



THE BLUEBIRD

Evansville Audubon Society Newsletter

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A Bird of Fire: A Conservation Success Story

As a senior in college in 1974, I took an ornithology class and looked forward to all the scheduled field trips with great anticipation. But none were more exciting to me than the field trip to Mio, Michigan to observe the Kirtland's warbler. The Kirtland's warbler (*Septophaga kirtlandii*), known as America's rarest bird, has one of the most geographically restricted breeding distributions of any bird in the continental U.S. Furthermore, its breeding habitat is entirely dependent on young jack pines (5-20 years of age) that develop after fire. Fire is required to pop open the jack pine cones to release the seed and allow for germination. Additionally, this bird of fire preferentially uses the early successional jack pines because the lower branches of young trees are in close proximity to herbaceous undergrowth used for protection from predators.



The Kirtland's warbler was first discovered in 1851 near Cleveland, Ohio when a young man shot a migrant warbler on property owned by Jared Kirtland, a local doctor and amateur naturalist. But it wasn't until 1903 that its breeding area in Crawford, Ogemaw, and Oscoda counties in northern Michigan was determined. Based on observations that the already small population may be declining, Harold Mayfield organized and conducted the first census in 1951 and found 432 singing males. A complete census for Kirtland's warbler is possible because the population is small, it occupies a rather well-defined and limited area, and the males are very conspicuous when they sing their easily recognized song. In addition, the assumption was made that for every male, there was likely one female, so the population in this first census was estimated to be 864 individuals.

The next census, in 1961, revealed 502 singing males, indicating that the population was about 1000 individuals. However, the 1971 census saw a drop to 201 singing males. This declining trend in a species with an already low population indicated that the Kirtland's warbler may be on the road to extinction. In fact, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service identified the Kirtland's warbler as an endangered species as early as 1967. The listing became official in 1973 with the passage of the Endangered Species Act. So, what occurred during the period before the 1971 census?

A couple of factors did catch the attention of researchers who followed population trends in the Kirtland's warbler during the 1960's and early 1970's. One factor was fire suppression, which resulted in more mature jack pine forests (>20 years old) and, therefore, reduced the acreage of preferred warbler nesting habitat. Another, more ominous factor, was the presence of the brown-headed cowbird. Studies by Lawrence Walkinshaw, and Nicholas Cuthbert & Bruce Rodabaugh, noted cowbirds parasitized up to 83% of the warbler nests.

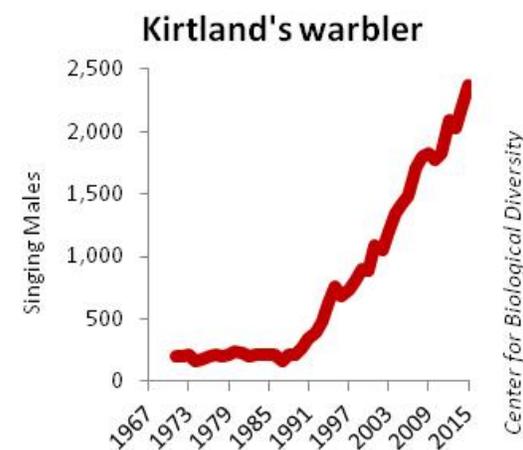
As young jack pine habitat disappeared and cowbirds invaded, federal and state managers of the public lands where most of the jack pine forests were located began intensive management practices to curb the decline of the Kirtland warbler. Land management included clear cuts and planting jack pine seedlings, as well as prescribed burns to release seeds from the cones of the more mature jack pines to establish young jack pines. Managers also took the radical step of trapping and killing cowbirds. Impacts of this strategy were immediate as a 1972 study showed that only two of the 32 warbler nests in one test area were parasitized.

This is where my ornithology class came into play. In class we became familiar with the life history of the Kirtland's warbler, learned about factors causing population declines, and studied management strategies used to restore the population. On our field trip to Mio we were able to visit sites where jack pines were being planted after a clear cut, as well as other plots where new pines were growing as a result of prescribed burns. We also saw traps filled with cowbirds, and had the opportunity to band and release the non-target birds (e.g. blue jays). But nothing compared to sitting on the jack pine barrens and watching male Kirtland's warblers only a few feet away incessantly singing their emphatic song from the tops of the jack pines.

What has happened over the forty plus years since I spent a day with the Kirtland's warbler is what makes this a conservation success story. Cowbird removal and land management strategies developed to ensure proper jack pine habitat have resulted in an increase in the warbler population. As of 2018, the number of breeding males stands at 2,300. Additionally, breeding now occurs, not only in the original northern Michigan counties, but in the upper peninsula of Michigan, northern Wisconsin, and Ontario, Canada.

