

THE THING WITH FEATHERS

Book By Robin Share, Music by Clay Zambo, Lyrics by Robin Share and Clay Zambo

Principle Performers

Jackie - Kirtland's Warbler (male)

The Kirtland's Warbler is a neat gray-and-yellow bird and one of the rarest songbirds in North America. A true habitat specialist, it breeds only in young jack pine forests in Michigan and adjacent parts of Wisconsin and Ontario. During the past century, timber rotations and fire suppression proved incompatible with the bird's needs, and Kirtland's Warblers spent nearly 50 years on the Endangered Species List. Intensive conservation, including suppression of Brown-headed Cowbirds, allowed the population to increase tenfold, and the species was delisted in 2019. Despite its low numbers, the Kirtland's Warbler is surprisingly easy to find if you can locate its classic habitat of young, dense jack pine scrublands.



Fun Fact!: Female Kirtland's Warblers are more selective in their choice of habitat than males, and the best habitat attracts more females than males. As a forest tract ages beyond the point where Kirtland's Warblers will use it, the last residents will be unmated males.

Learn More: https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Kirtlands_Warbler/overview

Also check out Robin Share's article on the Kirtland's Warbler on page 9 of this Guide.



Left: Kirtland's Warbler photos taken by Robin Share

Cardi - Northern Cardinal (female)

The male Northern Cardinal is perhaps responsible for getting more people to open up a field guide than any other bird with their perfect combination of familiarity, conspicuousness, and style: a shade of red you can't take your eyes off. But even the brown females sport a sharp crest and warm red accents. You can also find female cardinals by getting a sense of their warm, red-tinged brown— a pattern you can learn to identify in flight. Cardinals don't migrate and they don't molt into a dull plumage, so they're still breathtaking in winter's snowy backyards. In summer, their sweet whistles are one of the first sounds of the morning. Nearly any bird feeder you put out ought to attract Northern Cardinals (as long as you live within their range), but they particularly seem to use sunflower seeds.



Fun Fact!: Only a few female North American songbirds sing, but the female Northern Cardinal does, and often while sitting on the nest. This may give the male information about when to bring food to the nest. A mated pair shares song phrases, but the female may sing a longer and slightly more complex song than the male.

Learn More: https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Northern_Cardinal/

Also check out Robin Share's article on female Northern Cardinals, on page 11 of this Guide.



Left: Male Northern Cardinal “suitor” puppets and a male Northern Cardinal in the wild.

Wilson - Wilson's Warbler (male)



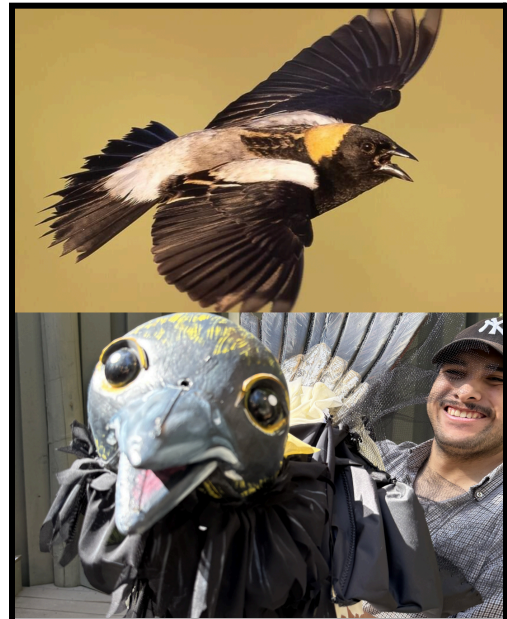
Wilson's Warblers dance around willow and alder thickets, often near water, to the rapid beat of their chattering song. This bright yellow warbler with a black cap is one of the smallest warblers in the U.S. and among the most recognizable. They rarely slow down, dashing between shrubs, gathering insects from one leaf after another, and popping up on low perches to sing. Wilson's Warblers breed in mountains and northern forests, but pass through every state in the lower 48 during migration—so be on the lookout when they are on the move in the spring and fall. Wilson's Warblers do not visit feeders, but you can provide habitat for them in your yard by landscaping with native trees and shrubs.

Fun Fact!: When most songbird nestlings are ready to leave the nest, they hop out and don't return to the nest, but some Wilson's Warbler fledglings head back to the nest for a night or two after fledging.

