

1980 KIRTLAND'S WARBLER TOUR SEASON - SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATIONS

May I extend my welcome to the 1981 Kirtland's Warbler naturalist. I thoroughly enjoyed this job and I think you will too. Summarized here are a few of my comments and recommendations on what you might expect from the warbler and the warbler watchers. Other aspects of the job seem to change from one year to the next and the tour(s) which you develop will be unique to your own personality and interests. There is a lot of room for creativity in this position.

The Bird - Patterns of Activity

The warblers arrive in the Mack Lake area on or around May 12 (mean date of arrival cited in Mayfield 1960) and for the first few days of the tours you may experience some difficulty in locating singing males consistently. At this time they are moving around and getting settled and it takes a week or so for the territory boundaries to become firmly established. An individual which obligingly sings and shows off on a certain path during the first week may be nowhere to be found later on - he has undoubtedly shifted his defended area away from the path and out of spotting scope range. By the end of May, you will probably begin to get a feeling for where the warblers' territories are and which ones are likely to be seen by visitors. It never seems to become entirely predictable, however. Singing activity will be reduced at certain times, even during the peak of the breeding season. In particular, the warblers don't sing as much on windy or very rainy days, and after 11:00 a.m. on hot, clear days. This year I also noticed a lull in vocal activity for about one week at the end of May. Mayfield (1960) believes that during the time when the female warbler is searching for a nest site and building the nest, the male keeps close tabs on her and does not do as much singing from high perches. This hypothesis seemed to be borne out by my observations. Males giving only sporadic songs during this period were sometimes eventually glimpsed flitting through the lower branches of the pines, nearly always in close company with the female. By the first of June, singing activity had returned to a high level. Around July 1, things quieted down rather abruptly in both sections 2 and 3 of the Mack Lake warbler area. At this time, most of the young have fledged, although they are still dependent on their parents for food. Apparently the male warblers do less singing and snag-sitting at this time as they keep watch over the kids. For that matter, all bird song activity becomes markedly reduced after the month of June. This year in July I discovered that the warblers at Muskrat Lake on Oscoda State Forest land (section 13, County Rd 608 and Ruth Rd) were decidedly more noisy and visible than those at Mack Lake. I therefore obtained permission from Tom Haver at the D.N.R. in Mio to lead tours to this area. It is slightly farther from the USFS station than is Mack Lake (13 as opposed to 10 miles) but has the advantage of being on paved road nearly all of the way. Another advantage is that there is one two track to walk in on, and both cowbird traps and warblers are along this path. At Mack Lake, one frequently has to make several short trips by car with the visitors from one two-track to another in order to include both cowbird trapping and warblers in the tour.

The Bird-Watchers - What to Expect

Actually there are basically two types of bird watchers which will show up for your tours. The first kind is the hard core birder. This person generally has a 'life list' of birds s/he has seen and wishes to add the famous *Dendroica kirtlandii* to the tally. S/he may also want to catch a glimpse of some other species, usually the Clay-colored Sparrow (a popular one), a Lincoln's Sparrow or perhaps a Prairie Warbler. These birders vary in their intensity and their expectations, but with the most avid listers you will quickly find that it is best to postpone other parts of the tour, such as the talk at the cowbird trap, until after they have laid eyes on The Bird. When this has been accomplished, they will usually relax and become interested in other things. The second kind of visitor is the general sight-seer. They may know something about birds and the warbler or they may be quite new to bird watching. If the latter is the case, you will probably want to re-emphasize and explain certain aspects of the warbler's basic biology with which they may not be familiar. For example, many new birders are surprised to learn that the warbler nests on the ground, that it eats insects, not pine seeds, and that the cowbird never (but Never) builds its own nest. You may have to take time out to explain to such a group how to use binoculars and the spotting scope, and once you have spotted a bird, make sure to explain in crystal clear terms, if possible, the exact location of its perch. You may experience some difficulty pointing out a warbler to visitors not accustomed to looking for one, even if the bird in question is perched on a branch ten feet away! With a little extra time and patience on your part, however, these new bird watchers can be the most rewarding part of your job. With them, you have the opportunity to broaden horizons and win over new bird enthusiasts. With the seasoned birders on the other hand, your role is simply to help them add a new species to their list (which can be fun, depending on the individual birders).

