

Kirtland's Warbler *Setophaga kirtlandii*



Folk Name: Jack Pine Warbler

Status: Migrant

Abundance: Casual

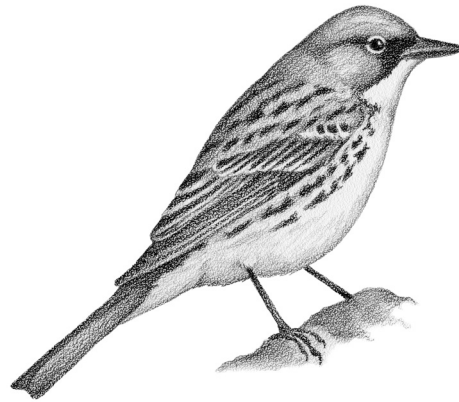
Habitat: Forest edge

The Kirtland's Warbler is one of the rarest songbirds in the United States. It was designated a federally endangered species in 1967. The entire population of this colorful songbird breeds only in a restricted area of young "Jack-Pine" country in Michigan and Wisconsin. The total number of singing males (males on territory) hovered around 200 for most of the 1970s and 1980s, but recovery team efforts have managed to bring the number up to about 1,800 singing males today. Kirtland's Warblers migrate back and forth between their breeding grounds in the northern United States and their wintering grounds on the Bahama Islands each year, but they are seldom encountered during migration. Some scientists have speculated that this may be because most of these tiny birds make this 1,200+ mile trip in a single "hop."

The Kirtland's Warbler is one of the rarest birds reported in the Carolinas. To date, there have been only six sight records accepted by the North Carolina Bird Records Committee. There have been three specimens and about seven sight reports accepted by the South Carolina Bird Records Committee. Surprisingly, almost one-third of all accepted records of Kirtland's Warbler in the Carolinas have been recorded in the Central Carolina region.

Leverett Loomis collected a specimen of a female Kirtland's Warbler in Chester County on October 11, 1888, providing definitive confirmation of this rarity as a migrant in this region. Loomis wrote:

I had been waiting all the morning of Oct. 11, 1888, for the cessation of the heavy gale and driving rain that had begun during the previous night, for I was anxious to get out into the woods and see what effect the storm was having on the returning migrants. By midday the wind had subsided and the rain had become a mere drizzle. Shortly after 1 P.M. I ventured out, directing my steps to the nearest woods. But few birds were found, and I continued my search until I came to an extended body of scrubby black-jacks, pines, and red cedars about a mile and a half from home. Here, I discovered a small gathering of Tufted Titmice, Carolina Chickadees, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, and several species of Warblers. I drove the gathering about through the low growth, shooting the birds that were not instantly recognizable, until I reached an edge bordering on an old-field where I noticed



a small bird fly into a low cedar. It was promptly shot. A glance was sufficient to reveal the fact that it was wholly new to me. I saw that it was a Warbler and a *Dendroica*. I began to revolve in mind the distinctive characters of each member of the genus until I had eliminated all save one—the one I had suspected it to be, for I had in memory Mr. Maynard's illustration of the female Kirtland's Warbler ("The Birds of Eastern North America," pl. xvii). I hastened home to my library and found that I had worked it out truly and that I had indeed "the rarest of all the Warblers" inhabiting the United States. This, if I have read the records aright, is the third instance of *Dendroica kirtlandii* having been taken in the Atlantic States, and the second of its capture in South Carolina.

In *Bird Lore* magazine in 1925, P.M. Jenness published an original account of an observation of Kirtland's Warbler in Gaffney, Cherokee County, only about 30 miles from where Loomis collected his specimen. Jenness wrote:

On May 5, 1925, at about 8 A.M., Mrs. Jenness and I were walking down the main drive of the Irene Mills Park when I heard an unfamiliar bird-song. My aptitude for music is so slight that I will not attempt to describe this song, except to say that it was loud and clear but "immature" in effect. Following this about 75 yards we came to a grove of small pines, and in these found the singer. The bird kept at a height of about 20 feet, moving from one tree to another with a fair degree of activity. I had several fairly satisfactory views of the underparts and side of the head but none of the back. I soon realized that the bird much resembled the Kirtland's

Warbler plates I have seen, and was a male.

At this time Mrs. Jenness called to me that she was viewing another bird, and as the first was getting into a thicker stand of trees, I stepped over to observe the second bird. This one was duller, apparently a female bird. In the interest of the chase, Mrs. Jenness stepped into a concealed ditch, this incident interrupting our observations so that we were unable to find the birds again.

Reference to the field guide, and subsequently to other texts, strengthened our opinion that we had seen Kirtland's Warbler, one point and another eliminating all other probabilities. Yet we were unwilling to be positive.

Two hours later I was passing again through the park when I heard two or three notes reminiscent of the song before heard. Within 50 feet of where we had seen the first birds, I caught sight of this one. It was in a pine tree but almost instantly flew into a small shrub directly in front of me. Conditions were ideal for observation. The bright sun high over my shoulder made strong light upon the bird, perched in the lower forks of a small shrub, about 2 feet from the ground, with no intervening foliage. The distance afterward measured, was not in excess of 25 feet, and I had the bird in full view with an 8x glass perfectly focused. All identification points were noted, including wagging of the tail, and I am able to say positively that this was a male Kirtland's Warbler. And I am now quite certain that the birds previously seen were also of this species.

After this very satisfactory view, observation was interrupted by the approach of the caretaker of the park, and I was not able to again find the Warbler.

The Jenness account provides an excellent narrative of the details of the observation but a definitive description of the birds' plumage is clearly lacking. This sight record is included by both Sprunt and Chamberlain (1970) and Post and Gauthreaux (1989) as one of the few records of this species in South Carolina.

Almost 60 years later on August 29, 1982, Zora Weisbecker discovered a Kirtland's Warbler in Iredell County about 70 miles northeast of the Jenness observation in Gaffney. She published her finding in the Fall 1987 issue of *The Chat*. Weisbecker's record is cited as the first accepted sight record for the state of North Carolina. She provided the following account with specific description of the field marks noted:

On 29 August 1982 I was taking my morning walk around the main lake at Allison's Woods Iredell

County, N.C. I saw a male Kirtland's Warbler in a Short-leaf Pine thicket growing at the highest point along the trail, approximately 40 feet above the lake, in a mixed pine hardwood forest. I watched the bird for about 15 minutes as it remained perched on a low limb about 20 feet from me. It appeared quite tame, and I distinctly saw through binoculars the bird's white eye ring, its gray back with black streaks, its yellow breast with black streaks only along the sides, its narrow wing bars, and its tail-wagging behavior. I recognized the bird immediately as a Kirtland's Warbler because I have seen the species at least a hundred times in a film I show to my biology students. "Patterns of the Wild" has a segment on the management of the nesting habitat of the Kirtland's Warbler in the Jack Pine forest of central Michigan.

A final testament to the extreme rarity of the Kirtland's Warbler is illustrated by the most recent sighting of this small migrant in our region. On September 27, 2010, almost 122 years after Loomis collected his specimen in South Carolina, Kevin Metcalf was able to photograph a Kirtland's Warbler at Cowan's Ford Wildlife Refuge, in northern Mecklenburg County. This photograph, taken only 35 miles south of Allison's Woods, provided the first definitive evidence of this species ever recorded from the state of North Carolina.

The Kirtland's Warbler is listed on the Red Watch List of birds of the continental United States. It is a "species with extremely high vulnerability" to extinction. It is in need of immediate and significant conservation action.



Kirtland's Warbler at Rural Hill Nature Preserve. First photographic evidence of this bird in North Carolina. (Kevin Metcalf)