



# THE PLAIN DEALER

**AERIAL VIEW**

## **Trip north begins with a detour south to see a black rail -- Aerial View**

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**Plain Dealer Reporter**

A few days ago, my son Bret and I took off on a two-week birding tour of the North and Upper Midwest.

So naturally we began our adventure with a quick detour to the south.

That's because a special bird -- a black rail -- had shown up the week before where it wasn't supposed to be: a marsh in Circleville in Pickaway County.

The rental car was packed and Bret and I were on the road before 4 a.m. Saturday. We arrived at the now-famous site known as Charlie's Pond less than three hours later and heard the bird before we exited the car.

A half-dozen birders were there, employing their best X-ray vision to see through the dense marsh grass for a glimpse of the shy sparrow-sized bird with a big-time call.

"Kee-Kee-Drr," the rail called incessantly for three to four minutes before taking a breather.

In his field guide, David Allen Sibley describes the black rail as a bird "as secretive as a mouse; virtually never seen in the open." And he was right. We had better luck spotting the Henslow's and grasshopper sparrows singing from grassy perches in the adjoining fields.

Then we hit the road for our original destination, the jack pine forests of Northern Michigan, breeding ground of North America's rarest songbird, the Kirtland's warbler.

These gorgeous gray-and-yellow warblers were destined for extinction before wildlife biologists figured out how to save them and took action, preserving huge tracts of jack pines no more than 20 feet tall, and eradicating the nest-parasiting brown-headed cowbirds.

Since 1987, when its numbers bottomed out at about 320 birds, the Kirtland's numbers have multiplied to an estimated 3,400 birds, almost all concentrated in the Huron National Forest near Mio.

On Sunday, U.S. Forest Service biologist Kim Piccolo led four of us on an early-morning Kirtland's expedition, and it took her all of about 10 seconds to locate our target bird.

We admired an especially bubbly male singing from a perch atop a scrub oak, and then headed into the dry, sandy forest for further ornithological entertainment.

There were Nashville warblers, field sparrows, brown thrashers, Eastern bluebirds and hermit thrushes -- all singing. And Piccolo found a red-tailed hawk's nest with a couple of fuzzy chicks. But none of the birds could top the Kirtland's warblers for sheer beauty and excitement.

Before we crossed the Mackinac Bridge for Michigan's Upper Peninsula, Piccolo provided a couple of birding tips -- which paid off.

First, she directed us to the Hardwick Pines State Forest, where evening grosbeaks and purple finches were visiting the feeders at the visitors center. She also told us about a forest that had been clear-cut in preparation for future Kirtland's warblers nesting grounds. But until the jack pines have reached their minimum 5 feet height, the area is prime habitat for other birds such as upland sandpipers.

As predicted, one of these unusual and uncommon shorebirds flew into view and perched atop a dead snag for several seconds before taking off.

Exhilarated by our morning in the field, we hit the road for our next stop at the Seney National Wildlife Preserve in the Upper Peninsula.

Along the way, flying beetles popped like pebbles on the windshield with such force, I nearly expected the glass to crack. Misty showers and fog as thick as soup rolled off Lake Superior from the north. Wild turkeys and sandhill cranes pecked at insects in the grass along the highway. A porcupine inched toward the road, then jumped back -- a good decision, judging by the number of quilled carcasses that appear every 20 miles or so along the berm. Bald eagles soared overhead and pileated woodpeckers occasionally dove like missiles in front of the car.

Seney was bustling with wildlife and waterfowl. Trumpeter swans and ring-necked ducks paddled in the clear, cool ponds. A female hooded merganser led a line of chicks into the reeds of a swamp. Pine, Blackburnian, yellow-rumped, American redstart, common yellowthroat and yellow warblers sang practically nonstop. An osprey's head popped above a nest of sticks while its mate rested on a nearby snag.

It took a single fill-up to realize I had seriously underestimated the cost of the trip. Gasoline is \$4.24 a gallon and more in this area, and our SUV gets only about 25 miles to the gallon, less with the air conditioner running.

It might have been cheaper to fly.

Note: To hear the songs and calls of the black rail, the Kirtland's warbler and all of the birds mentioned in this report, log onto the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Web site, "All About Birds," at: [www.birds.cornell.edu/allaboutbirds](http://www.birds.cornell.edu/allaboutbirds).

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