

Multiplying warblers give experts cheep thrill

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ok a nosedive in the 1970s and '80s as the young jack pine forests they once were cut for lumber or disturbed by development.

By 1987, the state's annual count of singing male Kirtland's reached an all-time low of 167.

But one morning this month, 485 singing males were overheard by volunteers and government naturalists in the pines from Mio to Grayling. That's the most in 30 years.

Experts assume there are about as many relatively silent females in the woods. The males warble and dance up storm to attract a mate, a process that basically is finished this weekend.

After that, the warblers will concentrate on hatching and raising their young, pretty much holding their tongues until next May.

But the Kirtland's recent success could be fleeting.

A 1980 fire near Mack Lake outside Mio crisped 25,000 acres of forest. Five or six years later, the area was full of young jack pine — prime warbler habitat. Most of those pines will be too old by the year 2000 to make attractive homes for warblers.

Weise worries that Kirtland's numbers may drop again if the birds don't extend their breeding range.



Bird-watching help

Guided tours to help visitors find Kirtland's warblers are available:

■ Michigan Department of Natural Resources naturalists lead tours that leave from the Grayling Holiday Inn at 7 a.m. and 11 a.m. today through Friday. For more information, call 1-800-292-9055 anytime.

■ The U.S. Forest Service district office in Mio offers tours at 7:30 a.m. today through Friday and at 7:30 a.m. and 11 a.m. Saturday and Sunday. For more information, call 1-517-826-3252, weekdays 9 a.m.-5 p.m.

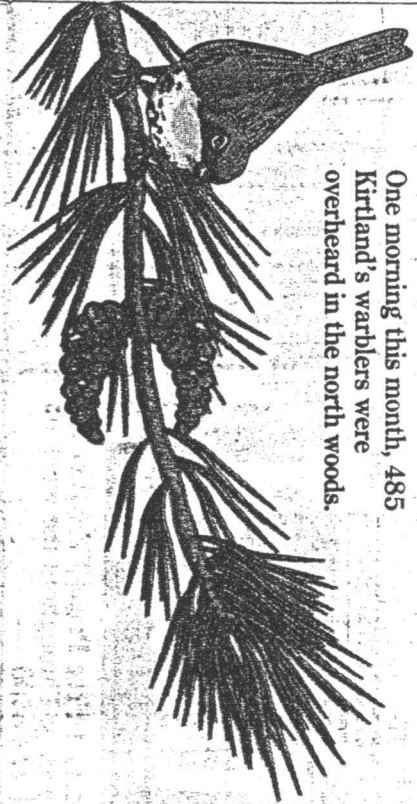
To hear the Kirtland's warbler for yourself, use a touch-tone phone to call the Free Press Plus free information line at 1-313-441-1034 and press button No. 4 when asked for your selection.

One hopeful sign: This year, a singing male was overheard in the Upper Peninsula, in a Schoolcraft County forest north of Manistique. Naturalists are hoping the bird will nest there and return for several seasons.

This year, the best warbler listening is in Oscoda, Ogemaw and Crawford counties in the northern Lower Peninsula. About one-third of the birds were found in jack pine stands that had been planted to attract warblers.

More warblers give Michigan a cheep thrill

One morning this month, 485 Kirtland's warblers were overheard in the north woods.



By EMILIA ASKARI
Free Press Environment Writer

Listen carefully in the north woods this weekend and you may get a rare Michigan treat.

Above the rustle of the leaves in the wind, below the chatter of common birds such as the wren and thrush, you have a chance of hearing the cheep-cheep-cheep-Cheep-CHEEP of the rare Kirtland's warbler.

This year, there are 22 percent more of the 6-inch, yellow-belly birds than there were last year. Ornitholo-

gists are chirping with glee.

"It's thrilling," said Tom Weise, endangered species coordinator for the state Department of Natural Resources. "Michigan is the only place where we have found their nests. These are all the Kirtland's warblers in the world. So it's exciting to see their numbers go up."

Kirtland's warblers, which winter in the Bahamas, are on the federal endangered species list. Their population

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