

Pete Dunne



Pilgrimage to Jack Pine Country

BY OUTWARD APPEARANCE, Grayling, Michigan, is the sort of town birders happen upon only by accident. A sidestep off I-75, it offers the traditional assortment of conveniences—gas, food, and lodging. But unless you are heading for Michigan's Upper Peninsula, Grayling does not exactly lie on the most direct route to anywhere. The quickest way out is back the way you came in. How then to explain the eighteen binocular-clad individuals standing in a parking lot on the outskirts of Grayling at the improbable hour of 6:45 a.m., on May 22, 1989?

All were there by acts of volition. All had traveled great distances, some from as far as California and Florida. And all of us had come with a single objective: to see a single species of North American bird, Kirtland's Warbler.

Among our ranks were several birders who had just completed tours at Point Pelee. Also in the group was an old friend, John Kricher, of Wheaton College in Massachusetts. "Just happened to be in the area," he confided. (The fact that a Wilson's Ornithological Society meeting was being held in South Bend, Indiana, was just a coincidence).

At some point all serious birders make the trek to Grayling or nearby environs, gateway to the nesting grounds of Kirtland's Warbler. Few may do it more than once, but unless you make the effort your chances of seeing one of America's rarest birds (and a Federally Designated Endan-

gered Species) are not particularly good. In fact, even here, they are not guaranteed. The United States Fish and Wildlife Service offers tours at 7:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m., seven days a week, during the nesting season, but no promises.

Dan LeBlanc, our field trip leader, was young and wiry and the very picture of a young Fish and Wildlife biological technician. He was also quite plainly worried.

Park Service interpretive naturalists, of which Dan was not (same ge-

nus, different species) are show people. In the grand tradition of the stage, park naturalists routinely don an air of uncertainty to keep group excitement levels high.

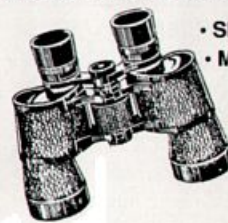
Typical scene. "Will we see a moose?" the (gasp, sigh) naturalist repeated thoughtfully. "Well, ma'am," he said, looking out across the willow flats, at the moose and her calf feeding in the usual spot, "it's unpredictable. Moose are shy creatures. We'll have to be a pretty lucky group to see one or two."



A pilgrimage to Grayling will not guarantee sighting a Kirtland's, but it's well worth the trip.

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But Fish and Wildlife technicians like Dan aren't particularly schooled in drama. When they look worried they usually are, and Dan's concerns weren't exactly groundless. The warblers were *not* cooperating. The first males hadn't arrived on territory until May 17, about a week late, and the full complement of approximately 200 singing birds had yet to establish themselves. Dan's tour the previous day had come very close to getting skunked. High winds kept what few territorial males there were from perching where they could be seen. The wind also blew territorial songs into disembodied notes, making detection difficult. Few among the birders who had traveled hundreds of miles out of their way to see a Kirtland's Warbler that day managed to get so much as a glimpse of one.

You can, no doubt, appreciate Dan's legitimate concerns and reluctance to repeat the previous day's performance. Would you like to orchestrate the skunking of a bunch of birders inching their way toward 600 species two days in a row? Think about it.

On command, we filed into the wood frame building that served as the headquarters and into a room festooned with charts plotting the annual rise and fall of Kirtland's Warbler.

"I'm not in a hurry to get into the field," Dan announced—a brave thing to say considering the nature of the group. "I'd like to show you a program first to give you some background on the Kirtland's Warbler."

