



Associated Press

Loren Ford, a park ranger for the Mio district of the Huron National Forest, stands near a scenic overlook with the Au Sable River in the background. Ford will be a leader in the continuing effort to protect the Kirtland's Warbler, a rare bird that nests only in the northern Lower Peninsula.

# Birding for dollars

## Some hope to cash in on Kirtland's warbler

By JOHN FLESHER  
Associated Press Writer

MIO — Huron National Forest is a long way from the tropical backwoods of Central America that biologist Loren Ford knows so well. But he says they have at least one thing in common: "ecotourism."

Ford, recently assigned to direct the U.S. Forest Service district office in Oscoda County, is enthusiastic about efforts to save the endangered Kirtland's warbler — and boost the local economy in the process.

The world's only known population of the half-ounce, yellow-bellied songbirds nests each spring in jack pine forests of the northeastern Lower Peninsula after spending the winter in the Bahamas.

And right behind the warblers flock thousands of bird watchers, bearing cameras, binoculars and ample wallets. They fill motels and campgrounds, dine in restaurants and buy souvenirs.

"Many of our endangered species become an attraction for birders ... and local businesses take advantage of that. They're not dumb," Ford said.

Ecotourism means visiting and spending money in places where efforts are being made to protect rare plant or animal species.

It's promoted mostly in Third World nations, to convince people that protecting environmental jewels such as rain forests can be more lucrative than destroying them, said Ann Woivode, director of the Michigan chapter of the Sierra Club.

"Ideally it's a low-impact type of tourism" that encourages leaving nature untouched where possible, she said.

In contrast, saving the Kirtland's warbler requires extensive human activities. Some ordinarily would be seen as environmentally harmful, such as clear-cut logging.

"It's an odd situation," Woivode said. "But it's a good example of targeting a species for protection and getting people into the area to enjoy it."

Ford, who has studied forests in Costa Rica and Puerto Rico, said Kirtland's warbler country is "ideal for ecotourism."

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Virgie Purchase, who moved to Mio from Grand Haven in the early 1990s. She owns the Songbird Motel and a campground.

are what drive the economy. So if we can manage the forests using sound ecological principles ... to the economic well-being of the region, so much the better."

The Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Michigan Department of Natural Resources have teamed with local business interests to rescue the warbler from near-extinction.

Through controlled burns and plantings of up to 3 million jack pines a year, they provide stands of young trees that are essential habitat for the delicate creature.

It seems to be working, but the bird isn't out of trouble yet.

A census last year recorded 764 singing males, up from 633 in 1994. The all-time low was 167 in 1974 and again in 1967. Scientists assume each male has a female partner, meaning the population is now estimated at 1,528.

The effort to link economic growth with warbler preservation began two years ago, with the first Kirtland's Warbler Festival in Mio.

It coincided with the opening of the Jack Pine Auto Tour, a 48-mile, self-guided drive with views of the Au Sable River and opportunities to see a variety of forest wildlife.

The warbler is a sore subject for some because of a 1980 "controlled burn" that got out of hand. Settling fires is essential for jack pine growth because the intense heat causes the cones to pop open and release seeds.

But this fire roared out of control in the Mack Lake area of southern Oscoda County, burning more than 25,000 acres and destroying 28 homes. A federal wildlife biologist was killed.

The tragedy prompted new safety rules. Still, memories linger — and not everyone was enthusiastic when a warbler festival was proposed at a Cham-

ber of Commerce meeting a few years ago.

"I don't think some local people realized what they had," said Virgie Purchase, who moved to Mio from Grand Haven in the early 1990s. She owns the Songbird Motel and a campground.

"We said, 'If you can have a festival for cherries or tulips, why not a bird?' Ecotourism is big right now. People would rather get back to nature than go to a beer tent or carnival."

Critics were mostly silenced after the first two festivals drew a combined 14,000 people to tiny Mio, an unincorporated village with two traffic lights. The average visitor spent around \$50 on everything from meals to carved birds and T-shirts, pumping roughly \$700,000 into the area economy.

Organizers say the next festival, scheduled for May 18-19, will be even bigger.

Previously it was centered in Oscoda County, where a 3-foot-high warbler monument adorns the courthouse lawn. More than half of the birds are believed to nest in the county.

This year's event will be based at Kirtland Community College in adjacent Roscommon County. The new location is symbolic of a greater emphasis on education, says Linda Barnes, a consultant for the college and a festival planner.

"We will have seminars, workshops, bring in speakers or use local people with expertise in various areas," Ms. Barnes said. Possible discussion topics include wildlife photography, bird watching and shopping for equipment such as binoculars.

That's a good strategy for drawing more people, says Neil Case, a retired state wildlife official from Albion, Ind. He took in the Kirtland's festival — among many others — while researching an article for Bird Watcher's Digest.

Some of the nation's bigger festivals offer educational programs with films, slide shows and lectures by well-known bird experts, Case said.

"I think the (Kirtland's warbler) festival is going to grow, because it's the only place that you can go to see that bird," he said. "It's a big deal for a

### A RARE BIRD:

Facts about the Kirtland's warbler:

- Blue-gray head and back, yellow underneath. About 6 inches long, weighs a half-ounce. Male has a loud, continuous chirp.
- Classified as endangered species; 1995 census set population at 1,528.
- Spends winters in Bahamas. Only nesting spot in the world is in jack pine forests of northern Michigan.
- Found primarily in eight Lower Peninsula counties: Oscoda, Ogemaw, Crawford, Alcona, Osego, Iosco, Montmorency and Delta. Occasional sightings in Roscommon, Schoolcraft, Baraga, Clare and Kalkaska counties.
- Named for Jared Kirtland, scientist who identified bird in 1858.
- The Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Michigan Department of Natural Resources have teamed with local business interests to rescue the warbler from near-extinction. Through controlled burns and plantings of up to 3 million jack pines a year, they provide stands of young trees that are essential habitat for the delicate creature.

bird to see a rare type like that."

Another reason for optimism is the soaring popularity of bird watching. The American Birding Association, based in Colorado, says its membership has jumped from 6,000 to 16,000 the past five years.

Bird watchers tend to be older and have money to spend. They seem undaunted by traveling to remote locales with limited accommodations.

"They're the people whose kids have left home ... a lot of early retirees," Mrs. Purchase said.

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