The population figures for Kirtland's warbler are encouraging and as a result of these trends, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife

Service has proposed delisting the warbler from the Endangered Species List. The increase in the population, which has exceeded projections, is not the only reason for delisting. Cowbirds may no longer be a threat and trapping no longer necessary. A paper published July 31, 2019 in the *Journal of Wildlife Management* examined the effect of removing the traps from the breeding grounds over the course of a three-year period to evaluate cowbird response to trap removal. After removal of traps, from 2015-2018, the researchers from the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center found only 4 out of 514 warbler nests had been parasitized. They concluded that a changing landscape was likely responsible. There are actually more forests in northern Michigan now than in the 1970's because agricultural land has been converted to forest, thereby depriving the cowbird of its preferred habitat.



Despite the proposed delisting, the Kirtland's warbler is still considered a conservation-reliant species. This means that population monitoring and habitat management will continue to be important on the breeding grounds. Just as

important will be the monitoring of the birds on their wintering grounds in the Bahamas to ensure that resources critical to the winter survival of the Kirtland's warbler are maintained.

The delisting of the Kirtland's warbler has also spawned a movement in Michigan to replace the robin as the state bird. Bill Rapai, head of the Kirtland Warbler Alliance, has proposed that the Kirtland's warbler be the state bird. The rationale is that the robin is already the state bird of Wisconsin and Connecticut, and the Kirtland's warbler is unique to Michigan. Although it is not likely the robin will be displaced as the state bird by the Kirtland's warbler, as a former resident of Michigan, I would be in favor of such a change. I have nothing against the robin, but my memories of singing Kirtland's warblers are still vivid and a bird that is about to come off the endangered species list is quite deserving of state recognition.

Submitted by Don Batema



In Memoriam

It is with sad feelings that I report that another long-time member of Evansville Audubon, Lois Schmidt, passed away on August 7, 2019. She was very active with EAS serving as director, chairing committees, and helping with events, until eventually her health restricted her ability to attend our board meetings and programs. Even then, I could count on her to respond to my "action alerts" to make those contacts to preserve nature for future generations. She will be missed.

The family requested donations to Evansville Audubon in memory of Lois, and we thank the many generous friends who responded.

Sue Vernier, President

GOING GREEN?

Send an email request to Steve Heeger at sdheeger@sbcglobal.net and ask to begin receiving your newsletter electronically.

FUTURE FIELD TRIPS

Nov. 9 - Hovey Lake/DNR Trip

Dec. 7 - Somerville Mine Owl Prowl
"Local Christmas Bird Counts"

Jan. - 100 in January contest-
(More info to come)

Feb. 8 - Kentucky Dams Trip

Mar. 14 - Goose Pond FWA

Apr. 25 - Bluegrass Evening Trip(OVBF)

May 30 - Harmonie State Park trip

Questions or comments, contact Bob Meier at birderbob68@yahoo.com

2019 Vanderburgh Christmas Bird Count

The 2019 Vanderburgh Christmas Bird Count will be held on Saturday, December 14. From the Indiana Audubon web page, "Each year, the Audubon Christmas Bird Count mobilizes over 70,000 volunteer bird counters in more than 2,400 locations across the Western Hemisphere. The Audubon Christmas Bird Count utilizes the power of volunteers to track the health of bird populations at a scale that professional scientists could never accomplish alone."

If you can help with the field count this year, please contact Steve Heeger, sdheeger@sbcglobal.net, or 812-499-0177. You don't have to be an expert birder--less experienced birders can accompany more seasoned birders for an enjoyable opportunity for honing your birding skills. In addition, you can also help by doing a feeder count in your yard on that day. Please contact me for instructions and your count.

Evansville Audubon Society Minutes September 17, 2019

Program at 6PM Dr. Eric McCloud from USI presented an interesting program on Migratory Birds and Climate Change Following the Program the Business Meeting was called to order at 7:00PM by President Sue Vernier Mary Jo Campbell moved and Brian Taylor seconded that the minutes be approved as mailed.

Treasurer's Report The following balances were reported by Richard Vernier. Bulk Mail \$180.17 Savings \$5.09 CD \$5026.67 Checking w/o reserves \$1812.86 Checking \$2813.68 Reserve Accounts Total \$1000.82: Ed&Cons Available \$406.42 E-Scripts \$412.21 OVBF \$182.19. "Checking" is from check register, includes transactions not on the bank statement yet. \$500 committed to Purdue Climate Change lecture. Treasurer's Report was accepted as presented. Niles Rosenquist moved and Mary Jo Campbell seconded that the Draft Budget be approved. Motion passed. Budget attached to Secretary's minutes.
Memorial gifts of \$670 were received in memory of Lois Schmidt.

