



Kirtland's Warbler, male; Iosco County, MI; June 8, 2016
all warbler photos: © 2016 Samuel B. Burckhardt

Oscoda Kirtland's Warbler Tours 2016

This year, for the first time, Kirtland's Warbler tours were offered by AuSable Valley Audubon (AVA) and organized in large part through the efforts of Peggy Ridgway. For the first time, since the inception of the AuSable Valley Audubon chapter, guided tours were offered to the public showcasing the endangered Kirtland's Warbler. Matt Hegwood and I were the guides for the tours.

Before we could begin with the first tour, we had to get the necessary permits, which both Peggy Ridgway and Arnie Leriche were instrumental in securing. Greg Berner from the Forest Service was very helpful in providing information about the Pine River Kirtland's Warbler Management Area. A little more than a quarter of the roughly 16'000 acres is considered suitable habitat for the warblers.

The folks at the Camp Inn Lodge were kind enough to take reservations for the tours. We met our guests at the lodge where we showed them a short video about the Kirtland's Warbler and some of the issues involved in its conservation.

We scouted the territory for over a week ahead of the official tours to find the best spots to hear and see Kirtland's Warblers which we used as the tour sites. We ended up in mostly two areas: one in Iosco County and one in Alcona County.

The first section we took our groups had quite a few singing males; however, they were mostly distant and despite the young habitat hard to see. They either perched low in vegetation and out of sight, or in surprisingly tall trees and thus again hard to spot. Hearing them was not a problem. Everyone who has ever heard one is amazed at how loud this, our largest wood warbler, sings; and how far the song travels. This section was ideal to explain many of the habitat restoration features, such as the young jack pines, as well as the other vegetation such as the jack oaks and taller, older trees left standing stand. It also gave us a great view of a cowbird trap. We were able to explain why it was important to try to prevent predation of nests by cowbirds. Often, we would see and hear other species of birds typical for this type of habitat,

like Common Raven, Brown Thrasher, Nashville Warblers, and Vesper Sparrows, to name just a few.

The second area was about a 15 minute drive from the first. For those who agreed to make the trek, it turned out to be well worth the trip since the singing males often perch prominently and close to the road.



Kirtland's Warbler, singing male; Alcona County, MI; June 5, 2016

Thanks to the proximity to the road of some of the singing males in this area, we were able to get to know some of the individuals by their particular song. It was up here that I first heard one of the males sing a whisper song; very different from the regular loud, emphatic and intense vocalization, and more like the bubbly song of a House Wren.

Here, the habitat was more established with jack pines from eight to ten feet high, and the views over the area were more encumbered. This didn't mean, though, that we couldn't hear or see the birds. In addition to Kirtland's Warblers, most groups were able to hear Brown Thrashers, Wood Thrushes, Nashville Warblers, Indigo Buntings, Eastern Bluebirds, Field Sparrows, and Eastern Towhees.

The tours were offered for five consecutive weekends, Friday through Sunday, from June 3 through July 3. I led the tours on the first three weekends. Matt Hegwood led the tours on the last two. Group sizes ranged from one person to eight. While over half the participants were familiar with the warbler, most came away with a deeper appreciation for this special bird and its conservation needs.



*A group of birders, including Matt Hegwood (second from left) and yours truly (far right) at section 24
photo courtesy Janice Sweet*

It was a great pleasure to lead the tours and to meet many wonderful people, and to see familiar faces, and to connect the participants with this amazing songster, fostering understanding for its continued conservation and the management of suitable habitat. Matt and I are grateful for all the support we received. We hope to have made a difference in support of the Kirtland's Warbler and its habitat.

Sam Burckhardt
August 2016



Kirtland's Warbler, singing male; Iosco County, MI; June 8, 2016