

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION
Contact: Paul N. Sutton
Phone: 517-636-5640
Midland, Michigan

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

OPERATION POP CONE AIMED AT
PROVIDING HOME FOR RARE BIRD

Mio, Michigan -- The song of a rare, lemon-breasted little songbird will linger on in the jack pine country of the Huron National Forest as the result of a man-made forest fire on May 14

"Operation Pop Cone" was carried out on that day by several hundred foresters and conservation officers to burn off 500 acres of jack pine slashings near here to prevent the extinction of this tiny bird

The gray and yellow jack pine songster is the little-known Kirtland's Warbler, which winters in the Bahamas and nests only in a limited area of Michigan. Bird watchers come from around the world to the Au Sable River valley to see the rare Kirtland's Warbler. According to a census made in 1961, less than 1,000 of these songsters remain.

Recently the Michigan Audubon Society introduced a campaign aimed at naming the warbler the official bird for Michigan.

Problems raised by this exacting little bird are helping in the development of new techniques for forest management and fire control. Controlled or "prescribed" burning of forest lands to create the desirable habitat for the bird are being carried out by the U.S. Forest Service.

-more-

Kirtland's Warbler nests only in new jack pine areas, building its nest of pine needles and fine grasses on the ground in thickets of young trees. When the pine gets too large, the warbler looks for a new habitat.

Historically, wild fires in Michigan's jack pine "plains" maintained an abundance of natural habitat for the warblers. Over the years forest protection practices have become so effective that "man is pushing the warbler out of its habitat," Louis A. Pommerening, forest supervisor of the Huron-Manistee National Forests, observed.

The jack pine is peculiar in that its cone is unusually tight and will stay closed on the trees for years without opening, forest biologists say. Enough heat must be generated to open the cones in sufficient number for millions of seeds to drop to the ground and produce young trees.

The jack pine is a profitable tree, and previous to the "controlled burn-off" the timber had been harvested for pulpwood. The remaining slashings on the mile-square area provided a fire hazard.

The U.S. Forest Service, in cooperation with the Michigan Conservation Department, decided to give the warbler a hand, while at the same time removing the fire hazard created by the slashings.

"Prescribed burning for the natural regeneration of jack pine gets rid of the slash and provides sufficient heat to pop the cones," Pommerening explained.

The burn served also as a training project for the forestry services to test new equipment and check organization procedures.

in fire control. Several new pieces of mechanized equipment were used to build fire lanes and control spot fires

Of special interest was the testing of a new "gelled water" fire control agent which may be dropped from aircraft ahead of the fire or sprayed along fire lanes. This new agent, Gelgard M fire control polymer, causes water to cling to surfaces, slowing combustion. It was developed by The Dow Chemical Company

Air drops of this new brush and forest fire fighting liquid were dumped on burning jack pine slashings in a matter of seconds as a part of "Operation Pop Cone."

Four thousand acres of the Huron National Forest in Oscoda County, Michigan, were dedicated to perpetuation of the famous warbler last June (1963). Under timber sale contract, old growth timber was removed. Selected seed trees were left by loggers, and the slash was seared by the controlled fires, popping cones that dropped new seed.

By late summer of this year, tiny jack pine seedlings should be sprouting throughout the nearly mile-square area, Pommerening said. Within five or ten years, an entirely new nesting area will have been created for the Kirtland's Warbler. Rotation of this practice every five years with other blocks of the management area will keep a perpetual supply of young jack pine growth for warbler nesting.

The warbler's problems have not all been solved, however. The cowbird, not native to this area, is the warbler's nemesis. It moves out the warbler's eggs from the nest and deposits its own, with the hope that the warbler will hatch them

Conservationists are still trying to figure out a way to solve the cowbird problem.

The Audubon societies of Michigan have been intensely interested in protecting the warbler and have played a part, working with and supporting the U.S. Forest Service and the Michigan Conservation Department, financially, technically and through enlisting public support to get the management area established for this purpose.

The Huron National Forest is on the eastern side of the lower Peninsula of Michigan. With the Manistee National Forest on the western side, the combined forests represent about 870,000 acres of federally-owned lands.

In 1963, this forested area has 3,400,000 visits from the public, which placed it as a close runner-up to first place in the nation in the number of visits by the public to national forest areas.

Headquarters for the Huron-Manistee National Forests is at Cadillac, Michigan.

#

5-28-64