

Bahamas in danger of losing some gorgeous winter residents

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THE BAHAMAS is in danger of losing some of its annual winter residents — forever.

No, this is not about "human" tourists, but rather, a scarce species of songbird.

Kirtland's Warbler, a migratory bird that comes to the Bahamas for winter, is on the verge of extinction.

The bird, on the endangered species list in the United States, resides in the Jack Pine Forests of Michigan, and will winter only in the Bahamas.

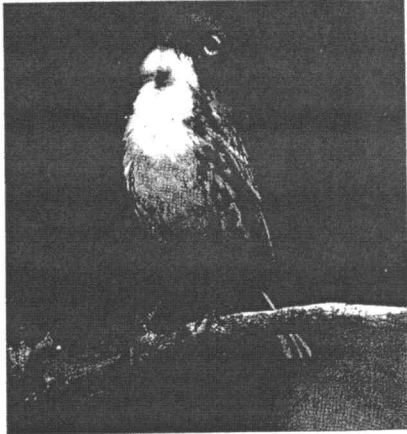
Even though it is considered to be an American bird, Kirtland's Warblers actually spend more time in the Bahamas than in Michigan.

According to Dr David Mehlman of the Nature Conservancy, the birds will stay in the Bahamas from mid-August until early May.

There are two possible reasons for the bird's decline; a diminished amount of available nesting habitat, and the Brown-headed Cowbird nest parasitism.

But while efforts are being made in Michigan to protect the Kirtland's Warbler through research, management and public education, not much has been done in the Bahamas — until now.

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and many of these birds share what we think is the same habitat as the Kirtland's Warbler," said Dr Mehlman.

Some of these birds include the yellow-throated warbler found in Grand Bahama, the Bahama parrot, Bahama yellow-throat, which has disappeared totally from New Providence, and the Brown-headed Nuthatch, found only in Grand Bahama.

So how can you spot the Kirtland's Warbler on your next bird-watching expedition?

Although quite often seen and heard in Michigan, the birds are very elusive in the Bahamas.

In Michigan, they are known for their blue-gray plumage, with black streaks, yellow breasts with black spots on the sides, black cheeks, and rings around their eyes.

Lynn Gape, public relations manager at the Bahamas National Trust, said spotting one of the birds in the Bahamas can be diffi-

cult. "They also look extremely different. Most of the pictures you see of the Kirtland's Warbler are of it in its breeding plumage of the summer. They change their appearance quite radically, and don't look anything like these pictures that we have of them," she said.

Eric Carey of the (Bahamas) Department of Agriculture said the birds, known in Michigan for their beautiful singing, don't sing much at all in the Bahamas.

"They might sing as it starts to get near to summer, and it's going up to breed..." said Mr Carey.

"We've had spotted sightings recently," he said.

"Historically, actually, this bird was seen here in the 1800s, and was found only here during the winter. And for a while they thought it was only our bird. They just didn't know where it existed. "It was much later that it was

discovered in Michigan. But we claim that this bird is our bird because it spends actually more time here, during the winter and early spring, and it goes up there (Michigan) and it breeds and then it comes back."

Ms Gape said the birds' numbers dwindled to about 500, but with the efforts of conservationists, have been brought up to almost 1,500 birds — 733 pairs.

Postmaster General, John Saunders, yesterday presented Mr Paglen and the Nature Conservancy representatives with special commemorative stamps featuring the Kirtland's Warbler. The stamps were first available on June 7, 1995.

The Kirtland's Warbler is named for the warbling sound it makes.

The name "Kirtland" was said to be given in honour of a scientist or farmer (depending on who you ask), who did not exactly play a role in the bird's discovery.

Realising that protecting bird's habitats in both regions will help ensure its future, United States' Nature Conservancy and its Wings of the Americas programme, the Bahamian Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, the Bahamas National Trust, and Canon USA, the camera and copier maker, have teamed up to save the Kirtland's Warbler.

On Tuesday, the Department of Agriculture held a press conference announcing the new partnership to protect the Kirtland's Warbler programme.

Canon USA sponsors Wings of the Americas programme as part of its Clean Earth Campaign, and is sponsoring the new partnership.

"We all share a concern for the Kirtland's Warbler. The process to begin ensuring its safety begins here and also in Michigan," said Keith Pagle of Canon USA.

"Certainly any bird that winters in the Bahamas must be protected because this is surely one of the smartest of the species."

Mr Paglen said the public must not forget that birds' habitats are under increasing pressure from human development, and that in many instances, their survival depends on humans.

The Nature Conservancy Wings of the Americas programme seeks to protect birds of North and South America and the Caribbean.

The programme stresses the land that sustains the birds in as much need of protection as the birds themselves.

Millions of birds are believed to migrate from North America to South America and the Caribbean for the winter, many of which, like the Kirtland's Warbler, will stop in the pine forests of the Bahamas.

Dr Mehlman, a conservationist (ornithologist — a study of birds), said this programme will help provide information about some of the indigenous birds of the Bahamas, that may also be in danger.

"There are quite a few species and subspecies of birds that