

USFS outlines warbler, other projects

Kirtland Warbler habitat and the annual evaluation of forest plans were two of the subjects discussed when organizations and individuals with an interest in the management of the Huron-Manistee National Forest met with Forest Service employees on Friday at the Holiday Inn in East Tawas for a day-long update on projects and issues concerning the federal forest lands in Northern Michigan.

Part of the "Friends of the Forest" program, those attending the meeting represented a cross-section of about 80 conservation and environmental groups from the northern part of the state, including those interested in wildlife, timber cutting, snowmobile, horse and hiking trails, and hunting and fishing interests.

Of particular interest to Alcona County residents is the Forest Service's management plan for the Pine River area, of which 50 percent of its 27,000 federal forest acres is managed for Kirtland Warbler habitat. The Kirtland Warbler is an endangered species, and management of its habitat is mandated by federal law.

Phil Huber, a wildlife biologist for the Forest Service, explained that the dry jackpine "plains," -- with their sandy soils and large variance in summer temperature from 80 - 90 degrees in the daytime to the 30s at night giving them the reputation of "the deserts of Michigan" -- provides ideal nesting grounds for the endangered songbirds. The birds typically inhabit areas of thick jackpine which thrive after a forest fire.

"In the Pine River area, we typically cut about one-fifth of the area every 10 years," said Huber, "although we think that a better ap-

proach might be to cut bigger blocks at a time. We harvest the mature jackpines, wait about two years for the stumps to decay, then plant between 1100 and 1200 trees per acre. The area is then ready for Kirtland habitat in about five years, and will provide nesting areas for about another 15 years," he explained.

Although primarily using "controlled" burns in the past as a technique for reseeding jackpine areas, since the cones release their seeds from the extreme heat of wildfires, the Forest Service now tries to mimic wildfires by cutting and planting. In the Huron-Manistee area, Huber said, about 130,000 acres are managed for the warbler in order to maintain about 30,000 acres of ideal habitat at any given time. That amounts to about 14 percent of the Huron National Forest and about six percent of the Huron and Manistee forest lands combined. Of the total acreage, about 70,000 are managed by the state (DNR), 60,000 by the Forest Service, and 5,000 by the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The management of the woodlands for the Kirtland Warbler is proving successful, the Forest Service believes, because the 1991 census recorded the most singing males since 1961, when 502 were counted. In 1991, there were 347 males counted in six counties in Michigan, up 31 percent from the previous year; and in the Huron-Manistee were 235 of those birds, up 38 percent from the previous year. 89 percent of those birds were counted in the Mack Lake burn area. The Pine River area had a modest increase of from four to six birds.

Not everyone at Friday's session

totally supported the warbler management process, however. Wayne Allen of Mikado, representing a group called "Timber Watch," expressed a concern that the management of other species of wildlife and vegetation were being sacrificed for the benefit of a just a few birds in the management areas.

"Could it be that without the aggressive clearcutting, these birds wouldn't have located here?" asked Allen. "Maybe this is not their original nesting area. We're not against the protection of the species, but there have been no significant numbers of birds increased in this area. Maybe this is too far east; too near Lake Huron," he said.

"If you provide a perfect habitat, the species will flourish," continued Allen, "but is this natural?"

Allen said that his group recommends that the Forest Service reconsider its controlled burn policy; scale back plans to a more conservative approach; examine the results of the work so far; and to monitor all work which has been done so far to increase the warblers' habitat.

Another wildlife biologist, Rex Ennis, noted that the Kirtland Warbler was one of the first birds entered into the endangered species program, with a target recovery of 1,000 pairs of birds. He added that the birds have never been found nesting outside the area of central northern Michigan.

"We are monitoring the birds not only in these nesting areas, but also along their migration routes and in their winter areas in the Bahamas," said Ennis. "Studies show that the wintering is not a problem; the problem is in northern Michigan," he said.

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Included in the Endangered Species Act are penalties not only for harming the birds, but also for annoying them (by trespassing on lands closed to all entry) or for harming their habitat (cutting down trees).

One of the biggest problems facing the nesting warblers is another bird, a nest parasite called the cowbird. The brown-headed cowbird lays its eggs in other birds' nests, and these birds tend the nest and raise the offspring as if they were their own. Biologists say the warbler is especially naive and susceptible to such parasitism, and therefore the Forest Service places one-way decoy traps for the cowbirds, and manage to catch between 4,000 - 7,000 of them per year in about 50 traps. Although the trapping and removal of the birds has been very successful, no dent seems to have been made in the annual cowbird population, according to biologists.

Also pointed out by the biologists was that improving the Kirtland Warbler habitat is also very conducive to improving the populations of other songbirds such as the bluebird. They also noted that the warbler areas are also a tourist draw for birdwatchers, since it is so rare, and that the Mio office runs popular birdwatching tours from May 15 to July 4 to spot the warblers.

Other issues discussed in the Forest Service annual report included:

• **Timber harvest objectives.** Aspen clearcut acreage was targeted at 2,410 acres, about half the total clearcut objective for the forest. The reason for the aspen clearcuts are to provide a diverse age class of trees to enhance wildlife populations, especially ruffed grouse and deer, the report noted. Overall clearcutting has decreased, except in the areas of jackpine and aspen.

• Wildlife.

• **Eagles** -- With a forest objective of 20 nesting pairs of bald eagles, there were 16 pair in the forest last year, which produced 17 fledglings. In addition, the Manistee Forest produced the first documented osprey nesting in 1990, which produced three fledglings.

• **Loons** -- The Huron Manistee currently has 27 lakes with loons on them, and in 1991 13 nesting pairs produced 13 fledglings.

• **Grouse and woodcock** -- Monitoring of state information indicated that in Alcona County, flushes per hour in 1991 were 2.34 for ruffed grouse, and 1.62 for woodcock. Grouse harvest in Region II in 1990 was placed at 242,000, down from 315,000 the previous year. Woodcock harvest in 1990 was placed at about 150,000.

• **Old growth** -- The issue of "old growth" forest has been controversial throughout the country, and an appeal of the forests' plan resulted in a settlement agreement which would set aside 173,000 acres for old growth management during the next 10 years.

• **Gypsy moth, budworm** -- It was noted that in 1989, only 2400 acres were infested by gypsy moths; in 1991 160,000 acres were infested. Also, in 1991, 57,000 acres were infested with the pine budworm.

• **Sprinkler Lake** -- A fisheries survey was conducted in September, with the information to be used to evaluate the overall fish population of the lake.

• **Dam relicensing** -- The Forest Service's recommendations concerning the relicensing of the hydroelectric dams on the AuSable River included that there be a "run of the river," (the same amount of water going in is released); that intake areas are screened to eliminate fish mortality; that Consumers take a more active role in wildlife management; and that fish ladders around dams not be recommended for the time being, because of a concern over contaminants in fish from the Great Lakes coming into the rivers and being eaten by wildlife, such as eagles.

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