COMMITTEE REPORTS

Field Trips: September 28 Tekoppel School at 6PM to watch the Chimney Swifts. Friday Hikes in September at 4:45PM. September 27th at 3:00PM there will be a Bird and Forest Hike at Eagle Slough.

Program: October 15th Matt Williams, TNC, will speak on Disappearing Birds in the Midwest at 6PM.

Jr. Birders : Seeking Fill-in Assistants to lead Fall Hikes. Don Batema and Jesse Meier volunteered.

Conservation: A letter was sent concerning the Endangered Species Act; Green River NWR Draft LLP & EA.

Education & Conservation Grants: Up to \$500 committed to the Purdue Climate Change Event.

OVBF: April 18-20, 2020, combined with J.J. Audubon S.P. Wildflower Extravaganza.

Old Business

There are still open positions for Program & Education Chairs.

Purdue Climate Change Event scheduled for Sept 25th 6:30PM Central Library in the Browning Room.

Starting times for 2019-2020 Programs have been changed to 6 :00 PM with Business Meeting to start at 7PM following the program.

New Business

Donations Appeal Letter is ready to publish and will be mailed early in October.

EAS Booth at Refuge Appreciation Day Oct 5th at 9AM. Don Batema has volunteered to man the booth.

Annual Release of Liability Forms for EAS Members were distributed.

Items from the Floor

Whooping Crane Ambassador Training Event at WWNP on October 2. Call the office for a reservation.
Bird sightings shared.

Meeting was adjourned at 7:30PM.

Carolyn Egan, Secretary



The Jr. Birders will have several hikes and activities focusing on citizen science and includes Big Days, Christmas Counts and Backyard Bird Counts. They will contribute their data on birds seen and heard via eBird.

JR. BIRDER'S HIKES FOR 2019-2020

NOVEMBER 16th 2019, HOWELL WETLANDS

Meet at the parking lot off of Tekoppel Road at 8:30 am and we will hike the trails through the grasslands and then the boardwalk through the bottomland forest. Expect to see resident birds, like woodpeckers, titmouse, and chickadees, as well as wintering species like white-throated sparrows.

DECEMBER 14th 2019, 2930 LENOX DRIVE

Jr. Birders will participate in the Christmas Bird Count by observing feeder birds at 2930 Lenox Drive. Arrive by 9 am and we will count birds, drink hot chocolate and enjoy some snacks. Our observations will be submitted to eBird as part of

the Christmas Bird Count. Each Jr. Birder will receive a Bird Journal to use for the count and during the month of January (we will not meet in January).

FEBRUARY 15th 2020, WESSELMAN WOODS NATURE CENTER

Meet at the parking lot of the Wesselman Woods Nature Center at 8:30 am and we will enter the center as a group and proceed to the bird observation room. We will participate in the Great Backyard Bird Count and submit our observations to eBird. Bring your Bird Journals.

MARCH 21st 2020, BLUEGRASS FISH & WILDLIFE AREA

Meet at the parking lot off of Boonville-New Harmony Road at 9:00 am and we will drive the area looking for resident birds, and check to see if the eagles are nesting.

APRIL 18th 2020, J.J. AUDUBON STATE PARK

The Jr. Birders will again participate in the Ohio Valley Birding Festival and lead a hike at Audubon State Park. The time is yet to be determined, so more information will follow. Remember that this is Family Day at the festival and there are lots of activities in addition to our hike that will be of interest (e.g. bird banding).

MAY 9th 2020, AUDUBON WETLANDS

Our last citizen science project will be the May Day Count. Meet at the Audubon Wetlands parking lot, off of Wolf Road, at 8:30 am and we will hike the trails and boardwalks at the wetlands and record birds that we see and hear for the count, and then submit our results to eBird. This will be an exciting hike because many of the spring migrants (e.g. warblers) will be moving through the area.

Follow us on Facebook: Jr. Birders of the Evansville Audubon Society (<https://www.facebook.com/Jr-Birders-of-the-Evansville-Audubon-Society-1439312132956216/>)

Lecture on Climate Change in Indiana by the Purdue Climate Change Research Center

Melissa Widhalm, Operations Manager of the Purdue Climate Change Research Center spoke on “Indiana’s Past and Future Climate” to a highly engaged audience on September 25, at the Evansville Central Library. She first presented the basics of projected climate change in Indiana, temperature increases and changes in precipitation patterns / flooding events under both “no action” scenarios and under future scenarios where greenhouse gas emissions are substantially reduced. Then she translated those temperature/ precipitation projections into specific impact areas, e.g. from human health and lifestyle to growing seasons and agriculture to the viability of our Indiana natural areas.