The "Bird of Fire," makes an interesting if not particularly encouraging tale. Discovered as a May migrant in 1851 near Cleveland, Ohio, it was not until 1879 that the wintering grounds of Kirtland's Warblers were found in the West Indies. It took twenty-four years before a fly fisherman happened upon the first nesting bird in Oscoda County, Michigan. Although territorial males have been found in Ontario, Quebec, and Wisconsin to date, all confirmed nesting efforts by Kirtland's Warblers have occurred within 60 miles of the original nest site. Wherever territorial Kirtland's Warblers occur, they have at least this in common. The highly specialized warblers situate themselves in stands of Jack Pine, a scrubby little conifer that only Charlie Brown (and Kirtland's Warblers) could love. The finicky na-

ture of Kirtland's Warblers extends to both the height (5-20 feet), of the tree and the nature of the understory, a matrix of interlocking limbs interspersed by open grassy areas.

Habitat specialization, particularly specialization as keen as that demonstrated by Kirtland's Warblers, is a two-edged sword. It does cut down the ranks of potential competitors, but it also backs the bird into an evolutionary corner. A bird that specializes in Jack Pines is limited to the Jack Pines, and Jack Pines are not exactly stock items on nature's shelf. In fact, they occur only on sandy outwash plains left in the wake of the Wisconsin Glacier.

Since the ice sheet left town about ten thousand years ago, Kirtland's Warblers have never been particularly numerous. Between 1951 and 1961 the population was fairly stable, ranging from 432 to 502 pairs. Soon thereafter things began to unravel.

In 1971, the population was down to 201 pairs and by 1974 it had plummeted to 167 singing males. Investigators seeking to isolate the cause of the decline finally pinned the blame on the parasitism of the Brown-headed Cowbird. Control efforts were initiated, and the number of Kirtland's nests containing cowbird eggs went from an average of 69% nests to 4.9%. By 1980, the number of singing males had rebounded to 242, and then, oddly, the numbers fell back and stabilized. Despite extensive management efforts and continued cowbird control, the Kirtland's population has dug in at about 200 pairs.

The program over and a mutiny close at hand, Dan organized a car caravan and led us on the 15-mile drive to one of the prime Kirtland's nest sites, a spot where four historical territories were more or less tangent. But our first stop was one of the cowbird traps, a wood frame and chicken-wire affair baited with millet and occupied by an indigenous flock of cowbirds playing the role of Judas Goat. It is a drastic measure, the cowbird reduction campaign, but a necessary one. I frankly admire the Fish and Wildlife Service for being so up front with something as delicate as dry-gulching cowbirds.

As it was, poor Dan's anxieties about finding birds were groundless. The winds had died. The day was sunny and warming nicely. Unfortu-

nately, Dan never got the earned satisfaction of finding the first Kirtland's for the group. There was a ringer in our party. Our group had barely assembled at the trap before she shouted: "There's one! I hear one!" She even managed to locate the distant songster in her scope.

But it still took Dan's special, sure-fire, Kirtland's Omega Point for most of those seeking admission to the ranks of Kirtland's finders to get the look they came for. The spot was easy enough to locate. Two disgruntled but still hopeful members of the previous day's group were out and waiting.

It was an hour before every member of the group got the kind of look that doesn't make a conscience squirm. It was early in the season. Territories were still kind of on the vague side and the females hadn't arrived yet. This takes the edge off the territorial prerogative.

One singing male after another made a brief appearance, dropping from view whenever they sensed the presence of a spotting scope. I don't know how the birds are capable of this but it is clear that they are. One bird finally tired of the game and posed for the masses. John Kricher, at the helm of a Kowa spotting scope, so new you could smell the cosmoline, nailed the bird at 40X and stepped back. John is a gallant man.

The group slowly disbanded, Dan to pick up his 11 o'clock group, the others on to assorted destinations. The Kirtland's were left to their fortune—whatever that might be. For a bird that numbers fewer than my high-school graduating class, and lives in a habitat that even the glacier that spawned it has forgotten, that future is nothing to be cavalier about.

But it would take something pretty drastic and unforeseen for the Kirtland's Warbler to join the ranks of North American birds already lost in this century. For the foreseeable future, serious birders will still be making their pilgrimages to Grayling, Michigan. Their chances of seeing the "Bird of Fire" remains just above average.

But as Dan LeBlanc will tell you, they aren't guaranteed.

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