Guard. Until recently, it preferred the tank range.

Over the years, fires started accidentally by the tanks' large cannons on the practice range left behind hundreds of acres of new-growth jack pines — ideal habitat for the Kirtland's Warbler.

But while the warbler may not mind the whistling of shells overhead, those who would enjoy the whistling of the bird prefer that it nest more safely elsewhere.

For now, the recovery team's hopes are pinned on the vast, burned-out acreage at Mack Lake. In a few short years, it has become the most productive nesting area in the world for the Kirtland's Warbler.

THE MACK LAKE LANDSCAPE is blurred on this warm summer morning by a steady drizzle. But even the rain cannot soften the stark reminders of the violent fire that destroyed a huge tract of the forest nine years ago. Naked, blackened limbs stretch skyward, towering over the new growth of scrubby jack pine, a reminder of what can happen in an instant.

It was to be a controlled burn, managed by the U.S. Forest Service to clear a 100-acre tract of land for future warbler habitat. But something went wrong.

Byelich remembers the day — May 5, 1980.

"It was one of those days when the winds were buffeting from all directions," he recalled. "And the fire just flew across the highway."

"Now if you've never seen a crown fire — that is a spectacular noise. It sounds like a hundred freight trains colliding and box cars flying all over. Just a roar. And the hackles on the back of your neck raise up. "And you wonder if you are in a safe place."

Byelich had good reason to wonder, as he worked with other volunteers to help the firefighters. By the end of that long day, 25,000 acres had burned, 25 homes were reduced to skeletal ruins, and one man was dead.

Opposite page: John Byelich, who is losing his hearing, struggles to catch the call of the Kirtland's Warbler (pictured above) in the Huron National Forest. He has worked for three decades to save the songbird from extinction.

A young Forest Service firefighter, James Swiderski, 29, was caught in the blaze as he attempted to clear a fire break with a bulldozer. His body was found later in an aerial search of the burn area.

The tiny community of Mack Lake would spend years rebuilding. But the tragedy has become the researchers' best hope for the warblers' survival. And Byelich predicted it. Even as he carried hydraulic fluid needed for the equipment to fight the fire, he was thinking about the Kirtland's Warbler.



"The bird depends on fire. My first thought," before he realized the extent of the blaze, "was 'Gee whiz, this is a blessing in disguise.'"

The recovery team this year counted 101 singing males in the burn area, almost half of the total population of Kirtland's Warblers. Except for one male found this year wandering in Wisconsin, every Kirtland's Warbler in the world nests in northern Michigan where, all told, the team recorded 212 pairs of the species, up slightly from the 207 pairs counted last year.

The population is multiplying in the Mack Lake acreage because the jack pine stands are just the right size now for the oh-so-fancy warbler: roughly eight feet tall, between seven and 10 years old.

"Why they occupy those jack pines is an interesting story," Byelich mused. "But we don't know it."

It is one of the many unknowns about this little bird, which was first recorded in the middle of the last century, catching a ride on a ship near its winter home in the Bahamas. It was not identified in Michigan

until years later, in 1903, when two outdoorsmen from the University of Michigan caught one on a fishing trip near Grayling. Not knowing what kind of a bird it was, the men killed it and brought it back with them to the university. There, it was identified as a Kirtland's Warbler, a songbird named for the man who first identified it scientifically, an Ohio native named Jared Kirtland.

The Kirtland's Warbler is easily distinguished from other warblers by its size and coloring. The male is noted for its bluish-gray body and brilliant yellow throat and

cloud as it bounces over the ruts and bumps of the primitive trail through the forest. It slows, suddenly, and Byelich eases the vehicle off onto a narrow path.

Fifty yards in, the path widens, revealing a clearing and a large wire mesh cage, full of flapping, fluttering, cackling black cowbirds. Back and forth they fly across the makeshift trap, trying to find their way out the way they got in. But the trap is cleverly designed with a hole covered by a wire canopy. The birds can enter at an angle, but hit their heads if they try to escape.

Byelich checks the trap, then steps away from it to listen again for a warbler. But the chatter of the cowbirds distracts him. He shakes his head in disappointment and moves on.

THERE IS NO LOVE LOST BETWEEN John Byelich and the cowbirds, the most vital menace to his beloved warblers.

Parasites, he calls them. He and his team would like to see fewer of them.

The thousands of cowbirds in the burn area seek out the nests of the few dozen warblers, then lay their eggs in the warbler nests. The cooperative nature of the warbler adds to the team's frustration.

"The warbler is kind of stupid," Byelich said. "Just as George Bush wants a kinder nation, this is a kind bird. It's friendly to its enemies."

After the cowbird lays its eggs in the warbler nest, the female warbler will incubate and hatch the eggs. It will even raise the cowbird young, as the larger cowbird chicks compete with warbler chicks for food.

"The cowbirds dominate the nest," Byelich complained. "They squeeze out the warbler young and the female ends up raising a big fat cowbird."

When the recovery team began trapping cowbirds, almost all the warbler nests in the burn area had been invaded. Now, Byelich said, only a few nests are still plagued by the bird.

While some say the cowbird has presented the biggest threat to the warbler's survival, others speculate that limited habitat has been the crux of the problem.

Bill Irvine, another member of the recovery team, says Mack Lake will be an important research tool. For years, there wasn't enough habitat for the birds. But now, with 15,000 acres of prime habitat at Mack Lake and more maturing each year, there is more than the birds can use.

"What we are looking for is proof that nesting habitat is the weak link in the chain," Irvine said. "Within the next five years, if we don't see a significant increase in the numbers, we will have to consider another possibility."

THE BLUE PICKUP LEAVES A DUST