

Nature

Singing in numbers

Kirtland's Warbler, Michigan's rarest bird, is coming back

By NORRIS INGELLS
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The rarest of Michigan's rare birds is making a comeback.

Kirtland's warbler, the highly endangered species that nests only in the young jack pine forests of north-central Michigan, now totals 530 birds.

"That's the largest population in 29 years," said Mike DeCapita, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist who is an expert on the little yellow-breasted tweeters and a member of the species recovery team.

In 1961, more than 1,000 were counted. But by 1987 it was down to 334. So the 1990 tally is definitely good news. "I'm really happy about it," he said.

Kirtland's warbler is so rare that serious birdwatchers come to Michigan from all over the world to add it to their "life list" of different species spotted. Visitors this year included many from California and several from England.

On nature

Bird watching

Ironically, the good news about Kirtland's warbler comes as some biologists are painting a grim picture of the future of other songbirds.

Deforestation in tropical areas where many North American birds spend their winters is considered a major reason for declining numbers of some species. And pesticides dangerous to birds — long outlawed in the United States — are still widely used in Latin America.

Kirtland's warbler, sometimes called the "Bird of Fire," winters in the Bahamas and during the spring and summer nests on the ground in stands of young Michigan jack pine.

"Fire creates its habitat; food, nesting and all. It destroys the old growth. New growth is what the warbler has to have," said DeCapita.

Why the increase in numbers?

"Primarily because of the Mack Lake fire south of Mio in May of 1980," he said. About 300 of the 530 birds counted this year were in this area.

The birds are found mainly in Crawford, Oscoda and Ogemaw counties in the Grayling-Mio area.

Nesting areas in state and national forests are off-limits to humans except those on official guided tours offered free from mid-May to early July. Large groups need reservations. The tours originate at the U.S.

Taking pictures of the nests is prohibited.

DeCapita says the birds are easy to spot. "The males sing a lot and make themselves visible," said DeCapita. In fact, that's how biologists count the birds. Because the species is largely monogamous, they count the singing males and multiply by two.

"We assume one female per male," he said, though occasionally the bird version of a "love triangle" is observed.

For more information, call DeCapita at 337-6652.