

Warbler nest tours show bird lifestyle

By Pete Hector
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

MIO — Northeast residents who long for quiet misty mornings laced with the scent of falling pine are encouraged to take a walk in search of the elusive Kirtland's Warbler in Crawford and Oscoda counties.

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 finch-like 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 nesting areas," 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 tours could provide an economic boon to Crawford and Oscoda counties since bird watchers become aware of guided tours through the nesting areas.

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

All tours are free. Additional information about the warbler tours can be obtained 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 has a special bed-and-breakfast plan for birders. Jim Lemmiller, owner of the 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 in Michigan's Lower Peninsula. District Ranger Phil Huber 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 count, there is a female partner. The census is 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 Milton, and one banded bird in Wisconsin.

Two 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.

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.

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

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 much 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 Bahamas Islands.

In addition to requiring a

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

reforested each year on a rotating basis. This system, he explained, provides the best habitat for the warbler to raise its young. Some 130,000 acres of slash and federal land have been set aside for the warbler.

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

carefully balanced ecosystems for survival. Kirtland's warblers are now best by the cowbirds, which was attracted from the Plains region to northern Michigan through increased development and timber cutting, which

ferred by open expanses preferred by the cowbirds. The female cowbird, however, lays 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 it was captured near Cleveland, Ohio, on a farm owned by physician and ornithologist Jared P. Kirtland.

Another 52 years elapsed before Norman Wood found the first Michigan nesting area in Perot, Conn.

KIRTLAND WARBLERS FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL

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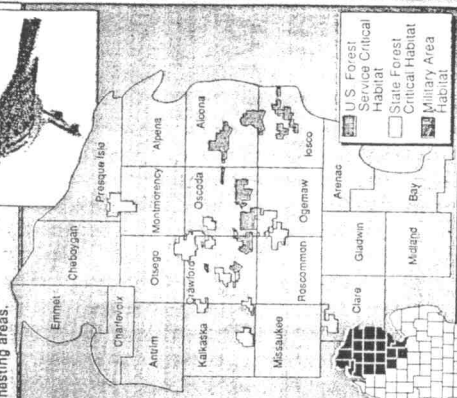
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KIRTLAND'S WARBLER HABITAT

Foresters in Mio and Grayling are increasing their efforts to educate the public about Kirtland's Warbler with guided tours through nesting areas.



U.S. Forest Service Critical Habitat State Forest Critical Habitat Military Area Bay