

WARBLER WONDER

Kirtland's comeback should make state heart sing

Somewhere in the sandy jack pine country around Mio, a Kirtland's warbler is lurching on an inchworm, unaware of just how lucky he is. Nor do any of his fellow warblers realize the effort being expended to provide them a cozy summer nesting spot.

The Kirtland's is big and cheeky for a warbler — almost six inches long and not especially shy. Its first recorded sighting was on Dr. Jared Kirtland's farm near Cleveland in the 19th Century, and its numbers may never have been robust. This year, a record 485 singing males were counted, and naturalists assume there are a roughly equal number of females.

The warbler's small numbers and its limited range — it breeds only in the little patch of northern Michigan around Gaylord and Mio, and winters in a Bahamas hideaway — mean it may never leave the endangered or threatened lists.

Because trees taller than 12 feet or so begin to shade out the shrubby ground cover where Kirtland's warblers nest, the birds' survival depends on humans doing

regular tree planting or controlled burning in the jack pine country.

Why is the Kirtland's fate of such interest? Maybe it reminds us of all that's unique about Michigan. Maybe, in the cascade of rotten news about disappearing species, rain forests and wetlands, we want to feel we've made room for some creature besides ourselves to share the planet.

Maybe it's that *Dendroica kirtlandii* has become a tourist attraction, the world's first songbird to have its own monument, in downtown Mio. It's too late to drop in on a Kirtland's this year — breeding grounds are closed to visitors after July 4 — but check with the U.S. Forest Service or the Michigan Department of Natural Resources next May or June.

Meanwhile, you can help the warblers by contributing to the Michigan Non-Game Wildlife Fund, DNR, Box 30028, Lansing, 48909. But don't expect any chirp of thanks from that Kirtland's fella if you do. He'll be too busy hunting up some horseflies and crickets for dessert.

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