A special note on the young people in the Y.C.C. and Y.A.C.C. programs who will attend the tours. They are generally (but not always) in the new bird watcher or non bird watcher category, but many of them have a great deal of interest in the warbler, particularly since the controversy stirred up by the Mack Lake Fire. You will probably want to tailor your tour specifically to their interests and background - adding more on basic ecology (e.g. what is a specialist vs a generalist in bird terms) and going light on the statistics (e.g. mean number of warblers fledged before and after cowbird trapping initiated). The young people vary enormously both within and among groups in their enthusiasm and interest. Their questions cover a wide range of topics. One girl from inner city Detroit asked me how the warbler produces his song and listened closely while I explained the mechanics of voice production in a bird. Another person asked me testingly "Hey lady, if I shot that bird, would the F.B.I. come after me?" I gave that one a moment's thought before giving a careful response... All in all, I found young people (ages 5 - 19) contributed the most to my tour guiding experience. I felt that I was able to add a little to their lives and outlook, and they to mine. My job as a naturalist would not have been half as rewarding had it not been for these groups.

Recommendations

1. Film versus slide-tape program. Part way through the season, I began showing visitors the film on the warbler made several years back by Walter and Myrna Berlett. I found that the film gave a more complete and clear treatment of the warbler's biology than did the slide tape. Other advantages of the film are that it is shorter, livelier and has excellent filmed sequences of the birds' behavior. The one major drawback of the film is its erroneous explanation of the rationale of prescribed burning. It suggests that the reason why we burn is to open the cones and release the seed. Actually, of course, most of the cones on an area to be prescribed burned are in slash on the ground and are thus consumed by the flames. When showing the film to visitors, I was careful to point out the fact that the Forest Service cuts most of the timber before it burns an area and that the purpose of the burning is to prepare the site and clear away competing vegetation for the artificially seeded or planted young jack pines.
2. Warbler slides from Michigan Audubon. Every year, it seems, there is difficulty in getting the warbler slides sent from M.A.S. This season, they did not arrive until about three weeks before the end of the tours, despite frequent phone calls to Kalamazoo to request that they be sent. Visitors like these slides and purchase them readily and the proceeds do go into the general pot for buying and maintaining warbler habitat. I recommend that the slides be requested well ahead of the 1981 season, like in March. Maybe (?) then we will have them by the second week in May. Order about 50 of each of the two sets (100 sets in all). They will sell, if you have them here all season.
3. Gas and mileage. Should the mileage restrictions become tighter in coming years, I recommend cutting the tours back to one tour per day plus scheduled groups. You could keep the 7:00 tour for the serious bird watchers and schedule YCC and other larger groups at 11:00 as the need arises. The naturalist could be kept busy at other tasks. You could also end the tours around the first week in July. Singing activity of the birds really drops off after that, so much so that sighting a bird for the visitors can be exceedingly difficult, especially on the 11:00 tour. Again, the naturalist could be employed until July 19 if funds permit, doing other work.

GOOD LUCK & HAVE A GOOD 1981 SEASON!

Rita Halbeisen, Kirtland's Warbler Naturalist 1980

KIRTLAND'S WARBLER TOUR ATTENDANCE 1980

WEEK	7:00	11:00	TOTAL VISITORS	
			1980	1979
May 15-17	6	0	6	13 (tours began 5/13)
18-24	15	40	55	52
25-31	14	15	29	59
Month Total			90	124
June 1-7	43	6	49	59
8-14	18*	37	55	12
15-21	34	6	40	53
22-28	14	45	59	49
29-5	52	42	94	107
Month Total			208	222
July 6-12	25	76	101	35
13-19	31	64	95	39
20-27	TOURS ENDED JULY 19		--	18
Month Total			286	150
SEASON TOTAL			584	496