At the end of the talk and then during the discussion period the speaker and members of the audience discussed a number of initiatives occurring across Indiana and specifically in Evansville to mitigate the effects of climate change, primarily by future reliance on sustainable energy and elimination of use of fossil fuels.

The work described is from a multiyear collaboration of over 90 scientists on the Purdue campus and from contributors from over 50 other organizations statewide. Detailed reports can be found at <https://ag.purdue.edu/indianaclimate/>

Niles Rosenquist, Southwest Indiana Sierra Club

The lecture was cosponsored by several local groups concerned with climate change. Here are observations on the lecture by representatives of those groups:

“Melissa’s presentation dealt firmly and thoroughly with an uncomfortable topic, yet, we left the evening with hope that the catastrophe can be averted with determined and united effort. I was especially impressed how her slides and graphics brought home the gravity of our situation in a way that words could not. I was also extremely grateful that many could hear this message and got the benefit of well presented information.”

Tom Bogenschutz, Tristate Creation Care

“It was great to see an overflow crowd of over 200 (best guess) in all age groups show up in downtown Evansville to hear Melissa give us specifics re the impacts of ongoing climate change in southwestern Indiana. I came away thinking of extreme heat and extreme water events.”

Pam Locker, League of Women Voters of Southwest Indiana

“WOW! We had over 200 people to a climate change lecture It was beyond my best hope and expectation. People really are beginning to pay attention.”

Sue Vernier, Evansville Audubon Society



UPCOMING EAS PROGRAMS

Programs are the third Tuesday of each month (September thru June) at Wesselman Woods Nature Preserve.

NEW START TIME 6 PM except where noted (last minute changes will be posted on our Facebook page and our Website). Free and open to the Public.

Nov 19, 2019 - "Improving Your Yard for Wildlife" presented by Jeremy Ross, local teacher and all-around outdoorsman. He will give advice and suggestions on what he has done and plans to do with his yard to make it a native-only habitat for wildlife throughout the seasons, plus he will be sharing photos and stories.

Dec. 17, 2019 - "Pelagic Birding, Cape Hatteras, NC" presented by Dr. Evan Speck, retired anesthesiologist. As an avid birder, Dr. Speck will provide information on pelagic birding and share his experiences with birding off the shores of Cape Hatteras, NC.

Jan. 21, 2020 - "Rewilding Southwest Indiana" presented by Heath Hamilton, Wildlife Refuge Specialist, at Patoka River National Wildlife Refuge.

Feb. 18, 2020 - "Friends of the Patoka River National Wildlife Refuge" presented by Nancy Gehlhausen, president of the Friends of the Refuge organization.

Mar. 17, 2020 - "How Birds Behave" presented by Sharon Sorenson, author and conservationist. Her talk will be based on her newest book.

April 21, 2020 - "Spring Wildflowers of Audubon State Park" presented by Lisa Hoffman, Parks Program Services Supervisor, J.J. Audubon State Park.

May 19, 2020 - "Birding Sources on the Net" presented by Brian Taylor, Webmaster, Evansville Audubon Society.

June 16, 2020 - TBA



ATTENTION SCHNUCKS SHOPPERS!!

Please support Evansville Audubon by shopping at a Schnucks grocery store. Just pick up a Schnucks eScrip Customer Card at the customer service desk and follow the directions on the card to register. Our group ID number is: 500023419
A percentage of your purchases at Schnucks will benefit the education funds of EAS. It's just that easy! Every time you shop at Schnucks, give the cashier your eScrip card to scan. It won't cost you a thing! We thank Schnucks for donating over \$400 to our education funds via eScrip. This money is then used for various school environmental/conservation projects. Shoppers cannot currently use both their Rewards and eScrip. Please note that **if you attempt to use both now, your Schnucks Rewards will override eScrip.**

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Moving? Send change of address to:
Steve Heeger
15340 Cemetery Road
Evansville, IN 47725

The mission of the Evansville Audubon Society is to promote the awareness of and appreciation for birds and other wildlife and their habitats through education and conservation.

Not an Evansville Audubon Society member? Join now and become a member of the National Audubon Society as well. **Current members** should renew with National Audubon Society. **Chapter Code C9ZH030Z**

\$20: 1 year introductory rate

\$15: 1 year Student/ Senior (62 and over) rate

\$30: 2 year Special Rate

Mail to: Richard Vernier, EAS Treasurer, 580 N 350 E, Princeton, IN 47670

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My check enclosed

Checks payable to: NATIONAL AUDUBON SOCIETY

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