



Dr. Andy Jones leading a birding trip at Black Swamp

The Biggest Week in American Birding: World-class and close to home

Some time in April, a Kirtland's Warbler—about the length of a Twinkie and only one-third the weight—ventured from its winter home in the Bahamas to cross a hundred miles of open ocean. Traveling at night, it will cover another 1,300 miles by mid May. But before reaching its summer breeding ground in a stand of young jack pines in the north of Michigan's lower peninsula, it will come to Lake Erie and stop.

Hungry and exhausted, the Kirtland's Warbler will find its way to the shelter of the woods around Magee Marsh, a world-renowned site for birders 25 miles east of Toledo. There, among an astonishing variety of songbirds, waterfowl, wading birds and raptors, it will feed on plentiful insects and build strength for the rest of its journey.

Nearly extinct 40 years ago but making a tenuous comeback, the bird is named after Jared P. Kirtland, a 19th-century physician, jurist, naturalist and a founder of the Cleveland Academy of Natural Sciences—a predecessor of the Museum.

If this year is like the past few, catching a glimpse or photo of a rare Kirtland's Warbler will be the highlight for many visitors at The Biggest Week in American Birding, May 6-15.

Hosted by the Black Swamp Bird Observatory (BSBO) at a variety of locations around Magee Marsh, The Biggest Week in American Birding is a 10-day festival celebrating the factors that combine to make Northwest Ohio the "Warbler capital of the world" and—at this time of year—arguably the continent's best spot to watch birds.

"Every spring we seem to have at least one Kirtland's Warbler sighting," offers Dr. Andy Jones, curator of ornithology at the Museum, and occupant of its William A. and Nancy R. Klamm endowed chair of ornithology. "There are only a few thousand nesting pairs anywhere, and very few are seen on migration anywhere. The nice thing about this event is that when you have thousands of birders in one area, if there's a rare bird, someone is going to find it."

BIRDING AT THE MUSEUM

The Kirtland Bird Club, founded in 1940, holds monthly meetings at the Museum with reports on recent field trips and a presentation from an invited speaker. Attendance is free, and guests and non-members are welcome. Information is available at kirtlandbirdclub.org.

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As a board member of BSBO and its research committee chair, Jones will spend several days in the region and lead a handful of outings in this fifth year of the event.

"It's hard to describe just how rich this area is for birding—especially at this time of year," Jones says. "With a reasonable amount of effort you should be able to see more than 100 species in a day. Getting 150 is possible."

Among those will be some 25 types of warbler—such as the abundant Yellow Palm and Yellow-rumped warblers, and other common species like Cape May, Blackburnian, Black-Throated Blue and Black-Throated Green. Still rarer sightings might include the Connecticut Warbler and the Cerulean Warbler—a bird not yet listed as endangered, but, owing to loss of habitat at both ends of its migration, in a critical free-fall, according to Jones.

"The Magee Marsh area features lakeside woods and well-managed marshes, bringing in waterfowl and shorebirds as well as songbirds," Jones says. "When people start birding, they're often hesitant about shorebirds because there can be so much nuance to identifying them. But this is the breeding season and their plumage colors really pop. If you're a beginner, this is the best time to look for these birds."

That's true for warblers too, which are not only in top color, but also in full song. Lake Erie's water is still only about 50 degrees in early May. That drives insects close to the ground, according to Jones, and the hungry birds follow with little regard to the people who are watching.

"I've been birding for 20 years," he says, "and this event has given me some of the closest and longest looks I've ever had of warblers."

Some birds may migrate later than usual due to this year's harsh winter. "But most warblers winter in Central and South America, so they have no idea what the weather has been like here," says Jones. "Their migration is timed more by the changing length of the day."

Much of the focus of The Biggest Week is to promote birding as a hobby while feeding Northwest Ohio's economy.

But consistent with the missions of both the Museum and the BSBO, Jones notes the conservation aspect as well.

"Birds are fascinating, wonderful creatures. But we also study them because they're easier to document than other types of life. It's important that we know what's going on with nematodes in the soil, for example, but it's really hard to study them. With birds, the only technology you need to document their presence is binoculars and ears. We use birds to understand what's going on with the rest of the environment," he says. "BSBO also does a lot of work with local legislators to understand why these coastal marshes are so important. If we lose these habitats, the birds don't just go someplace else; they don't survive."



Kirtland's Warbler sighting at Black Swamp

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The Biggest Week in American Birding offers a family friendly series of events for experienced, beginning and casual birders. Costs: \$35 (\$20 Black Swamp members; \$10 students). Registration is required. More information is available at biggestweekinamericanbirding.com.