

A KIRTLAND'S WARBLER BANDED AT POWDERMILL

by Kenneth C. Parkes, Curator of Birds
and
Robert C. Leberman, Bird-Bander, Powdermill Nature Reserve

Late in the morning of September 21, 1971, the Curator and Associate Curator of Birds at Carnegie Museum were occupied in what, for them, were routine activities. Dr. Parkes was writing an evaluation report on a manuscript sent to him to referee by the editor of THE AUK, and Dr. Mary Clench was sending some Powdermill publications to Chandler Robbins of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. A telephone call from Leberman interrupted, and September 21, 1971 then became an historic day for Powdermill, for Pennsylvania, for bird-banding, and for all of the people involved. Leberman had netted a bird that he had every reason to believe was a Kirtland's Warbler (Dendroica kirtlandii), although he had never seen one before.

And what is Kirtland's Warbler? And why had Bob Leberman, avid student of bird distribution in western Pennsylvania, never seen one? And why was this an historical day for bird-banding?

Kirtland's Warbler is one of the rarest of North American songbirds. It nests only in the jack pines of a few counties in the northern part of the lower peninsula of Michigan. Its numbers have been censused three times. In 1951 and 1961, the total count came to just under 1,000 birds. By 1971, for reasons as yet unexplained, the population had suffered a severe loss. Dr. Harold Mayfield of Toledo, the ranking expert on Kirtland's Warbler, reported to the American Ornithologists' Union in September that only about 400 birds could be located this year. Needless to say, the species is not only protected by the regular state and federal laws covering songbirds, but is also on the official "red book" lists of endangered species published by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. As far as is known, the entire population of Kirtland's Warbler spends the winter in the Bahamas, where few people have been lucky enough to see any. As Leberman had never done any bird-watching in Michigan or in the Bahamas, it is not surprising that he had never seen a Kirtland's Warbler. Parkes had seen them on the nesting ground in Michigan, where the loud song of the males makes them easy to find.

Needless to say, when the telephone call came in, Dr. Parkes and Dr. Clench left Carnegie Museum hastily for Powdermill, staying only long enough to inform the Director, Dr. Netting, and A. C. Lloyd of the exciting news, to scoop up specimens from the museum collection for comparison, and to give some instructions to Dianne Connelly, a bewildered Chatham College student who had just started working in the Section of Birds and had never seen such strange behavior on the part of a couple of supposedly dignified scientists.

The semi-permanent road repair traffic jams on the Penn-Lincoln Parkway delayed the two curators at least half an hour, but upon arrival at Powdermill (with fingernails chewed to the elbow), they watched as Bob, behind closed doors, proudly removed from its temporary resting place in a paper bag what was, without question, a Kirtland's Warbler! It was in the heavily streaked plumage of an immature bird--that is, one hatched earlier this summer--a stage during which the males and females cannot be distinguished. Dr. Parkes insisted that the first few photographs of the bird be taken inside the banding office--he had visions of Bob's tripping on the doorsill on the way out to photograph the warbler in the outdoor sunlight, and inadvertently releasing it undocumented. Furthermore, knowing about the possible photographic slips betwixt cup and lip, we made sure that pictures of the bird were taken on three different cameras before we released it, now bearing band number 78-99409.

After returning to Pittsburgh, Dr. Parkes and Dr. Clench checked to see what the precedents were for such a record. It seems that the Powdermill bird is the first Kirtland's Warbler ever handled in the state of Pennsylvania; there is a sight record from Lewisville, Sept. 27, 1964, but no specimen had ever been collected nor living bird banded before. In fact, this was only the second Kirtland's Warbler ever banded on migration outside the state of Michigan--the first was banded at Point Pelee, Ontario (just east of Michigan and on a direct line of flight between the nesting area and the Bahamas) on May 10, 1959. As might be expected of a species with such a small population, very few individual Kirtland's Warblers have been seen, even by the most experienced bird finders, during the course of migration, and such records are always scrutinized carefully by editors to eliminate those that might be based on "wishful thinking". Fortunately our photographs came out well, and we have proof of our record!

Bird no. 78-99409 was really most accommodating. Probably because of unfavorable southerly winds it stayed around Powdermill for at least eleven days. Had it continued its migration within the next few days following banding it might have encountered one or more of the several tropical storms that had developed between Powdermill and the wintering grounds during the time. It was netted (and photographed) again on September 26 and October 2, allowing several more observers to add the species to their "life lists". Kirtland's Warbler is the 151st species to have been banded at Powdermill, and is without question the rarest bird we have ever added to the list.