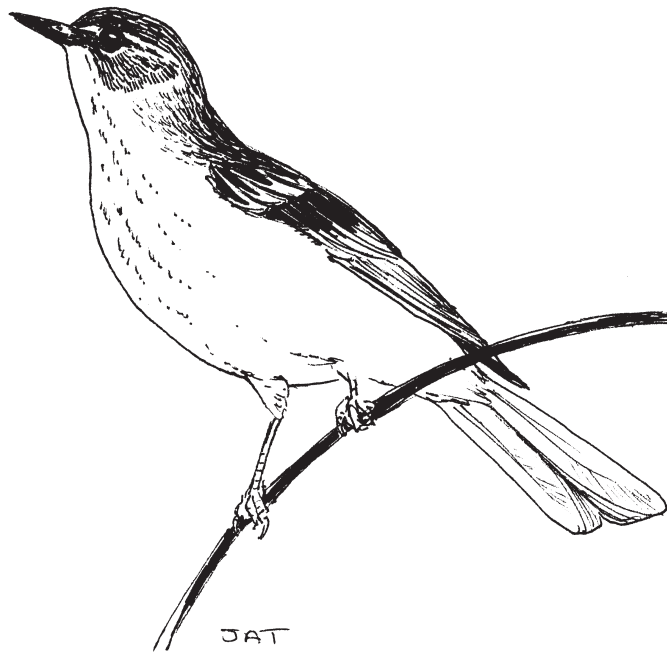




## Neotropical Migrant Bird of The Bahamas



Artwork by John Thompson

## KIRTLAND'S WARBLER

### SCIENTIFIC NAME:

*Dendroica kirtlandii*

### DESCRIPTION

The feathers of this warbler are blue-gray above; however, in fall, the gray is covered with brown on the back and the head. The back of the bird is boldly streaked with black. The lores (a strap-like surface between the eye and upper beak in birds) are black in spring males, or at least darker than the rest of the face in other plumages. There is a thin whitish eye-ring in all plumages split in the front and behind. The throat, breast and belly vary from clear yellow to pale buffy yellow, becoming white on the undertail coverts. The sides are streaked with black, boldest in adults. The wing bars are thin and not easily noticed; white tail spots, boldest in adult males, are concentrated near the corners of the tail. Structurally, it is a large and relatively long-tailed, heavy-billed bird. The Kirtland's warbler is one of the largest warblers to winter in The Bahamas.

### DIET

The Kirtland's warbler in its summer habitat searches in pine needles, leaves and ground cover for insects and edible berries. In The Bahamas, Kirtland's warblers have been seen foraging for fruit in low scrub as well as for insects on the ground. These birds generally forage low, rarely more than 16 inches above the ground.

### REPRODUCTION

In early spring Kirtland's warblers begin their trek from their winter home in The Bahamas, arriving at their nesting grounds in Michigan in May. Males arrive earlier than the females and establish their territories in an area covering some eight (8) acres of

jack pine stand. Once the females arrive, the birds pair off and courtship ensues. The female builds her nest of leaves, grass and similar materials on the ground while the male begins bringing her insects as tokens of his affection. Virtually all warbler pairings are monogamous. Egg laying starts in late May and the first nest of five (5) eggs is complete in five days. The male seldom shares incubation chores but continues to feed his incubating mate a diet of insects.

Incubation requires 13-16 days and the eggs hatch sometime between June 12-26. Both adults feed the young but the female does the brooding and most of the defending. The young develop rapidly and are out of the nest by the ninth day. Each parent takes part of the brood and cares for it exclusively. The young spend the first two weeks out of the nest in the growth and lower branches of the jack pines, being fed a diet of insects and ripened blueberries. By the third week, they begin to gather most of their own food, and by the fifth week, parental feeding has ceased. In some instances, a pair of warblers will reneest after they have reared the first brood.

## **BEHAVIOUR**

An extremely tame warbler with deliberate movements and a distinctive tail-pumping behaviour (jerking the tail downward and then slowly back upward). Although most birders encounter Kirtland's warblers as singing males at or near the tops of jack pines, most activities of the bird are concentrated low in the pines or near on the ground.

## **HABITAT AND RANGE**

The specialized breeding habitat consists of large stands of young jack pines (*Pinus banksiana*) on loose sandy soil; these stands must be dense, with interconnected low branches and a ground cover of grasses, sedges, ferns and berry brambles. Stands are first occupied when they are five or six years old with trees 3-6 feet tall and abandoned after about 15 years when the trees are 10-15 feet and lower branches begin dying back. The most suitable young jack pine stands are the result of fires that burn mature growth and stimulate germination of seeds and the formation of patchy new seedling growth.

Kirtland's warblers winter, as far as is known, only in The Bahamas, with records from late August to early May. Records are from the larger northern islands, with most specimens from New Providence, Eleuthera, Abaco and south Caicos. Winter habitat consists of dense broadleaf scrub thickets less than six feet high with scattered smaller trees. Wintering birds are generally solitary, secretive and rarely encountered within this preferred habitat.

## **STATUS**

The bird is listed in the United States of America as an endangered species. In 1998, the Michigan Kirtland's warbler population was the highest recorded since 1951, with 805 singing males officially counted, compared to 733 in 1997, and 692 in 1996. This species has probably always been uncommon but populations have been further limited by habitat loss and modification and brood parasitism by Brown-headed cowbirds.

The Kirtland's warbler is the subject of a multi-agency monitoring programme here in The Bahamas. Sponsored by The Nature Conservancy's Wings Over the Americas Program, trained groups from The Bahamas National Trust, Department of Agriculture and College of The Bahamas monitor specific areas to learn more about the winter habitat of this endangered species.