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Kirtland's Warbler To Be Featured on Michigan License Plate in 2022

The Kirtland's Warbler, long a symbol of conservation in Michigan, will be featured on a new Michigan license plate that will help raise money for wildlife habitat in the state.

Beginning in January, Michigan drivers will be able to purchase the license plate through the Michigan Secretary of State for \$35, with \$25 of that fee designated to the Nongame Fish and Wildlife Trust Fund.

The Michigan DNR chose to celebrate the Kirtland's Warbler species because it was removed from the federal endangered species list in October 2019. Through wise stewardship on the part of the Michigan DNR, the U.S. Forest Service, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, plans and partnerships with a network of nonprofit organizations and private citizens created a conservation coalition that saved this bird from extinction. There are now more than 4,000 individuals, and the population is considered healthy.

This warbler nests in young jack pine forests of northern Michigan. Ninety-five percent of the Kirtland's Warbler population nests in five counties in the northern Lower Peninsula. Small populations can also be found in the U.P., Wisconsin, and Ontario. The warbler spends its winters primarily in The Bahamas.

The Kirtland's Warbler is the perfect symbol for the Nongame Fish and Wildlife Trust Fund because even though the bird is no longer considered endangered, conservation efforts must continue for as far as we can see into the future. Kirtland's Warblers nest

on the ground under the overlapping branches of young jack pine trees. Historically, the warbler's breeding habitat was created by wildfire sweeping across the landscape, burning mature trees, and opening new areas for young trees to grow. But with more humans living near jack pine habitat starting in the early 20th century, fires became viewed as a threat and were extinguished. With young jack pine habitat becoming increasingly rare, the warbler went into a long, slow population decline until the 1980s, when humans began to harvest large areas of mature forests and replant them with young trees.

The Kirtland's Warbler is just one of the species that benefits from management of the jack pine ecosystem. Game species such as the white-tailed deer, wild turkey, and snowshoe hare use the young jack pine habitat extensively. Jack pine management also helps to support the threatened Hill's thistle (a plant) and the secretive locust (an insect).

"The accomplishment of this species qualifying for removal from the endangered species list is a testament to the efficacy and power of ecology-driven conservation," said Michigan Audubon Executive Director Heather Good.

Michigan Audubon has contributed to Kirtland's Warbler conservation, collaboration, tours, and management in many ways throughout history, which makes this event of relevance to a great many volunteers, members, donors, tour guides, and former board members who helped make this happen.

Since its inception, the wildlife habitat license plate has raised over \$3.9 million for Michigan's Nongame Fish and Wildlife Trust Fund. This is the only designated fund for nongame species in our state, which is why your contribution matters, Good shared. "It not only puts dollars into an area of natural resources management that is greatly unsupported and in need of resources, but it also conveys a message on the road and to our legislators about non-consumptive wildlife appreciation," she added.

The Common Loon, another beloved avian species to many, was the first species featured on the Michigan's nongame license plate when it became available in 2006. In December 2017, the nongame plate featured an elk, purportedly to mark the 2018 celebration of 100 years of elk presence in our state. "I think the birding community will applaud seeing this change back to an avian species on the nongame plate, especially one that has such strong Michigan relevance," said Good.

Michigan Audubon and the Kirtland's Warbler Alliance encourage every Michigan driver to purchase the plate and support our state's nongame wildlife work.

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About the Kirtland's Warbler Alliance:

The Kirtland's Warbler Alliance is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit created in 2013 to help support Kirtland's Warbler conservation. The Alliance works closely with the Michigan DNR, the U.S. Forest Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and its other partners to help inform the public of the hows and whys of Kirtland's Warbler conservation. Visit www.kirtlandswarbler.org for more information.

About Michigan Audubon:

Michigan Audubon connects birds and people for the benefit of both through conservation, education, and research efforts in the state of Michigan. A statewide, nonprofit conservation organization, Michigan Audubon owns 18 bird sanctuaries, has more than 30 local chapters throughout the state, and operates Whitefish Point Bird Observatory. Visit www.michiganaudubon.org for more information.