Learn More: https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/wilsons_warbler

Bobo - Bobolink (male)

Perched on a grass stem or displaying in flight over a field, breeding male Bobolinks are striking. No other North American bird has a white back and black underparts (some have described this look as wearing a tuxedo backwards). Added to this are the male's rich, straw-colored patch on the head and his bubbling, virtuosic song. As summer ends he molts into a buff and brown female-like plumage. It's easiest to find Bobolinks if you look for males giving their display flights during spring and early summer. In grassy or overgrown fields and pastures, listen for a long, burbling song punctuated with sharp metallic notes. The male Bobolink often sings this song while flying in a peculiar helicopter-like pattern, moving slowly with his wings fluttering rapidly.



Fun Fact!: The Bobolink is one of the world's most impressive songbird migrants, traveling some 12,500 miles (20,000 kilometers) to and from southern South America every year. Throughout its lifetime, it may travel the equivalent of 4 or 5 times around the circumference of the earth.

Learn More: <https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/bobolink>

Avian Ensemble



American Woodcock (Timberdoodle): Superbly camouflaged against the leaf litter, the brown-mottled American Woodcock walks slowly along the forest floor, probing the soil with its long bill in search of earthworms. Unlike its coastal relatives, this plump little shorebird lives in young forests and shrubby old fields across eastern North America. Its cryptic plumage and low-profile behavior make it hard to find except in the springtime at dawn or dusk, when the males show off for females by giving loud, nasal *peent* calls and performing dazzling aerial displays. The woodcock is also known as the timberdoodle, Labrador twister, night partridge, and bog sucker.

Learn More: https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/American_Woodcock/



Black-and-White Warbler: One of the earliest-arriving migrant warblers, the Black-and-white Warbler's thin, squeaky song is one of the first signs that spring birding has sprung. This crisply striped bundle of black and white feathers creeps along tree trunks and branches like a nimble nuthatch, probing the bark for insects with its slightly downcurved bill. Though typically seen only in trees, they build their little cup-shaped nests in the leaf litter of forests across central and eastern North America.

Learn More: https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Black-and-white_Warbler/



Cape May Warbler: Among the dazzling cohort of spring warblers, the first Cape May Warbler to arrive is a balm: its mossy green back, tiger-striped breast, and chestnut cheek patch make it unlike any other warbler. During the breeding season, the species lives remote from most human observers, in northern spruce-fir forests, where its nesting success is tied to its chief food, the spruce budworm caterpillar. These unusual warblers have specially shaped tongues that allow them to sip nectar from tropical flowers in winter—and sometimes from hummingbird feeders.

Learn More: https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/cape_may_warbler



Eastern Screech Owl: If a mysterious trill catches your attention in the night, bear in mind the spooky sound may come from an owl no bigger than a pint glass. Common east of the Rockies in woods, suburbs, and parks, the Eastern Screech-Owl is found wherever trees are, and they're even willing to nest in backyard nest boxes. These supremely camouflaged birds hide out in nooks and tree crannies through the day, so train your ears and listen for them at night. Eastern Screech-Owls readily accept nest boxes; consider putting one up to attract a breeding pair. Red and gray individuals occur across the range of the Eastern Screech-Owl, with about one-third of all individuals being red.

Learn More: https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Eastern_Screech-Owl/



Indigo Bunting: The all-blue male Indigo Bunting sings with cheerful gusto and looks like a scrap of sky with wings. Sometimes nicknamed "blue canaries," these brilliantly colored yet common and widespread birds whistle their bouncy songs through the late spring and summer all over eastern North America. Look for Indigo Buntings in weedy fields and shrubby areas near trees, singing from dawn to dusk atop the tallest perch in sight or foraging for seeds and insects in low vegetation.

Learn More: https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/indigo_bunting



Pileated Woodpecker: The Pileated Woodpecker is one of the biggest, most striking forest birds on the continent. It's nearly the size of a crow, black with bold white stripes down the neck and a flaming-red crest. Look (and listen) for Pileated Woodpeckers whacking at dead trees and fallen logs in search of their main prey, carpenter ants, leaving unique rectangular holes in the wood. The nest holes these birds make offer crucial shelter to many species including swifts, owls, ducks, bats, and pine martens.

Learn More:

https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/pileated_woodpecker



Sandhill Crane: Whether stepping singly across a wet meadow or filling the sky by the hundreds and thousands, Sandhill Cranes have an elegance that draws attention. These tall, gray-bodied, crimson-capped birds breed in open wetlands, fields, and prairies across North America. They group together in great numbers, filling the air with distinctive rolling cries. Mates display to each other with exuberant dances that retain a gangly grace. Sandhill Crane populations are generally strong, but isolated populations in Mississippi and Cuba are endangered.

