

The First Breeding Record of Kirtland's Warbler in Ontario

by
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The Kirtland's Warbler, *Dendroica kirtlandi*, is one of the rarest of our warblers. According to published records, in all of North America it has nested only in 13 counties of Michigan's northern Lower Peninsula, and only in Jack pines (*Pinus banksiana*) which are at least five or six years old and 0.3–1.8 m tall. It winters in scattered islands of the Bahamas (Walkinshaw 1983). The first specimen of the species was collected near Cleveland in 1851 and named after a distinguished Cleveland ornithologist, Dr. Jared Kirtland. The first Ontario specimen, a male, was collected at Toronto Island on 16 May 1900, by J. Hughes Samuel (Samuel 1900) and is in the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto (specimen #2241160).

In May 1916, Dr. Paul Harrington and Dr. Frederick Starr were training for artillery service at Petawawa Military Camp, Renfrew County, on the Ottawa River. To their great surprise they found Kirtland's Warbler to be fairly common on the Jack pine plains there. According to James L. Baillie Jr., of the Royal Ontario Museum, they "heard them singing their loud, clear, high-pitched and

somewhat ventriloquistic song, noticed their tail-wagging habit and determined that these rather large and tame warblers were distributed over a fairly large area and in the camp grounds" (Baillie 1952).

The species was not reported again at Petawawa until Dr. Harrington searched the Jack pine stands in the same camp area in June of 1939. On 5 June he saw a male Kirtland's Warbler at close range (Harrington 1939). Unfortunately at neither time was nesting confirmed.

In this note, I report the occurrence of a pair of adult Kirtland's Warblers near Midhurst, Ontario, in association with at least one, apparently still dependent, juvenile. I conclude that the pair nested in the local vicinity, thereby providing the first breeding record for this species in Ontario and the first breeding record from outside the state of Michigan. The Ontario Bird Records Committee (OBRC) has accepted this record as the first breeding record for the province.

In 1945 my husband, J. Murray Speirs, was stationed at Barrie, Ontario, in connection with his appointment as a Meteorological Officer at Camp Borden. As many Jack pines had been planted in the

vicinity of the Camp, we searched them carefully in the hopes of locating Kirtland's Warblers. Also, as six acres had been planted in Jack pines at the Government Forestry Station, Midhurst, the Station Manager assisted us in searching their plantation thoroughly, but no Kirtland's Warblers were found.

We lived in a stone bungalow 10 kms northeast of Camp Borden, 23-26 kms from Midhurst in Oro Township, Simcoe County, Ontario, on the northwest shore of Kempenfeldt Bay, Lake Simcoe (44° 24' N, 79° 39' W and 230 m above sea level). The nearby vegetation included a huge oak tree which overshadowed our swinging outdoor couch and a woodland of smaller oaks (*Quercus* sp.) maples (*Acer* sp.), white birches (*Betula papyrifera*) and staghorn sumacs (*Rhus typhina*), with an understory of maple-leaved viburnum (*Viburnum acerifolium*), golden-rod (*Solidago* sp.), bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*), and poison ivy (*Rhus radicans*). There were also many large stones and stone outcroppings. There were no Jack pines in the immediate vicinity but a number of scattered red (*Pinus resinosa*) and white (*P. strobus*) pines.

On the morning of 8 August 1945, I saw a strange warbler with an indication of a wing-bar, white over the eye, yellowish-green breast, darkish back and very quick actions. I put it down as a "Kirtland's Warbler?". But how could a Kirtland's Warbler be here? A fall migrant on its way to the Bahamas?

The next day, 9 August, my notes read:

"3:30 p.m.— Warbler with bright yellow breast and streaks on the sides, brownish back, said 'tip-tip-tip' constantly and jerked tail. Made as much noise as a chipmunk and started one scolding and so both were talking at once. The warbler's 'tip' a little higher in tone than the chipmunk's. Moved about quickly in the trees atop the bluff and then flew chipping into the woods."

On 10 August, I recorded the following:

"The warbler with bright yellow breast and streaks on the sides is back here today at 3:05 p.m. Noted white undertail coverts, black on cheeks as though the stripes were continued into the face. He had wing-bars; secondaries appeared black edged with grey; throat yellow. The tail-wagging suggests a Palm Warbler. I went to Peterson's Field Guide immediately (Peterson 1934), . . . *Kirtland's Warbler*. The bird flew with characteristic zip and energy into one of the oaks which edge the east side of the garden. My binoculars picked up a fledgling in the shadow of the leaves. It was perched on a branch facing eastward. I noticed its short tail, rather fluffy plumage, brownish upperparts and indication of wing-bars. It stretched out one wing as I glanced at it. The bill was quite stout for a warbler's. I wondered whose child it was, but was so intent in trying to follow the movements of the adult bird the fledgling was given little attention by me. That it was given definite attention by the adult, only occurred to me in the night."

At the time I thought that the

adult warbler was a migrant en route to the Bahamas. That it had bred here never occurred to me at all. Twice as I followed the adult, my binoculars picked up the fledgling. Was it feeding it? For days the sound of baby birds being fed about the bungalow had been noted by both of us. Because of the presence of poison ivy, we had not studied the woodland east of the garden. Young Yellow-rumped Warblers (*Dendroica coronata*) and American Redstarts (*Setophaga ruticilla*) were being fed daily about the bungalow but we had neglected that east bush.

At 4:00 p.m. I discovered a second adult Kirtland's Warbler in the garden, apparently a female. It was busy preening, quite close to where I was observing. The yellow breast had two dark spots near the centre; the male's breast was clear yellow. The bird's behaviour was so different from the excited male's. It was absorbed in its preening and only gave an occasional 'tip' note as it wagged its tail. I observed that the tibia were yellow, the feet and upper mandible dark and there was a suggestion of white in the tail. So, we had a pair of Kirtland's Warblers.

