

BIRD NOTES by Rick Pyeritz

Jared Potter Kirtland

Born 1793 in Connecticut

Died 1877 in Indiana

Buried in his beloved Ohio

“Between these widely separated dates was lived one of happiest and most useful lives ever fallen to the lot of mortals”

--from a biography of Jared Potter Kirtland

Kirtland's Warbler --- *Selophaga (Dendroica) kirtlandii*

Order *Passeriformes* --- Perching birds

Family *Parulidae* --- New World warblers

Genus *Selophaga* --- fr. Greek *selos* insect *phagus* to eat

Species *kirtlandii* --- named in honor of Jared Potter Kirtland

I was at the Outer Banks this fall while birders from the Southeast were flocking to Ridge



Kirtland's Warbler at Ridge Junction by Alan Lenk

Junction Overlook on the Blue Ridge Parkway to spot a rare visitor to the mountains. So I missed the Kirtland's Warbler. A bit disappointed, I thought little more of the missed opportunity until a friend emailed me that he had seen the Kirtland's Warbler that morning--- later sending me a corrected email that he had spotted the Kirtland's Warbler. The misspelling of the bird's common name stimulated the taxonomy-loving portion of my brain to begin a search for information on the naming of the bird.

On an 1841 archaeological visit to the Yucatan, Dr. Samuel Cabot, Jr. collected the first known specimen of Kirtland's Warbler. Ten years later, another bird was collected in Ohio by Charles Pease, who gave it to his father-in-law, Jared P. Kirtland. Kirtland then passed the skin to the director of the Smithsonian Institution, Spencer Baird, who named it after its donor stating,

“a gentleman to whom, more than anyone else living, we are indebted for a knowledge of the natural history of the Mississippi Valley.”

Jared Kirtland was a physician, malacologist, naturalist, fruit farmer, probate judge and politician. A malacologist studies mollusks, the second largest phylum of animals (in terms of described species) which includes snails, slugs, octopus and squid. He was the first enrolled student at the newly established Yale medical school in 1813 and co-founded the Western Reserve Medical School, as well as the Cleveland Museum of Natural History. To my knowledge, Kirtland never observed the warbler in the field.

For over half a century, the breeding area of Kirtland's Warbler eluded discovery. Norman Woods, of the University of Michigan, discovered the first nest in 1903 along the Au Sable River in northeast Michigan. It took another 20 years before Nathan Freudenthal, Jr. studied the life history of Kirtland's Warbler and published his findings in The Auk, "*The Kirtland's Warbler in its Summer Home.*" A brilliant student at the University of Chicago, Freudenthal's life took a bizarre turn soon after publication of his study. He was arrested and convicted, along with a friend, Richard Loeb, for the kidnapping and murder of a 14-year-old boy. Only a passionate and lengthy closing argument by Clarence Darrow prevented the death penalty. He served 33 years of his life sentence and was paroled in 1958. Freudenthal then moved to Puerto Rico where he continued his ornithological pursuits and produced the *Checklist of the Birds of Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands*. He died in 1971.



Nathan Freudenthal



Kirtland's in Jack pine by Ron Austing

Kirtland's Warbler is an Endangered Species Act success story. From a low of around 200 singing males in the mid-1970's to a current population of around 2300 pairs, the species has been proposed for removal from the endangered or threatened species list. There is still cause for concern about the future of Kirtland's Warbler since it has one of the most geographically restricted breeding areas of any bird in the continental United States. The warbler depends upon large areas of dry sandy soil with dense stands of young jack pines found only in northern Michigan, Wisconsin and Ontario. The decline in population was due to forest fragmentation, fire suppression and heavy nest parasitism by the Brown-headed Cowbird. Whether or not it is taken off the list, the Kirtland's Warbler will likely remain the only species whose name is linked to both murder and mollusks.

Questions and/or comments --- email me at <eapyeritz@gmail.com>.