



The Newsletter of the Kirtland's Warbler Conservation Team

Winter 2025—Spring 2026 Issue

This issue: New Era for Art Program; Winter Meeting Recap; Golden Silk Orbweaver; Remembering Karlis Lazda; Meet Nicole Schafer, Forester

New Era for Kirtland's Warbler Young Artists' Contest

The Kirtland's Warbler Festival, Kirtland's Warbler Alliance, and American Bird Conservancy teamed up in 2026 to assume leadership roles administering the long-running Kirtland's Warbler Young Artists' Contest. "Ensuring continuity was a priority for all three organizations," explained KWCT Coordinator, Steve Roels, "After 23 years of successful outreach to over 25,000 students, everyone was committed to seeing this program continue and thrive. We have many dedicated teachers who look forward to engaging their students through this place-based environmental education program every year."



Left: 2025 contest winner, Lilah from Grand Rapids.

Right: Bill Rapai of the Kirtland's Warbler Alliance struggles to judge an overwhelming number of 2026 contest entries, while some turkeys provide additional judgment. Photo by Mike Petrucha.



Mike Petrucha, Chair of the Kirtland's Warbler Festival, remarked, "Since the KWYAC originally started with the Kirtland's Warbler Festival, I'm excited for the Festival to be part of it again. With the new leading partnership, I believe we can increase the reach of the environmental education that the KWYAC brings to students, parents, and teachers." This year's winners will be announced in April.



Finding our way. Photo by Steve Roels.

Conservation Team Winter Meeting Recap

Sixty-seven conservation professionals and Kirtland's Warbler enthusiasts, representing thirty-three organizations, gathered online February 3rd to discuss the latest developments in Kirtland's Warbler conservation.

A highlight was the introduction of an innovative experimental site on the Huron-Manistee National Forest. Dana Meder, District Wildlife Biologist, explained that the site would be planted with a variety of jack pine densities with the intent of replicating the heterogeneity that would occur from natural regeneration following a fire. The site will be planted in 2027 and represents an excellent example of translating research (in this case, by Dan Kashian) into on-the-ground habitat tinkering.

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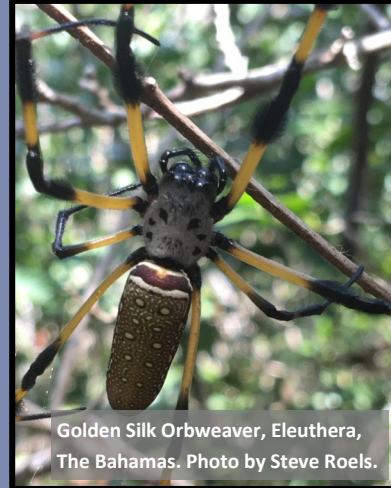
Join our mailing list by emailing KWconservationteam@gmail.com

Save the Date: 2026 KWCT Summer Meeting, July 28-30

Contact KWconservationteam@gmail.com for more information

Species Profile: Golden Silk Orbweaver (*Trichonephila clavipes*)

A striking, and large, spider, the Golden Silk Orbweaver is a common sight in the Bahamian coppice habitat that Kirtland's Warblers call home every winter. This spider has an extensive range, stretching from the southeast USA to northern Argentina, but it is most common in the Caribbean and Central America. Although Kirtland's Warblers eat a fair number of spiders as part of their winter diet, adult female Golden Silk Orbweavers (25-40 mm in body length) are much too large for the warbler. However, the significantly smaller males (~6 mm) may be a suitable snack!



Golden Silk Orbweaver, Eleuthera, The Bahamas. Photo by Steve Roels.

IN THE NEWS:

WI theater to produce Kirtland's Warbler play

"The Thing With Feathers", a bird-focused musical, premieres in Door County in June 2026

<https://bit.ly/KWOnStage>

Jack pine management in focus at symposium

University of Michigan Biological Station hosts symposium for land managers, researchers, and conservationists

<https://bit.ly/UMBSsymposium>



In Memoriam: Karlis Lazda by Phil Huber

Karlis Lazda, USFS Silviculturist for the Huron-Manistee National Forest Mio Ranger District, passed away on November 11, 2025. Karlis was critical to the successful establishment of Kirtland's Warbler breeding habitat on the Mio District. This single District is responsible for sustaining approximately 30 percent of the entire Warbler population. The Conservation Team deeply appreciates his contributions and his instrumental role in sustaining the species.

Get to Know a KWCT Member: Nicole Schafer, Kirtland's Warbler Recovery Forester

"I was inspired to pursue a career creating habitat for wildlife," Nicole Schafer told the *Observer*, as she recalled the environmental science courses of her undergraduate days. In January, Nicole started as American Bird Conservancy's Kirtland's Warbler Recovery Forester, a new position created in cooperation with the US Fish and Wildlife Service. She summed up her role as being an "on-the-ground resource for advancing Kirtland's Warbler habitat management across partner lands."

Nicole brings a varied background in ecological restoration, forest health, and natural resources management to the post. She has worked in forest, grassland, and desert ecosystems for the National Park Service, Huron-Manistee National Forest (HMNF), and Minnesota DNR. She highlighted an early-career position at Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie as her first exposure to a "well-oiled management system to restore a landscape."

Nicole spotted her first Kirtland's Warbler while participating in the HMNF census. Although based at the Cadillac-Manistee District at the time, she was able to join Mio colleagues leading the KW program. The following year, she supported the Huron Shores District through jack pine planting inspections and stocking assessments.

After her first month in a position completely dedicated to Kirtland's Warbler, the *Observer* asked how her perspective on the bird had changed. "There's more complexity than I initially realized," she said, "And there's a lot of passion for Kirtland's Warbler."



Nicole and a field assistant survey a timber stand.

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