

# world's last Kirtland's

by ED McGLINN

My friends call me Jack, and I live in Toledo. I visited the Grayling Zoo in Northern Michigan last week. Well, it's really known as the Fort Grayling Zoo, now that the Fort encompasses all of Crawford County and most of Otsego and Kalkaska counties. I guess I should add that the Fort also extends into Roscommon and Ogemaw counties as well, but that's not important.

The zoo is surprisingly large. The people of Grayling, Gaylord, and Kalkaska seem to be happy that it's there. They bring their children every day to visit, especially on the weekends. I am told it is a major tourist attraction, along with the weekly airshow put on by the National Guard at the bombing range near the ghost town of Lovells. Since it's the only zoo in northern Michigan, there are also a lot of visitors from Traverse City, Charlevoix and elsewhere. For some reason, the people at Mio and Roscommon don't come. Maybe they are unhappy since they live outside the borders of the Fort. I don't know — I guess you can't please everyone.

I went to Grayling because of the aviary. If I wanted to just go to a zoo, I would have stayed in Toledo. We have a pretty good one. Though the Grayling Zoo is large, its aviary is small — it has but one bird. It's a warbler, a male Kirtland's. He is special because he is the very last of a kind.

His name on the small brass plate in front of his home, I mean his cage, is *Dendroica kirtlandii*. What a terrible name! Having flunked Latin three years straight at St. Andrews, I decided I should give him a more conventional name. I first called him Jim, in honor of the former and late Governor of Michigan and Vice-President, James Blanchard. Blanchard, as I understand the history of more than forty years ago, was Governor when Camp Grayling became a fort, and, at the same time, there was this major effort to save these endangered warblers. I don't know if he's the villain or the tragic hero who failed — and I don't care. In either case, I thought it right that *Dendroica kirtlandii* be known as Jim. It fits.

Jim is a handsome bird. His bluish-gray back with prominent black streaks is accented by a pale lemon-yellow breast, enhanced by bold dark streaks or spots on the flanks and on the sides of the breast. What a combination of formal dress and brilliance! Moreover, a black mask with an

*When Ed McGlinn offered us this poignant look at the future of the AuSable-Manistee Country he noted that it is a "radical departure" from The Call's usual fare. In view of that, he added that he would understand if we decided not to print it. We agree with Ed that it is rather radical. But it is also delightful and frightening. If other conservationists do not care as much as Ed does it may also prove prophetic. Ed is a retired engineer, exceptional fly fisherman and Army veteran who has been fishing the AuSable for forty years. He lives in Farmington Hills and has become an almost regular contributor to The Call.*

do better. But I thought it was right. If I were the last of *Homo sapiens*, which is just as bad a name as *Dendroica kirtlandii*, Jack Finis would be great with me. I would then climb into the Wind River Range in Wyoming and look into the mirror of a high alpine lake, now sterile from California oxides and sulfides, but once filled with golden trout, and scream, "I am Jack Finis!" as if the ghosts of these gems with fins would care. I would then break the mirror with my hand, and the ripples moving out from shore would tell me that I was still alive.

What happened to the Kirtlands? There is no easy answer. There was none with a fish named the Grayling either, which I have recently learned inhabited the rivers in northern Michigan. Habitat destruction exceeded habitat creation. The uncertainty of what really was good habitat. The expansion of military training. Ever increasing destruction and range of weapons. New weapons and new aircraft. Laser this and setalth that. Smoke, gas and small exotic weapons. New tactics and combined arms training. I even hears that they have some special proton beam anti-aircraft weapons at Grayling. But the Army says that this is a "malicious rumor promulgated by our enemies."

It is a tribute to the toughness of these little birds that they lasted so long, coming back every spring from the Caribbean to the Grayling battlefield, an area dominated by the sights and sounds of training for war.

The Army blamed the Socialist Caribbean governments that assumed control of the countries where the warblers spent their winters. These governments blamed the United States for its conversion of the northern pine barrens into a major military training installation. The National Emergency of 2015 didn't help, when the whole Fourth Army was mobilized at Grayling and remained for over three years in a weary state of readiness.

As the years passed, people

conservation groups gradually disappeared, as apathy set in, and the tax exempt status was revoked by the 114th Congress. Only two remain: the Audubon Society and Greenpeace. Audubon does nothing now but count birds and add species to the extinction list. Greenpeace has gone underground—it was banned in 2020 by a special act of Congress as being subversive when they were accused of installing tank traps in the Snake River Birds of Prey Area, then being used by the National Guard.

In the spring of 2030, Audubon found only five singing males in the pine barrens. No nests were found. An emergency effort, manned by a brigade of the Army's finest, stationed at Grayling, captured three—and one female. The female died enroute to its new home—I can't remember where that was supposed to be. One male went to the Washington Zoo, one to Toledo, and Jim stayed at Grayling. Don't ask me why Toledo was honored. I don't know.

I often visited the one who came to Toledo. I called him Uncas, the Last Mohican. I thought that it also was a good name. Uncas died earlier this year, and I had to come to Grayling and visit Jim before it was too late.

I'm glad I came. My father told me before he died, that as a young man, he came to northern Michigan to fish for trout in the AuSable. He had many fond memories of nights spent camping on the river, and of the days pursuing its trout. His favorite time was when a mayfly called the Hendrickson was hatching. I've regressed so far from my father that I wouldn't know a mayfly if it bit me.

I looked for the AuSable but couldn't find it. There was an ugly channelized ditch running east from the town of Grayling, but I don't believe it could have been the river my father loved.

I'm glad I came because of Jim. He seemed to be well but I don't believe he will live much longer. And then another species will pass to oblivion. It is now happening more often each year.

