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ENDANGERED SPECIES PROGRAM**

TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW TIME (12:35)

KIRTLAND'S WARBLER (HOST – SARAH LEON WITH DAN ELBERT, CHRIS MENSING, AND CHRISTIE DELORIA)

This transcript was produced from audio provided by FWS Endangered Species Program

P R O C E E D I N G S

(Music plays.)

MS. LEON: This is Sarah Leon for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and today we have three of our Kirtland's warbler experts on the line. Dan Elbert and Chris Mensing, both fish and wildlife biologists at our East Lansing field office. And also joining us is Christie Deloria, a fish and wildlife biologist at our Upper Peninsula sub-office.

Christie, can you get us started today by telling us a little about this endangered bird?

MS. DELORIA: Sure. The Kirtland's warbler is about a 6-inch sized warbler—a large wood warbler and weighs about 14 grams, and so about equivalent to two quarters and a penny. That's how much it weighs. And the male has got a bright yellow breast. It has a little bit of black flex down the side and the back is sort of blue and gray mix.

The bird nests primarily in the Northern Lower Peninsula of Michigan, although recently with its population growing it's expanded its range to areas in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, as well as in Wisconsin and into Ontario. It nests in young jack pine and actually nests on the ground where they build the little nest usually at the base of a tree. And the female incubates the eggs. The males feed the female while she's nesting. And once the young hatch the chicks are tended by both parents until they can fly.

So after it gets done breeding in the Northern Lower Peninsula of Michigan than it migrates down to their wintering grounds in the Bahamas. And really the story of Kirtland's warbler is one of recovery success. So the world population of Kirtland's warblers was back in the 1970s through mid 1980s around 200 pairs. So not very many individuals are left. Now, the population is up around 1,700 pairs. And we're above our numeric recovery goals for this species, which the recovery goal's a 1,000 pairs. And largely the increase in pairs has resulted not only from a fire that happened back in 1980, which created thousands of acres of habitat, it really boosted the population. But that's been coupled with a lot of intensive habitat management in cowbird control.

MS. LEON: And why is this species endangered?

MR. ELBERT: So the Kirtland's warbler is very specific when it comes to choosing its breeding habitat. This bird prefers early successional stands within jack pine forests that are structurally distinct. The trees have to be a certain height, usually between two and five meters. They have to be very dense typically between 35 and 65 percent canopy cover. And they tend to be greater than 80 acres in size.

The problem is that in the historic Northern Great Lakes Region this habitat was more abundant than it is now. Large and frequent standard placing fires created this habitat which the Kirtland's warbler has adapted to use. And now modern wildfire suppression has decreased the frequency at which these wildfires occur, as well as the extent of the burns. So the overall affect has been a significant reduction in the extent of jack pine forests, and in turn the Kirtland's warbler breeding habitat.

A second major threat has been the advent of brown-headed cowbird parasitism. Cowbirds are an obligate breed parasite which means they don't make their own nests. They lay their eggs in other songbird's nests. Historically cowbirds are restricted to the grasslands of the Great Plains, but since the forests of Michigan were logged so heavily cowbirds were able to expand their breeding range into Northern Lower Michigan where Kirtland's warblers breed.

And because Kirtland's warblers have very little evolutionary experience with the brown-headed cowbird they lack the appropriate defenses against cowbird parasitism like rejecting eggs or constructing new nests and abandoning their old nests. So Kirtland's warblers seem to be especially vulnerable to cowbird parasitism.

On their wintering grounds there are no significant threats that we know of but we're still learning much about their wintering habitat. We are aware that the Bahamas have few protected lands or reserves of the development of lands for tourism, the establishment and spread of invasive plants that compete with native

plant and of shifting agricultural practices that may potentially become new threats for this species on its wintering ground.

And in migration we're still learning much about Kirtland's warbler migration but believe that the species uses a relatively narrow path between its breeding and wintering grounds. We have growing evidence that manmade structures such as communication towers and wind turbines pose a potential problem to migrating songbirds in general with some species being more affected than others. And although the magnitude affects that these structures could have on the Kirtland's warbler is unknown we will likely need to increase our attention to this issue as new wind energy and telecommunication projects continue to expand. So all of these contribute to why this species is endangered.

Sarah Leon: So what conservation actions are currently underway then?

MR. MENSING: The primary conservation tool used to protect Kirtland's warblers and to help recover them is an annual intensive habitat management program on the breeding grounds. This is achieved through mechanical treatments typically involving clear cutting existing mature jack pine stands and replanting jack pine in a structure that would benefit Kirtland's warbler. Over the landscape in Northern Lower Peninsula of Michigan and Eastern Upper Peninsula approximately 38,000 acres are available each year for Kirtland's warbler requiring approximately 4,000 acres to be managed on an annual basis.

This is mostly on public land. Ninety-five percent of the birds nest on public lands and then ninety percent of that is in these managed stands. There are periodic wildfires that still occur in the area. And those wildfires, even though they're suppressed and controlled as quickly as possible, when the jack pine regenerates out of those burned areas that will provide additional nesting habitat for Kirtland's warbler.