The next morning, 11 August, I called on Dr. E. L. Brereton, a noted ornithologist from Barrie, and told him of our discoveries. He came out in the afternoon, but all was quiet. I had to leave by car to pick up Murray at the airport, but Dr. Brereton remained. On our way home we met him in Barrie. He was very excited; a new bird for his life list. He said he had left a note in the post office for us. It told how successful he had been in

observing the male firsthand for about 20 minutes. He wanted to collect this rare bird but had refrained as he knew I had been sure it was feeding young.

On 13 August I came upon a juvenile Kirtland's Warbler. That morning I had heard 'tip' note at 7:00 and 9:00 a.m. and had gone out to investigate in the east woodland, unsuccessfully. In the afternoon, at 3:55 p.m. exactly, the 'tip-tip-tip' notes were heard again. The sound was coming from a very large red oak (*Quercus rubra*). I leaned against the trunk of a tree near the big oak as I heard young birds being fed. Suddenly I saw an immature which flew to a dead twig on a nearby oak and remained there quietly for at least ten minutes. Undoubtedly it was a juvenile Kirtland's Warbler. The tail was not short, but there was some yellowish down near the bend of a wing. The bird remained very still, obviously conscious of being watched. I was able to make a page of careful notes on its plumage.

It is strange, but we had heard not one Kirtland song, just the many excited call-notes indicating the parents' concern for their young. That afternoon, before my discovery of the juvenile, I heard a sudden loud song from the Kirtland territory. It was an unfamiliar outburst, a new song to me. It commenced quietly but accelerated into a thrilling crescendo, all in the space of a few seconds. In the stillness of the afternoon woods, it was as surprising as seeing a meteor in the night sky. Four years later, on 8 May 1949, we each heard a

different male singing in the Kirtland's Warbler country, Kalkaska County, Michigan. We were startled by the sudden joyous, ringing song.

On 16-17 August, I went to the Royal Ontario Museum and studied the tray of Kirtland's Warblers in the Bird Room under James L. Baillie's kind direction. I had with me my detailed description of the young Kirtland's Warbler. A specimen in immature plumage on the tray closely resembled it. Baillie said that there was no doubt the juvenile I saw was a Kirtland's. Of the nine specimens I examined, only the adult male, which had been collected on Toronto Island in May, 1900, had an immaculate yellow breast like our male. Two females had several spots on their breasts while ours had only two. On my return to the stone bungalow the Kirtland's Warblers seemed to have left. There was neither sound nor sight of them. However, on 31 August at 8:30 a.m. I heard the 'tip' note several times. Hurrying out with binoculars, I espied several warblers dashing about in the treetops northeast of the bungalow. Then I saw a Kirtland's Warbler in a large oak above the incinerator. He jerked his tail from time to time as he ran along the branches after insects. He was very active and hard to follow with the glasses. At 8:45, as an Eastern Wood-Pewee (*Contopus virens*) and Red-eyed Vireo (*Vireo olivaceus*) were singing, the male Kirtland's Warbler called out loudly again. Four Northern Flickers (*Colaptes auratus*) flew

into a tree near him and then he was gone, probably leaving the nesting grounds for good.

Dr. Lawrence H. Walkinshaw (Walkinshaw 1939) wrote prophetically in an article on *Dendroica kirtlandi*:

"It seems logical that it will eventually be found in Ontario breeding."

His prophecy has been confirmed.

[Eds. note: Excluding the Barrie records and those from the Petawawa area (during the years 1916, 1939, 1946 and 1977) there are about 25 additional records of the Kirtland's Warbler in Ontario which are generally considered valid. These comprise spring migrants (20 records), summer (apparently territorial) birds (3 records) and fall migrants (2 records). Few of these records, however, have been reviewed by the Ontario Bird Records Committee (A. Wormington, OBRC Secretary, pers. comm.)]

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Notes

A Winter Record of a Veery in Ontario

On 27 December 1983, we observed a single Veery (*Catharus fuscescens*) at Lakeside Park, Kitchener, in the Regional Municipality of Waterloo, Ontario.

The 18 ha park contains a 1.5 ha kettle lake surrounded by a narrow fringe of aquatic emergents. The eastern side of the lake is dominated by an open, immature forest of poplar (*Populus tremuloides*), while the northern and western sides are shrubby in aspect. The remainder of the park is maintained lawn with occasional large trees, particularly black walnut (*Juglans nigra*), Norway spruce (*Picea abies*), and Norway acer (*Acer platanoides*), and sugar maple (*A. saccharum*). The park is surrounded by residences on three sides and a busy street on the fourth. Habitats of Lakeside Park are described in more detail by Dance (1982).

The bird was first seen at 0845 h at a distance of approximately 7 m. It was facing us, perched 3 m

above the ground on a limb of a Norway maple. With the aid of 7 x 35 and 7 x 50 binoculars we could see the slender, dark bill and the faint brown spots on the upper portion of the white breast. A minute later, it flew into a tangle of wild grape (*Vitis riparia*) and then 10 m up into a sugar maple.

Although the weather was overcast and it was snowing lightly, the brownish back and tail were clearly visible. After approximately two minutes, it flew away and was temporarily lost from sight.

An hour later, it was observed again in a buckthorn (*Rhamnus cathartica*). It was 2 m from the ground and was approached to within 3 m. From this distance, all necessary field marks could easily be distinguished: the uniformly coloured tawny reddish brown back and tail; the light brown spots on the upper portion of the breast; the brownish cheeks; and the absence of an eye-ring.