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INCREASE IN WARBLERS RETURNING TO MICHIGAN

LANSING--The tiny Kirtland's Warbler is on the increase, despite a fear by many that the tragic Mack Lake forest fire this spring would decrease its numbers, the Department of Natural Resources reports.

An annual census of the endangered bird, just completed, found a total of 242 males, 31 more than were found last year. Assuming an equal number of females, the total breeding population would be 484. That represents a 15 percent increase in the population since last year.

Fire is important to the warbler since it creates the heat necessary to open jack pine cones, so that seeds may be released. The fire also removes plant competitors and creates a bed of ash ideal for seed germination. The warbler nests in young jack pines in the spring and summer.

Encouraging as the 1980 survey results are, the number of singing males is still far below the numbers tallied in 1951 (432) and 1961 (502).

The survey was conducted under the direction of the Kirtland's Warbler Recovery Team and was a cooperative venture of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and local Audubon Societies. Dr. Lawrence Rye1 of the DNR's Wildlife Division was the overall census coordinator.

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Michigan crews examined suitable appearing habitat in the jack pine areas of the northern Lower Peninsula and the Upper Peninsula for the presence of singing males. In addition, cooperators in Ontario and Wisconsin searched appropriate habitat in their respective areas.

In 1980, no males were located outside of the traditional breeding range in northeastern lower Michigan. In both 1977 and 1978, one male was present in Ontario, and another was located in Quebec in 1978. In Wisconsin, two males were found in 1978 and one in 1979.

This year Kirtland's warblers were found in six Michigan counties: Crawford, Iosco, Kalkaska, Ogemaw, Oscoda and Roscommon. The largest number of singing males (93) was tallied in Crawford, while Oscoda had 58, Ogemaw 46, and Kalkaska 38. Roscommon and Iosco had 4 and 3 respectively. Compared to 1979, counts were up in all counties except Oscoda, which was the site of the large Mack Lake forest fire in early May. A portion of the area occupied in 1979 burned, as well as other nearby suitable habitat.

The blue and yellow birds return to Michigan each spring from their winter retreat in the Bahamas. They are officially listed as an endangered species by both the DNR and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Members of the Recovery Team, headed by former DNR employee John Byelich, are cautiously optimistic about the 15 percent increase in singing males. While gratified with the increase, Ryel notes that twice in recent years relatively large increases in the population have been followed by equally dramatic decreases the following year.

The long range goal of the Recovery Team is to maintain a population of about 1,000 pairs, which is four times the 1980 level.

Detailed jack pine management plans have been prepared by both Michigan's Forest Management Division and the U.S. Forest Service to insure a continuous supply of jack pine timber. At the same time, this will provide warbler breeding habitat during an early stage of each tree stand's development.