As Dan alluded to cowbirds are a significant threat to Kirtland's warblers as well. And in the Lower Peninsula of Michigan and Wisconsin we conduct cowbird control programs to remove Brown-headed cowbirds from Kirtland's warbler nesting areas, allowing Kirtland's warblers to successfully raise their own young without the threat of cowbird parasitism.

We are also conducting research in the Bahamas and that's going from very basic level of just getting sightings of Kirtland's warblers in the Bahamas. But then also looking at the diet of the warblers on the wintering grounds, the habitat they're using and hopefully getting some management implications to look at what specific habitats should be conserved, should be protected or even restored to help the wintering warblers.

And the intensive habitat management and cowbird control programs really have been the primary cause for the recent population increase in Kirtland's warblers.

MS. LEON: So we've had some help then in this recovery effort?

MR. MENSING: Very much so. This program is one that there is no one party involved. From the very beginning, even before the Endangered Species Act (ESA), many partners were involved recognizing the species rarity and the need for conservation. Groups like Michigan Department of Natural Resources (Michigan DNR) and the U.S. Forest Service have been very instrumental from day one on recovering this species primarily involved with the habitat management.

The Fish and Wildlife Service, you know, we're also involved with cowbird control and overall recovery of the species. The U.S. Department of Agricultural Wildlife Services, the Nature Conservancy, Michigan Audubon Society, Bahamas National Trust—all have played major roles in the past and currently with protecting this bird and keeping it around for generations to come.

MS. LEON: Earlier Christie mentioned that the numeric recovery goal for Kirtland's warbler is 1,000 pairs, which we've exceeded with 1,700 pairs. What needs to happen before the species can be removed from the threatened and endangered species list?

MS. DELORIA: Really we've had tremendous recovery success as far as increase in the population numbers above 1,000 breeding pairs. And now we know how to manage the species but now it really becomes a challenge of how do we keep these intensive and expensive management efforts going into the future. And so, you know, the Kirtland's warbler is considered a conservation reliance species. Really it's a species that needs ongoing human intervention or management in order to survive.

And clearly Kirtland's warbler not the only species out there that has this challenge. Many of our other listed species have it too but Kirtland's warblers, as we say is, you know, extremely reliant on human intervention and management at this point. And for our question in looking at the listing as what would happen if we right now took the species off of the list and took away the protections of the Endangered Species Act and some of the things that we could predict might happen would be that there would a loss or a reduction in the amount of funding. A lot of times an endangered species, when looking for grant funding or the like, it gives it more priority and higher ability to get funding.

So losing that status might result in the loss of funding. Some of the agencies could decide to shift focus. So agencies being the Michigan DNR and the forest service who do the bulk of the management for the species could shift focus to other priority species and therefore take away the efforts for the Kirtland's warbler or reduce them. We just aren't sure if we take the ESA away right now if management would continue at the same levels.

So we've identified sort of three different actions that we think are really important to set us up in a place to help alleviate those concerns of loss of funding and a shift in agency focus, and ensure that management continues. And the first one of those actions is to put in place a memorandum of understanding which basically would ensure that the commitment of the agencies, the U.S. Forest Service—the Michigan DNR and the U.S. Forest Service to continue management after delisting is still there. And we're in the process of developing that, actually very close to having that signed. So we're on the right track there.

The second action is developing a Kirtland's warbler trust fund. Another non-for-profit group, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, has gotten that effort started and they're hoping to develop a Friends of Kirtland's Warbler group that would be able to raise some funds. And the idea would be to have this trust fund that would then help pay for cowbird trapping, which right now is completely funded through Endangered Species Act funding. And this fund would also help supplement agency appropriations. So it'd help supplement some of that and help with the habitat management.

And then the third action is the different partners are going to collaboratively write a Kirtland's Warbler Conservation Plan. And the idea behind the conservation plan is that this will replace the recovery plan and it'll provide a strategy about ongoing conservation needs for the species for habitat management, cowbird control, other management efforts that are necessary to sustain the species and the jack pine ecosystem into the future.

We feel that if we get these three things in place we'll have a really strong backdrop to begin delisting the Kirtland's warbler. And really taking the species off the list of threatened and endangered species from our perspective is really the ultimate measure of our success.

MS. LEON: Now, how can our listeners learn more about this bird and the jack pine ecosystem that it calls home?

MR. ELBERT: One of the best ways to learn about Kirtland's warbler is to actually see it in its natural habitat, and there are several ways that a listener can actually do that. We provide tours for the public to go view Kirtland's warblers. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has partnered with Michigan Audubon Society, and we provide tours out of Grayling and the U.S. Forest Service provides tours out of Mio, Michigan. And these tours run from mid-May to early July. The public can go out on a guided tour with wildlife professionals to view Kirtland's warbler and to learn more about its history, to learn more about its habitat and to just really experience that jack pine ecosystem.

MS. LEON: Well, thank you so much Dan, Chris and Christie for taking the time to tell us a little about this species today. It was such a pleasure having the three of you on.

MS. DELORIA: You're very welcome.

MR. ELBERT: Our pleasure.

MS. LEON: For the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service this Sarah Leon. Thanks for listening.