

'VENTURE
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Bird specialist Cameron Kepler examines a hermit thrush caught in a net set for the Kirtlands warbler.

PRESS PHOTO/HOWARD MEYERSON

A BIRD IN HAND

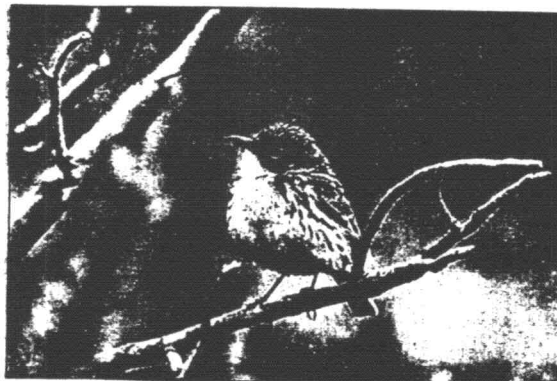
*A decade of banding research paying big dividends for warbler*By Howard Meyerson
Grand Rapids Press Outdoors Editor

MIO - Cameron Kepler is unshaken and even chuckles as a warm stream of digested blueberries streaks down his hand. The little bird he holds is not so amused. It angrily screeches at the good doctor.

"It's a hermit thrush," says Kepler, a prominent ornithologist with the University of Georgia who has spent 30 years studying endangered birds all over the world.

"We've caught over 120 bird species in this forest using these nets," Kepler adds. "Lots of migrant warblers and all of the thrush species in eastern North America."

Today, however, he is looking for just one.



The Kirtlands warbler is steadily recovering from being nearly extinct.

He gently strokes the brown feathered bird before letting it fly.

It is gone in a wink, flitting among the stout, gnarly trees of this jackpine forest planted specifically for the Kirtlands warbler.

It is the blue-grey and yellow warbler that Kepler and others seek today, a petite songbird on the federally protected list. Virtually the entire world population nests in Michigan.

Kepler's field demeanor is casual but his procedures are not. Every 20 minutes, without fail, he or his assistants along with biologists from the Department of Natural Resources and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service set out to walk the maze of mist nets strung through the forest.

The fine black mesh is strung between poles as though for badminton. They are tucked into tight rows between the planted trees. The net's

see WARBLER, D2

