

Celebrating Michigan's Kirtland's Warbler

The Oakland Owlet's Families and Friends ventured to northern Michigan for the Kirtland's Warbler Festival in Roscommon on June 5-6. The Owlet's scheduled a tour of Kirtland's Warbler habitat hoping to see the rarest songbird in North America, Kirtland's Warbler. We were not disappointed. The KW Festival is organized locally by various groups including the Kirtland's Warbler Alliance. The Festival kicked off on Friday with bird banding and a welcome gathering at the Marguerite Gahagan Nature Preserve. The event featured author Scott Harris, and he shared his quest to chase 53 raptor species across the lower 48 states. Harris's book *Raptor Quest - Chasing America's Raptors* was available after his program.

Most of the Owlet group arrived on Saturday morning and met U.S. Forest Service biologist Dana Meder along a sandy road in the Huron Manistee National Forest. The U.S. Forest Service is one of the agencies that manages KW habitat in Michigan.

As we waited for everyone to arrive, we were surrounded by the songs of the Kirtland Warbler. The group drove a short distance into the managed jack pine forest. We immediately saw a male KW perch on a dead tree branch and start singing. Everyone was able to see this bird and we were all thrilled.



This location was a hot spot for Festival goers' tours. A tour bus lumbered up and down the sandy two track road. Everyone was in town to see the warblers. Dana Meder, our guide, patiently shared her vast knowledge of the Kirtland Warbler and the management of this critical habitat. Groups would come and go but there was plenty of time quietly surrounded by this special environment. This was an amazing experience to hear the song of the KW and watch the males perched nearby on branches declaring their territories.



The Kirtland's Warblers prefer to breed in young Jack Pine and use the protective cover of the lower branches for their nests. Due to fire suppression over the years, the Jack Pine Forest aged. By 1986 Kirtland's Warblers were in serious decline. The breeding birds census found only two hundred breeding pairs. Conservation work by many agencies and the Endangered Species Act reversed this decline. Today Kirtland's Warblers are removed from the endangered species list. However, Kirtland's Warblers are a conservation reliant species that rely on land management to provide appropriate breeding habitat.

Dana also pointed out the unique botanical qualities of Jack Pines. We were surrounded by Jack Pines less than 15 feet tall; it was easy to step off the road to touch and look at this habitat.



Dana showed the group developing seed cones on Jack Pines. Often known as a tree of Fire, the cones do not open without heat like a fire. We learned how habitat is critical to KW's survival. Both



the Jack Pine and KW are unique in their needs and management requirements.

Most of the morning was spent along a short stretch of the road. Several birds live in the area, yet our eBird checklist was short. Other birds we encountered included Field Sparrows, Nashville Warblers, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Brown Thrasher and Hermit Thrush. About lunch time, everyone needed to eat. Dana had obligations at the Kirtland's Warbler Festival in town. We gathered a group photo just before everyone departed and thanked Dana for her time and sharing her expertise.



A few traveled to Roscommon to see the Festival and the largest sculpture of a Kirtland's Warbler in town.



Photo Credits - Kathleen Dougherty & OAS Gallery (Nashville Warbler & Kirtland's Warbler) .