

MICHIGAN & NEW HAMPSHIRE

Kirtland's Warbler, Bicknell's Thrush and more

Sunday 27th May – Saturday 2nd June 2012 (7 days)

Leaders: Matt Denton and assistant

Group Size Limit: 12

Tour Category: Easy to Moderate

Every part of the world has its emblematic bird species and, for North America, the rare Kirtland's Warbler is right up there at the top. Bachman's Warbler tragically slipped away before it could be helped recover from human impact on its habitat, but, in contrast, the Kirtland's Warbler story is one of success. Reduced by habitat loss and fragmentation, and brood parasitism by Brown-headed Cowbirds, to only around 400-500 individuals by the early 1970s, it took another two decades of careful habitat management and ultimately the trapping of cowbirds before breeding productivity recovered and population numbers started to significantly increase. Now the population is probably around 4500 individuals and its status has gone from endangered to near-threatened.

This attractive bird is both highly sought-after and very hard to get on one's life list unless one visits its breeding grounds, which are predominantly in Michigan's Lower Peninsula. The birds seem to migrate pretty much non-stop between their rather remote and rarely visited winter quarters in the southern Bahamas and the Turks & Caicos Islands and their breeding grounds, so unless you spend a lot of time looking for migrants at Point Pelee or Magee Marsh, you are probably going to have to visit Michigan to encounter this very special bird.

Fortunately, the efforts of the Forest Service, who have carefully managed the

Jack Pine forests over large areas in the Lower Peninsula to try and help the species recover, have really had a profound effect in recent times and, with the birds now far more common than they were a decade or two ago, we can expect some great views during this short tour at the very peak of Kirtland's Warbler territorial activity.

The only other bird species that breeds only in the Northeastern United States (and adjacent Canada) is the uncommon Bicknell's Thrush, a species that was long overlooked until research showed that, rather than just being a race of Gray-cheeked Thrush, it was a distinct and vulnerable species of the high mountains of the region. Seeing this species on its breeding grounds is the only realistic option for most of us, for it is decidedly uncommon on migration on the East Coast and very secretive and hard to see on its wintering grounds in the Greater Antilles (predominantly in the forests of Hispaniola). Bicknell's Thrush in the White Mountains of New Hampshire is the second star-turn in our pleasing journey through America's cool-temperate-zone woodlands.

We start our travels at Detroit in southern Michigan and from there head for the Jack Pine forests of northeastern part of the Lower Peninsula and our encounter with Kirtland's Warbler.

Many other birds can be found in the mosaic

of habitats in this region, consisting of coniferous and mixed forests, meadows and wetlands, including Trumpeter Swan, Bald Eagle, Wild Turkey, Sandhill Crane, Whip-poor-will, Black-capped Chickadee and Bobolink.

After returning to Detroit and flying to Burlington in northern Vermont, we will cross the state line into adjacent New Hampshire and explore the rich forests of the White Mountains.

The bird here is of course Bicknell's Thrush, and it requires a bit of hiking effort to get to grips with, for the species mainly breeds above 3000ft (914m). We will be visiting one of the very best areas for the species, where we can be virtually sure of success.

A wide selection of other species occurs in the White Mountains and amongst the more interesting of these are Philadelphia Vireo, Gray Jay, Boreal Chickadee, Tennessee Warbler, Blackpoll Warbler and Rusty Blackbird.

Itinerary

Day 1 The tour begins in the afternoon at Detroit (Metropolitan Wayne County) airport, from where we will drive north to Oscoda, on the shores of Lake Huron, for a three nights stay.

Days 2-3 During our visit to the Oscoda region in the northeast of Michigan's Lower Peninsula we will explore both young and mature Jack Pine forests, mixed forests, meadows and wetlands.

