

# First sight record of Kirtland's Warbler (*Dendroica kirtlandii*) in Cuba

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## Abstract

This paper documents the occurrence of a male Kirtland's Warbler (*Dendroica kirtlandii*) on Cayo Coco, Ciego de Ávila province, Cuba on 8 November 2004. Recent trends in breeding and wintering populations and other factors that may be relevant to this record are also considered herein.

## Field encounter

On the island of Cayo Coco, Ciego de Ávila province, Cuba, the author located a male Kirtland's Warbler (*Dendroica kirtlandii*) at the edge of semideciduous scrub forest along the north sector of the roadway that leads to the Cuatro Caminos y Los Almácigos roundabouts (22° 31.883' N, 78° 22.284' W) at 0900 EDST on 8 November 2004. This location is approximately 1400 m inland from the northern shoreline of the small island, where dense, short coastal scrub has been heavily developed for resort use. Most of the vegetated area of this island is covered with the semideciduous forest, in which the average canopy height ranges from 12 to 15 m. This forest has a significantly high floral diversity and includes several endemic taxa. Among the most numerous plant species in this location are: Gumbo-limbo (*Bursera simaruba*), Pigeon Plum (*Coccoloba diversifolia*), Wild Tamarind (*Lysiloma latisiliqua*), Horsefish Mahogany (*Lysiloma sabicu*), Black Ironwood, or Leadwood (*Krugiodendron ferreum*), Lancewood, or Sweet Torchwood (*Nectandra coriacea*), Ironwood (*Zuelania guidonia*), Mastic or False-mastic (*Mastichodendron foetidissimum*), Poisonwood (*Metopium toxiferum*), and several species of fig (*Ficus*). Bordering the forest in many areas are natural and secondary scrub-shrub communities and low coppice comprised of many plant species, including small examples of the above-mentioned taxa. Particularly, the type of vegetation where the Kirtland's Warbler sighting occurred is a secondary forest classified as low-canopy coppice woodland, in which average tree height ranges from 5 to 6 m. This forested area, as well as many others in Cayo Coco, was heavily used for charcoal production on an industrial scale during several years in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

I observed the bird closely for three minutes. Conditions during the observation were ideal, with clear skies and light wind. The temperature was approximately 27.1° C, with a northeasterly wind of about 20 km/h (Coastal Ecosystem Research Centre, Meteorological Database). The bird remained silent during the observation. It moved actively among smaller branches of smooth-barked hardwood species such as Hicaquillo (*Coccoloba retusa*) and Gumbo-limbo, wagging the tail frequently, at a height of about 2.5–3 m, gleaning insects among small branches and live leaves. It did not appear to take fruit.

I determined the bird to be a male Kirtland's Warbler based on the following features: blue-gray above with distinct blackish streaking on the back; entirely yellow below (throat, breast, and belly), with fairly heavy black streaking on the sides; thin, whitish wing bars; and a bold white eye-ring broken at front and at rear. Many features of structure and plumage ruled out Northern Parula (*Parula americana*), Yellow-rumped Warbler (*Dendroica coronata*), and MacGillivray's Warbler (*Oporornis tolmiei*), species that likewise show a broken eye-ring (the latter has not yet been recorded in Cuba). The lack of yellow rump further ruled out Yellow-rumped Warbler and also Magnolia Warbler (*Dendroica magnolia*), which in some plumages may be confused with Kirtland's Warbler. On the other hand, the lack of horizontal black/blackish facial markings along with the yellow/yellowish undertail coverts ruled out Prairie Warbler (*Dendroica discolor*), which is a common and regular winter resident bird inhabiting different forests and scrubs of the study area. In addition to the specific field marks mentioned above, the individual looked slightly bulkier than most warblers inhabiting these ecosystems.

## Discussion

Kirtland's Warbler breeds in dense forests of young Jack Pine (*Pinus banksiana*) in Michigan's Lower Peninsula, with a few breeding records from the state's Upper Peninsula; it is very rare outside of Michigan during summer but has nested or attempted to nest in southern Ontario, southern Québec, and Wisconsin (A.O.U. 1998). The known wintering

grounds lie entirely in the Bahamas, where they are found mostly November through March (extreme dates span late August through late April), although there are at least two reports from the nearby Turks and Caicos Islands (Mayfield 1992, Sykes and Clench 1998). The northern cays of Ciego de Ávila province are relatively close to these wintering grounds, about 150 km away (from Cistern Point, Andros Island). This proximity is probably also the reason that this Cuban sub-archipelago shares several species with the Bahamas (Garrido 1973), i.e., Black-faced Grassquit (*Tiaris bicolor*), Bananaquit (*Coereba flaveola*), Bahama Mockingbird (*Mimus gundlachii*), and Thick-billed Vireo (*Vireo crassirostris*); the vireo and mockingbird have well-established populations in the archipelago (Garrido and Kirkconnell 2000).

In the Bahamas in recent years, rather high densities of Kirtland's Warblers (up to 10/0.1 km<sup>2</sup>) have been reported, as well as an increase in the number of new sites in the Bahamas (12 new sites in which at least 30 individuals have been observed between 1 November 2002 through 8 March 2003; Currie et al. 2003). The Kirtland's Warbler Research and Training Project, working in southern Eleuthera, has banded 113 Kirtland's Warblers between October 2003 and March 2006 (J. Wunderle, pers. comm.). The stark increase in Bahamian records is likely related to the recovery of the breeding population in Michigan, from about 167 breeding pairs in 1974 to 1478 singing males in June 2006, as a result of the conservation measurements implemented by the U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service, the U. S. Forest Service, and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (Mayfield 1992, Hagner 2006; see also <[http://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,1607,7-153-10371\\_10402-148280--,00.html](http://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,1607,7-153-10371_10402-148280--,00.html)>); the increase is probably also a product of the increase in scientific scrutiny in the Bahamas in recent years. The likelihood of a vagrant appearing on the Atlantic coast of Cuba is almost certainly greater with an expanding population rather than a declining population; and some writers have argued that vagrant passerines are probably indices of an expanding population (Veit 2000). There has been a documented record of the species from Bermuda

18 December 2004 (Amos 2005; photograph in *North American Birds* 59: 372) and at least one sight record from the Dominican Republic (Faanes and Haney 1989). The habitat in which the Kirtland's was found in Cuba corresponds rather precisely to the species' preferred wintering habitat in the Bahamas (Sykes and Clench 1998), with many genera and species in common between the southern Bahamas and the north coast of Cuba. J. M. Wunderle (pers. comm.) notes that "many of the plant species or genera described at the Cayo Coco site are the same as those found on our Kirtland's Warbler study sites on Eleuthera. We have found that the birds regularly feed on fruit, especially the fruit of plants common in early to mid-successional sites that have been disturbed by man. Fruits of the Wild Sage (*Lantana involucrata* and other *Lantana* spp.), Black Torch (*Erithalis fruticosa*), and West Indian Snowberry (*Chiococca alba* and other *Chiococca* spp.) appear to be especially important."

Meteorological phenomena in the Caribbean such as cold fronts and tropical cyclones have been associated with the arrival of vagrants to Cuba and other Caribbean islands (Garrido and Kirkconnell 2000); the passage of a cold front through the Bahamas during the first week of November 2004 should be also be considered a possible factor for the Kirtland's Warbler's appearance on Cayo Coco.

The observation of the Kirtland's Warbler constitutes an addition to the avifauna of Cuba and addition raises the number of species of Parulidae to 35 for the northern cays of Ciego de Ávila and to 43 for Cuba as a whole (Llanes et al. 2002).

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