

Rare Bird Nests are Cause for Celebration

by Rachel Levin,
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Scientists and bird lovers are celebrating a milestone in the recovery of the Kirtland's warbler (*Dendroica kirtlandii*), a highly endangered songbird -- the recent discovery of three active nests in Wisconsin.

The Kirtland's warbler, whose distinctive male song can be heard up to a quarter mile away, nests primarily in jack pine forests in the northern Lower Peninsula of Michigan. However, the species has nested in Michigan's Upper Peninsula since 1994 and singing males have been seen in recent years in Wisconsin and Ontario.

The Wisconsin nests were discovered by a birder in early summer of 2007. Recognizing the significance of the discovery, this private citizen contacted and assisted the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources in documenting the presence of Kirtland's warblers in the state. To protect the site from disturbance,

the Service is not disclosing its precise location.

"This development is a testament to decades of cooperative conservation among the states of Michigan and Wisconsin, private landowners, and organizations such as the Audubon Society," says Robyn Thorson, Regional Director for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Midwest Region. "This discovery proves that by working together, recovery and range expansion for an endangered bird are not only possible, but are happening as we speak."

The Wisconsin nests were on land owned by the Plum Creek Timber Company. "Discovering the Kirtland's warbler nesting in managed forests in central Wisconsin is exciting and encouraging, and provides Plum Creek the opportunity to work further with the Service on enhancing Kirtland's warbler habitat in Wisconsin, as we are planning to do in Michigan's Upper Peninsula," says Scott Henker, Plum Creek's senior resource manager for Wisconsin.

The Kirtland's warbler was first described in 1857. Its nesting area was not known until the first nest was discovered in Oscoda County, Michigan, in 1903. Scientists quickly recognized the species as rare and set aside special areas to protect it. Nevertheless, the Kirtland's warbler population plummeted from 432 singing males in 1951 to only 201 males in 1971.

Thanks to recovery efforts by federal, state, and private partners, Kirtland's warbler numbers have increased steadily since 1990, reaching 1,707 singing males in 2007, the highest number since population monitoring began. This year's count includes eight males in Wisconsin and two in Ontario.



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Prior to this year's historic nesting in Wisconsin, no Kirtland's warblers have nested outside Michigan since nesting occurred in Ontario in the 1940s. In the past two years, several singing males were found in Wisconsin and Ontario, prompting optimism that the species would ultimately nest in those locations.

"Wisconsin is excited about having its first Kirtland's warbler nest, and we congratulate our partners in Michigan who have worked for so long to strengthen the Kirtland's warbler population," says former Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Secretary Scott Hassett. "Having this rare bird in Wisconsin is an honor and underscores our responsibility to keep providing quality habitat for wildlife. We look forward to working with Michigan in the future management of this rare pine barrens species."

Now that the Kirtland's warbler has been confirmed as a breeding species in Wisconsin, the Service will look for opportunities to work with landowners to encourage management practices that

could benefit the species. An added advantage of managing habitat for the Kirtland's warbler is that it would also provide benefits for numerous other bird species, as well as other plants and animals that depend on similar habitats.

The Canadians have been preparing for eventual Kirtland's warbler nesting for several years, having conducted annual searches for the species, written a recovery plan, conducted habitat inventories, including aerial surveys with Michigan experts, and participated in Michigan census work and recovery team meetings.

In Michigan, the Service and its partners, including the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, U.S. Forest Service, and the Michigan National Guard, have seen success with efforts to recover the Kirtland's warbler through restoration and protection of nesting habitat, control of the competing brown-headed cowbird, public information, and the assistance of organizations like the Michigan Audubon Society and Kirtland Community College.

"Management partners in Michigan have worked for decades to restore the Kirtland's warbler population," says Michigan Department of Natural Resources Director Rebecca A. Humphries. "Following this discovery, we look forward to working with our partners in Wisconsin to continue the efforts to conserve this species."

The Kirtland's warbler selects nesting sites in stands of jack pine that are between four and 20 years old. Historically, frequent natural wildfires created these stands of young jack pine. Modern fire suppression programs altered this natural process, reducing Kirtland's warbler habitat.

To mimic the effects of wildfire and ensure the future of this endangered species, state and federal wildlife biologists and foresters annually manage forests through a combination of clear cutting, burning, seeding, and replanting to promote warbler habitat. Approximately 3,000 acres of jack pine trees are planted or seeded annually on state and federal lands in Michigan. These successful cooperative management efforts have restored the Kirtland's warbler throughout much of its historic nesting range in Michigan's Lower Peninsula. The presence of a healthy and expanding core population in this area has resulted in the dispersal and appearance of the birds in the Upper Peninsula, Canada, and Wisconsin.

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