

HENRY T. WIGGIN
151 TAPPAN STREET
BROOKLINE, MASSACHUSETTS 02146

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Henry T. Wiggin
151 Tappan Street
Brookline, Massachusetts 02146

Dear Mr. Wiggin,

Thank you for your kind words about my Kirtland's Warbler paper.

We have not considered capturing young Kirtland's Warblers and holding them over the winter to deliver in the spring safe and sound at good nesting sites. There are a couple of reasons that deter us from such a bold effort. Insectivorous, migratory birds are notoriously hard to keep in captivity, and in the only attempt I recall to keep this species over winter, the birds lasted only a few weeks. However, some people are very clever at this kind of thing, and I regard it possible that these warblers might be preserved as cage birds even though no one has done it. The other obstacle is that the Recovery Team which is charged with steps to preserve this species is very reluctant to approve any molestation of individual birds for experimental purposes. There are so few of the birds that the responsible people are unwilling to risk even a handful for experiments where the outcome is not highly predictable and favorable.

For example, we have talked seriously about attaching tiny transmitters to a few birds and then flying these birds by airplane to the Bahamas in order to find them and study them in their winter quarters, where we do not seem able to find them otherwise. Yet here we have not seriously considered doing the preliminary work on the Kirtland's Warblers themselves. Instead we would like to work out all the bug in the system first by using substitute species that are abundant, like the Palm Warbler or Prairie Warbler (which also winter in the Bahamas), and even here we would use something else, perhaps juncos, to try out radio tracking at its easiest on the nesting ground in northern Michigan. So we are a long way from capturing and holding Kirtland's Warblers.

We have also talked about transporting a few eggs over to surrogate parents located in the jack pines of Wisconsin (perhaps using Chipping Sparrows as surrogate parents) in order to establish a separate breeding population and not have all our eggs in one basket. However, this idea is fraught with many difficulties too that I will not enumerate, even though the cost to our warblers would be negligible, since the removal of eggs would ordinarily be followed by prompt replacement and no ultimate loss in production of young. But note that this too is just talk. We are not about to do it.

At present we are doing just two significant things to help the species: (1) We are continuing to remove cowbirds from the nesting sites, and we are getting a marvelous yield of fledglings; and (2) we are trying to enlarge the area of suitable habitat so that the birds have adequate room for nesting and also have a bigger target to find in their migration to the nesting ground.

Any other ideas will be welcome. Thank you for your interest.

Sincerely,