Our first priority will of course be to get good views of Kirtland's Warbler, which thanks to careful management by the Forest Service has now greatly increased in numbers, although the population (most of which breeds

in Michigan) is still small compared to that of most bird species. Kirtland's Warblers prefer to nest in Jack Pine areas where the trees are only about 5-20ft (1.5-6.1m) tall. Once the trees mature the area ceases to be suitable. Zealous fire control measures after European settlement prevented the natural burns that once permitted a cyclical turnover in the Jack Pine areas, providing plenty of habitat for Kirtland's Warblers, and the population declined away to a very low level. Now the forest service manages the areas with the warblers in mind, cutting large tracts on a timetabled basis so that there are always large expanses of young trees for the warblers to nest in. Brown-headed Cowbirds are also trapped and removed from the Kirtland warbler areas, which has resulted in breeding failure declining from as high as 70% to as low as 3%! As a consequence we should have little difficulty in getting great views of some of these beautiful but highly localized warblers.

We should also encounter Wild Turkey and the extraordinary Whip-poor-will, which should be giving its strange calls. Other notable bird species include Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Alder Flycatcher, Black-capped Chickadee, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Hermit Thrush, Nashville, Yellow, Yellow-rumped and Pine Warblers, American Redstart, Ovenbird, Scarlet Tanager, Bobolink, and Orchard and Baltimore Orioles.

Wetlands in the area hold American Bittern, the rare but increasing Trumpeter Swan, the magnificent Bald Eagle, Virginia Rail and Sora (both can be hard to see), Sandhill Crane, Marsh Wren, Common Yellowthroat and Swamp Sparrow.

Additional species of wide distribution that we should encounter include Great

Blue Heron, Turkey Vulture, Osprey, Mute Swan, Canada Goose, Mallard, Blue-winged Teal, Red-tailed Hawk, American Kestrel, Killdeer, Spotted Sandpiper, Ring-billed Gull, Mourning Dove, Belted Kingfisher, Hairy Woodpecker, Northern Flicker, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Eastern Kingbird, Warbling and Red-eyed Vireos, Blue Jay, American Crow, Purple Martin, Tree Swallow, Eastern Bluebird, American Robin, Gray Catbird, Brown Thrasher, Chipping, Field, Vesper, Savannah and Song Sparrows, Red-winged Blackbird, Eastern Meadowlark, Common Grackle, Brown-headed Cowbird and American Goldfinch.

Day 4 This morning we will return to Detroit, stopping along the way at a marsh that holds Yellow-headed Blackbird (and also Great Egret and Willow Flycatcher),

and then take a flight to Burlington in northern Vermont. From there it is just a short distance eastwards to the White Mountains region of New Hampshire where we will stay for three nights at Littleton

Days 5-6 W Littleton lies to the west of the White Mountains and the scenery in this region is dominated by a long line of peaks, including Mount Washington, at 6288ft (1916m) the highest peak in the Northeastern United States. The bald, tundra-like tops of the mountains give way to treeline scrub and then predominantly coniferous forest and ultimately broadleaf forest towards the base of the mountains. We will be hiking up into the mainly coniferous zone at least once in order to find our main target, Bicknell's Thrush, which should be busy singing away and defending territory at

this time of year, meaning that they are at their most conspicuous.

While we are exploring for Bicknell's Thrush, we should also encounter such interesting 'northern' species as Philadelphia Vireo, the inquisitive Gray Jay, Boreal Chickadee and Tennessee and Blackpoll Warblers, as well as the more widespread Winter Wren, Swainson's Thrush, Golden-crowned and Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Chestnut-sided and Black-throated Green Warblers, White-throated Sparrow, Dark-eyed Junco, Purple Finch and Pine Siskin.

We will also check out a small wetland that holds Hooded Merganser and Rusty Blackbird, while additional species we should encounter in the White Mountains include Common Raven, Bank Swallow (or Sand Martin), House Wren

and Cedar Waxwing.

Day 7 After some early morning birding in New Hampshire we will head for Burlington airport where the tour ends around midday.

Accommodation & Road Transport: The hotels/motels are of normal Birdquest standard throughout. Road transport is by minibus/passenger van or car.

Walking: The walking effort is easy in Michigan, easy to moderate in New Hampshire. There is a possibility we will need to make a more demanding hike in the White Mountains in search of Bicknell's Thrush and other higher altitude specialities.

Climate: Cool to warm, with a mix of sunny and overcast weather (some rain is likely).

Bird Photography: Opportunities are worthwhile.