

Kirtland's Warbler Fuss

Kent Glauser

I consider myself an average birder. My wife Dolores is better than I am. She has 363 birds on her life list, one more than my 362, even though I have more time to spend in the field. A hawk that the "biggies" in birding can identify at a distance of several hundred yards just looks like a speck in the sky to me, if I am lucky enough to see it.

When I say "biggies" in birding, I am referring to the numerous expert birders we have living in or near Northwestern Ohio. Indeed, we are appropriately blessed with one of the greatest concentrations of gifted birders to attend an area that hosts one of the world's greatest concentrations of migrating birds every spring.

Having said all that, I think the reader will appreciate the reasons for the initial timidity displayed by Dolores and me after experiencing one of the most exciting events in our relatively short birding careers.

On Saturday, May 9th, 1987, at about 9:30 AM, we were standing near the Crane Creek Bird Trail enjoying the parade of warblers in the foliage before us when Dolores said, "There's something different." Looking in the direction Dolores pointed I first croaked something unintelligible - it's hard to talk with your mouth hanging wide open - and then blurted out, "I'll say it is; it's a Kirtland's warbler!" Knowing the bird was one of slightly more than 400 of its kind in the world, I quickly called for someone to confirm the sighting. Unfortunately, before anyone approached our position, the bird disappeared into dense foliage.

Not wanting to create a stampede and knowing that many birders are "doubting Thomases", we chose to tell only a few friends about the incident. Later that morning while walking the Bird Trail, we told a few people about seeing the Kirtland's warbler and asked them to look for it and verify our rare sighting. They assured us they would keep alert and resumed walking toward the entrance to the Trail.

Soon after, Chuck and Marty Michener, whom we had confided in earlier, reached us with the news that the Kirtland's was feeding low in the trees and staying within view near the entrance to the bird trail!

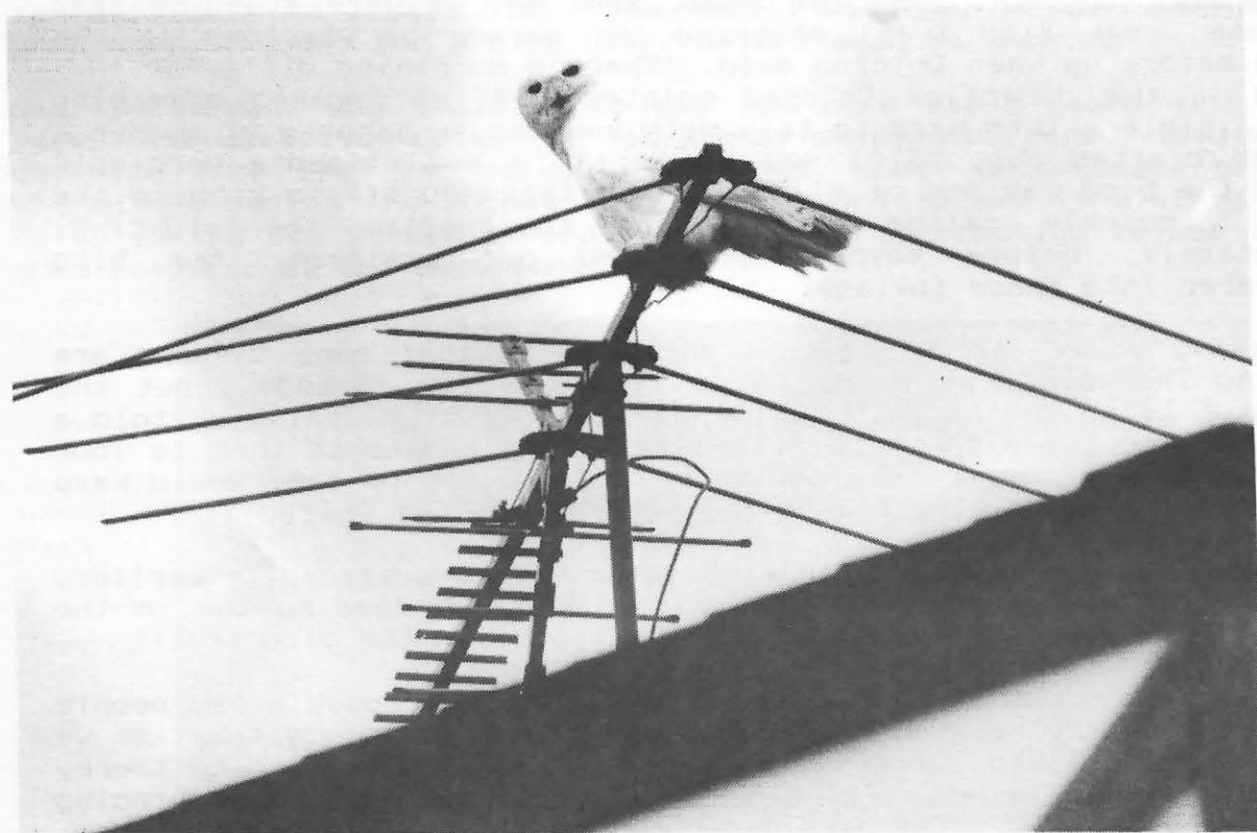
So far as I know, no one was trampled to death, although a few people may have been sent reeling to both sides of the trail. By the time we reached the trailhead there were about 100 spectators standing there, in a surprisingly orderly fashion, taking in one of the best birding shows of their lives. The bird was probably a lifer for most of them. About eight photographers were jockeying for position in front of the warbler.

The second performance by the Kirtland's that day, which began before 11:00 AM and was still in progress when we left at 6:00 PM, was

witnessed by an estimated 500 people. That's what I call a massive confirmation.

On Thursday of the following week, Dolores and I had our names in an article about birding on the front page of the Toledo Blade. Then the phone started ringing. Friends, well-wishers, even strangers called to congratulate, empathize, and ask questions about birds.

Although our birding skills have improved only slightly during this last season, our birding reputation has taken a giant leap forward, thanks to the timely appearance of this rare and lovely little songbird that can bring excitement to all birders, experts and novices alike.



Akron Beacon Journal photo/Ott Gangl

A snowy owl perched on a television antenna at a residence in Akron, Ohio, February 5, 1987 where it remained the entire day. Reprinted with permission of the Akron Beacon Journal.