

May 1992

New Kirtland's warbler tour package bringing people into Crawford County

A new Kirtland's warbler tour program put together by the DNR and the Grayling Holiday Inn is attracting people from all over.

Although the tours don't start until May 15, there are already people signed up from London, England, New York, Kansas, and other states. Four tour buses, including one from Austin, Texas, have also made reservations for the tour to see the rare warbler.

The Kirtland's warbler tours are not new. They started in 1972, according to Gary Boushelle, DNR regional wildlife biologist, and have been growing in recent years to attract 600 to 800 people from the United States and other countries. Previously, the tours were run out of the old DNR field office at the Grayling Fish Hatchery.

The hatchery wasn't a good spot

for the tours," said Boushelle, "we didn't have the facilities for the public. This program with the Holiday Inn is a nice working relationship with the community leadership."

"We're really surprised at how much interest the Kirtland's warbler package is creating," said Jennifer Rowan, of the Grayling Holiday Inn. "It's really bringing people in from all over."

The Holiday Inn is a convenient place for newcomers to the area to find on the southern edge of Grayling off I-75. The tours, which will run twice a day from May 15 to July 4th, all start at a Holiday Inn meeting room. A slide show and short presentation by a wildlife guide prepares the group for the tour at a Kirtland's warbler nesting area in Crawford County.

"Once the people are here, it gives us a chance to show them all the other

things in the Grayling area," said Rowan. "There is so much to do here."

The tours travel to one of the warbler habitat spots in the county. With a tour guide provided through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Forest Service, visitors usually hear or see more than one warbler. The U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Michigan DNR, Department of Military Affairs, and the Michigan Audubon have all helped in the bird's recovery.

Last year, the census recorded 347 singing males or about 694 of the endangered birds left in the world. Jerry Weinrich, DNR wildlife biologist, said that was the highest count since 1961. The small birds are hard to count and census takers arrive at fairly accurate totals by doubling the num-

ber of singing males for a population figure.

The birds require young jack pine stands for nesting. As humans became more proficient at fighting forest fires, habitat for the warbler dwindled. Now the recovery team is creating new habitat for the bird and the population has been increasing.

Boushelle said the jack pine stands are only used by the birds for about 7-8 years. "Usually management practices with endangered species are considered anti-development," said Boushelle. With the warbler, the habitat can first be managed for the birds and later for recreational uses when the bird leaves. Then the jack pines, with a short life span of about 50 years, can be managed for commercial harvest, he said.

In 1991, the Kirtland's warbler management program planted 1.3 million trees.

The warbler recovery team plans on having a group tour for local leaders this year.

"We're very pleased with the Holiday Inn's participation in the program and we would like other people to better understand the Kirtland's warbler," said Boushelle.

The guided tours are free and they are the only way to view the bird on nesting areas. Kirtland's warbler habitat is off-limits to public entry during the nesting season. For more information about the tours or the Kirtland's warbler overnight package offered by the Holiday Inn call the Grayling Holiday Inn at 517/348-761 or 1-800/292-9055.