

DNR



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NEWS

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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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United States Department of the Interior

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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
PATUXENT WILDLIFE RESEARCH CENTER
LAUREL, MARYLAND 20708

January 13, 1987

Mr. John Byelich, Leader
Kirtland's Warbler Recovery Team
Mio, Michigan 48647

Dear John:

The following is a report of Patuxent Wildlife Research Center's research activities on the Kirtland's warbler breeding grounds in summer 1986. Please share it with each team member. In addition, we are planning to give a detailed report at the Recovery Team meeting in February.

Our work in Michigan on the Kirtland's Warbler Research Project for 1986 was conducted by Wildlife Biologists Paul Sykes and David Jett of our Southeast Field Station in Athens, Georgia. Assistance in the field was provided by Wildlife Biologist Mike DeCapita of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Wildlife Assistance Office, East Lansing and a member of the Recovery Team; Biological Technician Elaine Carlson, and Wildlife Biologist Jerry Weinrich of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, Houghton Lake Office; and by graduate students Carol Bocetti and Sue Savage of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit, Ohio State University. We greatly appreciate the assistance and cooperation of each of these individuals.

The field season extended from August 12 through September 13. The principal study area was at Bald Hill (that portion of the 1975 burn on the north side of North Down River Road in Section 20, T-27-N, R-1-W), Crawford County, Michigan.

A total of 27 Kirtland's warblers were captured in mist nets (26 at Bald Hill and 1 at McKinley). Of these, four were recaptures, three from 1984 work on Bald Hill and the other, "The Governor," from winter 1985 and 1986 on the Island of Eleuthera, Bahamas. This bird was studied during the last winter season (mid-December through late March) near the town of Governor's Harbour on Eleuthera and was found on territory at Bald Hill in 1985 and 1986 by Dr. John Probst, Wildlife Biologist, U.S. Forest Service, North Central Forest Experiment Station.

Twenty-three warblers were uniquely color banded and miniature radio transmitters were attached to the backs of six of these (one adult and five hatching-year birds) in the manner developed by Sykes (manuscript in preparation) at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in the fall of 1985. The radioed birds were tracked three times per day (early morning, mid-day, and late afternoon); visual contact was made each time to insure that they were okay, that the radio was still attached, and to record data on movements, behavior, habitat, and associates. No problems were observed. The longest a radio remained on a warbler was 9.5 days. Two of the radioed birds were observed after their radios had fallen off (one was seen at 6

meters and the other was captured in a mist net). Both birds behaved in the usual manner for the species, and the radio attachment site could not be seen unless the back feathers were parted with the bird in hand.

From the radioed and banded birds it was noted that the adults tended to stay in their own territories after breeding activity was completed while the young of the year moved a great deal (up to 1.5 km or more, sometimes in a matter of hours). We also confirmed that some warblers stay in Michigan well into September. All of these data are receiving additional analysis this winter. We will be prepared to discuss the findings in more detail in February.

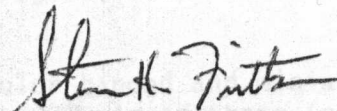
We believe that the 1986 field season in Michigan, while short, was highly successful. Much was learned, and the experience gained was an important step toward future research with the species. We now know that Kirtland's warblers can be safely captured, handled, banded, outfitted with small radio transmitters, and followed in the field at close range by skilled researchers without causing problems for the birds. The rapport and cooperation developed among the personnel of the various agencies was outstanding, and we hope this will continue.

Dr. Cameron B. Kepler will be the new Project Leader for the Kirtland's Warbler Study. Dr. Kepler has 18 years with our program and we are extremely pleased about having the benefit of his experience and expertise on the Kirtland's warbler project. In addition, you will recall that Cam conducted earlier survey work on the Kirtland's warbler in the Bahamas. Paul Sykes and David Jett will continue on the project and have a vital part in all aspects of the research and publication of results. This winter is being spent planning new work on the warbler and making preparations for the 1987 field season.

We look forward to working closely with the Recovery Team, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, the U.S. Forest Service, and others in a concerted effort to determine the problems limiting the Kirtland's warbler to identify for managers, based on our research results, appropriate strategies to enhance species recovery.

I look forward to seeing you at the Recovery Team meeting in February.

Sincerely,



Steven H. Fritts
Acting Leader, Ecology Section I
Endangered Species Research Branch

cc: Tom Weise
Jim Engel