

# Warbler nest tours show bird lifestyle

By Pete Hector  
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MIO — Northeast residents who long for quiet misty mornings laced with the scent of young pines are encouraged to take to the woods in search of the elusive Kirtland's warbler.

During free, guided tours in Crawford and Oscoda counties, visitors can forget the hustle and bustle of the city and head for the warbler habitat amid young jack pine and springtime meadows.

Foresters in Mio and Grayling are increasing their efforts to educate the public about the Kirtland's warbler, a 6-inch-long bird that has become an integral part of the environment in Oscoda and Crawford counties.

"We're trying to do more to make the public aware of this endangered species of bird through increased publicity and tours through the nesting areas in Crawford and Oscoda counties," said Phil Huber, wildlife biologist at the Huron National Forest station in Mio.

Huber said the 1991 warbler census showed 347 pairs in Michigan's Lower Peninsula, a 31 percent increase over the previous year.

The birds could provide an economic boon to Crawford and Oscoda counties once bird watchers become aware of guided tours through the nesting areas.

Tours are conducted from the forest service office in Mio from May 13 through July 5 at 7:30 a.m. Wednesdays through Fridays and at 11 a.m. on weekends.

All tours are free. Additional information about the warbler tour is available by contacting the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Grayling or the U.S. Forest Service Ranger Station in Mio.

In Grayling, where tours are conducted by the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Holiday Inn offers a special bed-and-breakfast plan for birders.

Jennifer Rowan, group tour coordinator for the Holiday Inn, said birders receive one night's lodging and a complimentary early morning breakfast as part of the package.

"So far, we've been surprised at the response. We've heard from birders in Quebec, New Mexico, Colorado, North Carolina and other states," Rowan said.

Forestry experts estimate there are 450 pairs of warblers nesting in the area, Huber said.

District Ranger Roger Moore said the annual bird count is conducted by employees of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, the forest service and a large contingent of volunteers.

The assumption is that for each singing adult male counted, there is a female partner. The census makes an estimate of the number of nesting pairs each year.

According to forest service statistics, the only other areas where the species have been spotted include Ontario, where one warbler was sighted in migration, and one banded bird in Wisconsin. No Kirtland's have been sighted in the Upper Peninsula.

Huber said local residents and visitors alike sometimes question management techniques required to provide habitat for this finicky member of the wood warbler (Parulidae) family.

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"Because the Kirtland's warbler is very site specific, requiring certain conditions for nesting habitat, we are required to do some things the public might not understand," Huber said.

Huber was referring to large sections of acreage that are clear-cut, then allowed to remain dormant for at least two years.

"We do this," he said, "to allow tree stumps which remain after the cutting to decay and soften so our planting machine can be used to reforest the area."

Moore said approximately 1,200 acres of clear-cut land is



## KIRTLAND WARBLER'S FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL



The Kirtland's Warbler is a small, brightly colored bird that breeds in the Kirtland's Warbler nesting area in Oscoda and Crawford counties. It is a member of the Parulidae family and is known for its distinctive yellow and black plumage. The bird is named after its discoverer, Kirtland, and is considered one of the most endangered species in Michigan. Its population has declined significantly due to habitat loss and the introduction of cowbirds, which compete for nesting sites. Conservation efforts are focused on protecting and restoring the nesting habitat, which consists of young jack pine trees and open areas. The Michigan Department of Natural Resources and the U.S. Forest Service are working together to manage the nesting area and ensure the survival of the species.

▲ Wildlife biologist Phil Huber checks one of the new signs that will be erected near nesting areas.

reforested each year on a rotating basis. This system, he explained, provides habitat for the warblers and mature jack pines for loggers on a 50-year cycle. Some 130,000 acres of state and federal land have been set aside for the warbler.

"In earlier times," Huber explained, "forest fires created

habitat for the birds. Now, when we have the means to control these burns, we manage the habitat through slash cutting and replanting. Controlled burns are infrequently used for habitat management."

The Kirtland's warbler lives only in large tracts of young jack pine which, after about eight years of growth, reach a height of 5 to 12 feet.

A nesting pair of birds requires as many as 40 acres of habitat and nests on the ground, usually under thick patches of jack pine. During the winter, the birds seek out scrub land in the Bahama Islands.

In addition to requiring a

carefully balanced ecosystem for survival, Kirtland's warblers are now beset by the cowbird, which was attracted from the Plains region to northern Michigan through increased development and timber cutting, which created open expanses preferred by the parasitic bird.

The female cowbird lays her eggs in warbler nests. Young cowbirds hatch sooner than warblers and are much larger. Warblers are then pushed from their nests and die.

To combat this increasing problem, cowbirds are trapped in special cages throughout warbler territory and released elsewhere.

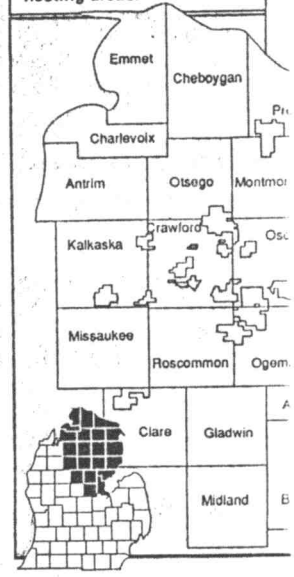
Cowbirds also are trapped by many private landowners because they take over nests of several other bird species. About 3,600 cowbirds are captured annually in warbler nesting areas.

The warblers' shy and retiring personality is one of the reasons the species wasn't officially discovered until May 13, 1851, when a male was captured near Cleveland, Ohio, on a farm owned by physician and horticulturist Jared P. Kirtland.

Another 52 years elapsed before Norman Wood found the first Michigan nesting area in Oscoda County.

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