



## This bird stops tanks

by Richard Slater

I became interested in the Kirtland's Warbler after nearly stepping on one.

My wife and I live next to the endangered species area in Crawford County. It's well marked by signs. Even the Army National Guard tanks go around, though one of them clanked across our backyard. The warblers can't read, so they sometimes stray out of bounds.

One evening near the middle of June, I strolled along the edge of the old burn near the nesting ground east of our house. Insects hummed in the twilight.

"Cheep, cheep." On the ground near my feet sat a brown chick: small, fat and hunched. It watched me inquisitively, its short neck tipped backward to look up.

"Cheep, cheep," it hopped across my feet into thick grass and blueberry bushes.

A hurried, aimless search revealed nothing. The chick had vanished, yet I knew it must be very near. I looked for the nest in the pine branches overhead...nothing. Returning to point of origin, I stood still, searching every foot of ground around me. A harsh chipping sound, like someone saying, "tsk, tsk, tsk," over and over, came from somewhere close at hand, yet I could still see nothing.

There -- right in front of me, under a fallen pine -- a switch or twitch: no wonder -- red ants are crawling in its feathers, biting, but except for that shaking, it stays put.

I reach, it hops, I touch it for one second, feel its soft, quick struggle; it's gone -- grab it again (soft struggle), it's gone again.

A larger bird, dark wings fluttering, flapped and fell to the ground in front of me. It appeared wounded, but able to fly a few feet at a time: the classic "hurt bird" act of the mother. She'd adopt the fledgling as

soon as I moved away. She chipped "Tsk, tsk, tsk." I tip-toed carefully backward, watching the ground around me, especially where I was about to step, as there might be more young.

I realized I had no idea how many there might be, so when I reached home I decided to learn all I could about this little neighbor.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife office informed me there are several other ground-nesting warblers in the area. The Kirtland's is the most famous, because they are endangered and because they have always nested only in the AuSable river valley and a few scattered locations around it. It has been proposed as our state bird.

Harold Mayfield, author of *The Kirtland Warbler*, says they winter only in the Bahamas, where they eat berries and are very elusive. "I will be astonished," he said, "if you can find anyone in the Bahamas who knows anything about the Kirtland's warbler. Everything known about the bird on its wintering grounds has come from Americans in the last century or so."

In 1841, one landed on a ship carrying Samuel Cabot Jr., an ornithologist, to Yucatan. He preserved the specimen, but forgot it in his desk drawer until 1865.

The warblers make the journey from the Bahamas to Crawford County, Michigan, round-trip, spring and fall. It's non-stop over the ocean, in or near the southern portion of the Bermuda Triangle.

Upon arrival in northern Michigan in May, the males select an eight-acre territory of jackpine thicket with grassy openings.

The female makes dozens of trips a day to construct the nest on the ground under the short pines. Cowbirds watch, thus learning the nest location.

About 5:30 a.m. the female cowbird sneaks into the nest after the warbler has left, and deposits its own egg. It returns about 9 a.m. and if the female warbler is still absent, steals her eggs and eats them, leaving her own to be raised by the warblers.

The female cowbird has only one saving grace -- she won't take the very last warbler egg. But she might as well because when the larger cowbird hatches, it often tramples and thus starves the warbler's young to death. It's been estimated that production could be 60 percent higher if not for cowbirds. Actually, cowbirds don't really belong here anyway -- they came north with the first farmers and used to be called "buffalo birds."

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service operates capture pens which can put cowbirds on hold.

Female Kirtland's warblers are very tame, often hopping on the shoes and shoulders of bird banders, as if curious. One female took some colored bands from a cigar box and hung them on a jackpine. (She preferred yellow.) She also ate 17 flies from the fingers of one observer, said Mayfield.

After they hatch, young warblers eat mashed bugs and worms brought by the adults. It's during this period in the nest that they eject fecal sacs, sort of a disposable diaper "baggie," which the adults carry away.

Between nine and 11 days old, the nestlings "break out" or leave the nest for good, by short flights and hopping. (This is where I came in on my walk.)

"On the ground, they can be stepped on accidentally," says Mayfield.

The fledglings take up residence within a quarter-mile of the nest. One or the other adult feeds them for up to 44 days.

If you approach a very young fledgling, it often "freezes" on a branch, pretending to be a pine cone. "Although the young bird sits as though frozen, its eye regards the intruder warily, with an appearance of alertness," writes Mayfield.

The fall migration peaks in the first week of September. By the end of the month they're all gone south.

In the spring and summer, I'll be back for my walks along the boundaries, but now I'll really watch my step.

*Richard Slater is a freelance writer and bird watcher from Grayling.*