

Kirtland's Warbler Finally Finds Lots of Burned Forest to Call Home

By LES LINE

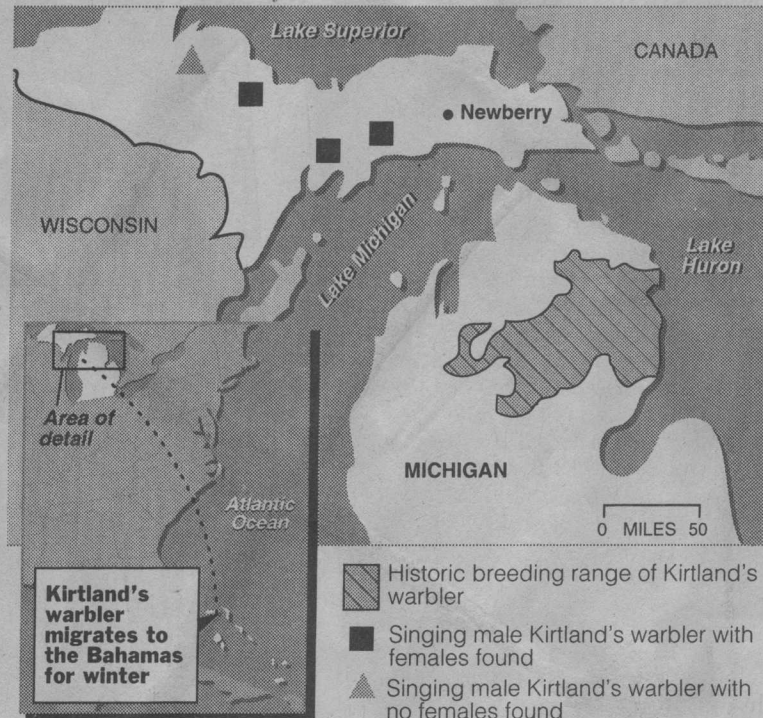
Nine years ago, the Kirtland's warbler, one of North America's rarest songbirds, appeared to be on the ropes. A survey of its nesting grounds in northeast Lower Michigan turned up only 167 singing males, which translates into a roughly similar number of breeding pairs.

"We didn't know what it would take to bring the species back," said Harold Mayfield, an ornithologist in Toledo, Ohio, who is an authority on the bird. "I had my doubts about its survival."

But the warbler has come back in spectacular fashion after a forest fire created thousands of acres of the bird's specialized habitat: Christmas tree-size stands of jack pines. Now there are so many Kirtland's warblers that adult birds looking for nesting places have leapfrogged Lake Michigan and are apparently breeding in the state's Upper Peninsula. A census this summer counted 678 singing males, the second-highest number ever, in Lower Michigan. The survey also turned up 14 male warblers in four northern counties in the Upper Peninsula. At least six of those birds had mates, and observers saw adult birds carrying food, a sure sign that nestlings were being fed.

The sightings raise the possibility of a significant expansion of the species' breeding range, which has historically been confined to a few counties in Lower Michigan where there are large expanses of jack pines.

"We've got state and national forest lands with the right kind of



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ground cover that can be managed to favor Kirtland's warblers," said Ray Perez, a biologist with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources in Newberry in the Upper Peninsula. He noted that warblers had been found both in jack pine plantations and on tracts burned a few years ago by wildfires.

Mr. Perez said scientists would try to net and band the young warblers before they migrated to their winter range in the Bahama Islands late this month.

Mr. Mayfield cautioned, however, that "exploratory efforts by birds to colonize new nesting areas often fail." He added, "I wouldn't be surprised if we can't find Kirtland's warblers in the Upper Peninsula three years from now."

Kirtland's warbler is a handsome bluish-gray and yellow bird about six inches long. It has a ringing song that can be heard for some distance, which is a big help to the biologists and volunteers who count the birds. The species is named for Dr. Jared

