

DNR



MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES
PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICES
PUBLIC AFFAIRS DIRECTOR, JAMES R. WIEBER
P.O. Box 30028, LANSING, MICHIGAN, 48909

NEWS

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Contact: Tom Weise
517-373-1263

KIRTLAND'S WARBLERS SLIP TO NEW LOW; HABITAT WORK FOR THEM HITS NEW HIGH

LANSING---"Down but not out" is the way state and federal wildlife specialists are summing up the status of the nationally-endangered Kirtland's warbler whose nesting numbers in northeastern Lower Michigan have skidded to a record low this summer due to a temporary habitat crunch.

Results of an annual survey held June 5-14 on the birds' exclusive nesting grounds in that part of the state produced a count of only 167 singing males, a 20-percent drop from last summer's tally of 210.

The size of this decline understandably concerns wildlife biologists for the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, U.S. Forest Service, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. However, they did predict population problems for the tiny, yellow-breasted songbirds back in 1979 when their projections signalled an approaching shortage of prime nesting habitat.

It was too late then to completely head off this squeeze, but the forecast shifted special habitat work for the warblers into high gear in the late 1970s. Thanks to accelerated state and federal efforts, the birds' pinch-period for quality habitat should be over soon, perhaps after next year or the summer of 1989.

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Kirtland's warblers are very choosy about where they nest, preferring young, Christmas-tree-size jack pine for their family nurseries. "After we carry out tree plantings or controlled burns, it takes about eight to 10 years before the resulting new growth jack pine reaches the stage that meets the birds' nesting needs," explains Jerry Weinrich, the DNR's "point" biologist for Kirtland's warbler recovery work.

"And this time lag explains the habitat 'bottleneck' which faces the birds right now," he adds.

As a crucial continuation of the stepped-up habitat work launched in the late '70s, this spring saw a record 2.6 million young jack pine trees planted on more than 2,100 acres of state and national forest lands for future warbler nesting and timber production.

Last month's census in the following counties produced this breakdown of singing male birds counted: Oscoda, 68; Crawford, 66; Ogemaw, 13; Kalkaska, 10; Roscommon, 9; and Alcona, 1.

This year's collective count ties the record low of 167 male Kirtland's warblers tallied in 1974 when these popular songbirds were caught in a similar habitat crunch.

"Next year and thereafter," Weinrich anticipates, "the amount of available prime nesting habitat should increase, and hopefully, so will the warblers' numbers."

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