

PROJECT POP CONE A SUCCESS

FOREST FIRE RAGES, BUT UNDER CONTROL

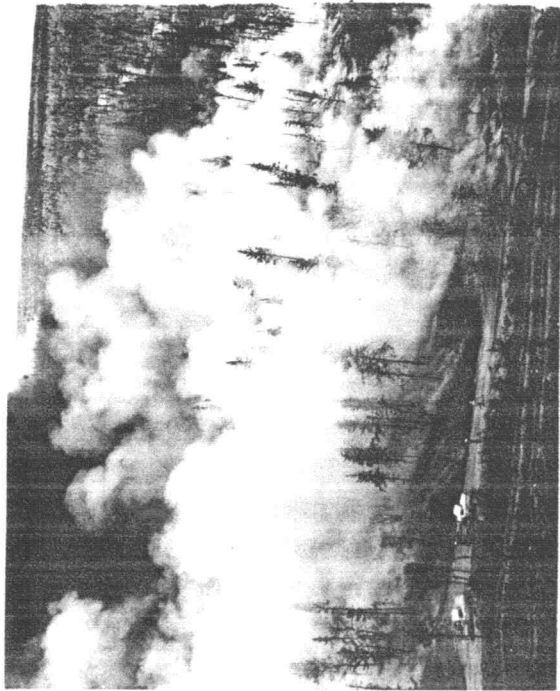
Mio, Michigan . . . Jackpine smoke billowed thousands of feet skyward from the hottest forest fire in recent Michigan history as Project Pop Cone came to a climax southeast of here, near Mack Lake. The mid-May fire in the 4,000-acre Kirtland's Warbler Management area of the Huron National Forest was purposely set to burn a mile-square area of jack pine slash in an area recently harvested by Packaging Corporation of America. The object: to create new nesting areas for one of the world's rarest songbirds, the half-ounce Kirtland's Warbler.

Called "Michigan's Biggest Pop Cone Party," the slash fire was set to generate new, low, jack pine growth necessary for survival of the warblers. Quick, intense heat tends to pop dormant jack pine cones, releasing a flood of seed. Without fire, it takes nature up to twenty years to do the job.

Only about 1,000 Kirtland's warblers exist, experts estimate. They nest primarily in the region of the Au Sabie River valley in Michigan. As forests mature,



Fire pops pine cones and releases these tiny seeds almost instantly.



Smoke and flame churn through the mile-square Kirtland's warbler burn near Mio. Trees seen through smoke are seed trees left when area was first logged under Packaging Corporation contract.

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Traditional foes unite to save bird

MIO, Mich. (AP) — It's enough to make a spotted owl green with envy: The timber industry, environmentalists and government regulators are working together to try to save an endangered bird called the Kirtland's warbler.

The same groups that have been at each other's throats over the habitat of the spotted owl have united to try to save the half-ounce, yellow-breasted warbler, also threatened by a shrinking habitat.

The endangered owl dwells in the Northwest's old-growth forests, where a three-year-old logging ban cost thousands of jobs. A federal judge lifted the ban Tuesday.

By contrast, the warbler lives near young trees, nesting in the thick underbrush beneath stands of jack pines just five to 15 years old.

"They're very picky," biologist David Case said.

The pines start dying when they reach 16 to 20 feet, but by that time, they've choked the undergrowth.

Historically, wildfires preserved warbler habitat by destroying older trees. Heat from the fire bursts the pine cones and scatters their seeds, giving birth to a new generation of trees.

But as more people moved into the area, they fought the fires, disrupting the cycle and shrinking

the bird's habitat.

As of last year, fewer than 1,000 of the warblers were known to exist — all within an eight-county area of Michigan's Lower Peninsula.

Now, state and federal agencies use controlled burns and clearcutting to restore the habitat. Private logging companies cut the timber.

"The reason the Endangered Species Act is working in Michigan is one simple word — partnerships," said Charles Wooley, Kirtland's project leader for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

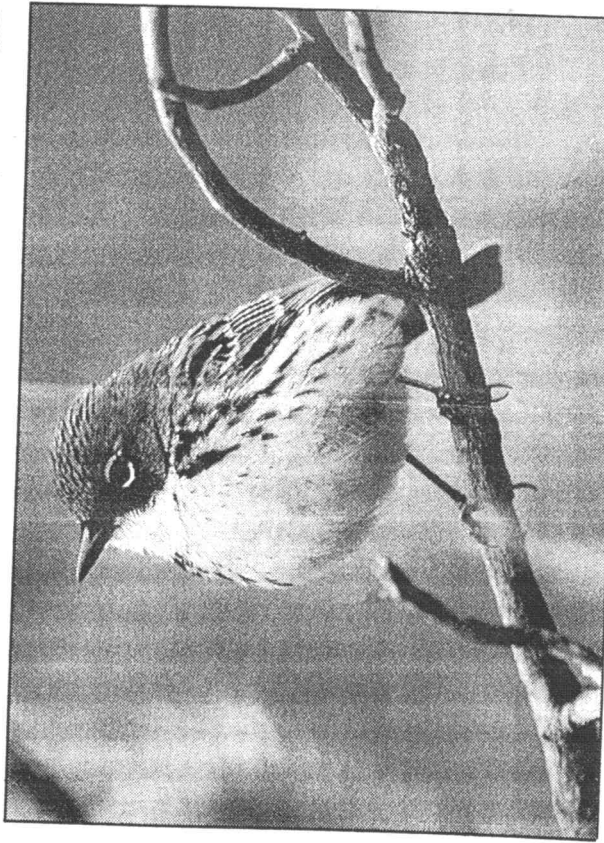
"It is nice not to have the kinds of problems they've got in the Pacific Northwest," said Paul Call, raw materials manager for Weyerhaeuser Co.'s mill in nearby Grayling.

Biologist Rex Ennis, of the U.S. Forest Service, was among several dozen biologists and volunteers who fanned out Friday for the last day of the annual Kirtland's census.

Cupping an ear, he strained to hear the warbler's melodious chirp. Hearing one, he noted the warbler's approximate location on a map, then resumed his trek.

Conservation groups such as the Michigan Audubon Society and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation help fund the census program.

Annual Kirtland's counts be-



AP photo

Endangered warbler has become the focus of a festival

gan in 1971, when a 10-year census showed a sharp drop in their numbers. In 1974, only 167 males were counted.

The 1993 census found 485 males, up 22 percent from the previous year. It will take several days to tally this year's figures.

But scientists say the warbler will remain endangered until the population stabilizes at 1,000 or more pairs — which probably won't happen until well into the next century, if ever.

Meanwhile, the first Kirtland's

Warbler Festival, sponsored by the local Chamber of Commerce, began Saturday and runs through June 19. The festival illustrates area residents' evolution from hostility to enthusiasm about the preservation effort, festival Chairman Vergie Purchase said.

"The more we understood this little bird and the economic impact it could have, we decided we'd better celebrate," said Purchase, owner of the nearby Songbird Motel. "It's a great way to promote tourism."

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