Learn More: https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/sandhill_crane



Tree Swallow: Handsome aerialists with deep-blue iridescent backs and clean white fronts, Tree Swallows are a familiar sight in summer fields and wetlands across northern North America. They chase after flying insects with acrobatic twists and turns, their steely blue-green feathers flashing in the sunlight. Tree Swallows nest in tree cavities; they also readily take up residence in nest boxes. This habit has allowed scientists to study their breeding biology in detail, and makes them a great addition to many a homeowner's yard or field.

Learn More: https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/tree_swallow



Veery: This small forest thrush gets its name from the cascade of “veer” notes that make up its ethereal, reedy song—a common sound at dusk and dawn in summer in the damp northern woods. Most Veeries are a warm cinnamon brown above, with delicate spots on the throat; though far northwestern and northeastern populations are darker brown. These birds hop through the forest understory as they forage for insects and fruit. They spend winters in South America. The Veery’s scientific name reflects its vocal prowess as well as its plumage coloring. *Catharus* comes from the Greek *katharos*, for “pure”—probably a reference to the quality of its song. *Fuscescens*, from the Latin *fuscus*, means “dusky.”

Learn More: <https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/veery>

Mentioned, But Not Seen

An Addendum by Robin Share

Carolina Wren: For a bird that barely tips the scale, the Carolina Wren has an outsized presence. It’s a plump, rusty-brown wren with a crisp white eyebrow stripe and a long tail it loves to cock straight up. What it lacks in size it makes up for in volume: the male belts out a loud, rollicking “teakettle-teakettle-teakettle” far too big for his body. The charming part is how pairs stay in constant contact, calling back and forth all day, the female answering her mate’s song with trills of her own. Carolina Wrens form tight, devoted pairs that tend to mate for life, staying together through every season — if you’re lucky you may come across this songbird couple side by side in the dead of winter, still chattering.



Learn more: https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Carolina_Wren/



Eastern Phoebe: If a bird could introduce itself, it would be the Eastern Phoebe – it sings its own name. Its song is a clear, emphatic “FEE-bee,” repeated over and over, with a buzz on the second note that makes it unmistakable. In *The Thing with Feathers*, our heroine Phoebe chooses this distinctive song of her namesake as the ringtone on her phone – the ringing of which is

an important plot point throughout the play. But who would have known that the woods around the theater would be populated by so many Phoebes, several of which seem to intentionally choose performances as their time to sing out! In fact, if you listen, you can often hear a live Phoebe in a tree nearby answering a ringtone occurring in the play! File this under: Funny things that only happen when your theater is in a state park.

Learn more: https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/eastern_phoebe

Piping Plover: The Piping Plover is a tiny, sand-colored shorebird — pale above, white below, with a single dark neck band in breeding season — named for the clear “peep-lo” whistles it pipes along the shore. It nests in simple scrapes right out in the open on sandy beaches, which is exactly where its troubles begin. These birds are a major conservation concern: a 2024 status review lists the Great Lakes population as highly endangered — a population once nearing 800 pairs had crashed to just 13 by 1990. Because the plovers want the same beaches people do, protection is hands-on, year-after-year work: crews fence off nesting areas, ask beachgoers to leash dogs, manage predators, and guard the habitat from development. It’s slow going, but the effort has nudged the Great Lakes population back to around 70 nesting pairs. Every fledged chick is genuinely a small victory.



Learn more: https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/piping_plover



Yellow-rumped Warbler: One of North America’s most abundant warblers, the “yellow-rump” floods through every U.S. state and most of Canada on migration, breeding in northern forests and wintering across the south. Males are sharp in gray, black, and yellow, while females wear browner, warm colors — but both sport that signature splash of yellow on the rump. They flit through trees gleaning insects, singing their soft musical trills. But here’s what birders love: that flash of yellow on the backside, so instantly recognizable, earns the species its deeply affectionate nickname, “butter butt.” Spot one and someone will inevitably grin and call it out like they’ve run into an old friend. For such a common little bird, it inspires a remarkable amount of joy.

Learn More: https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Yellow-rumped_Warbler

The Story of the Kirtland's Warbler

A Companion to *The Thing with Feathers* by Robin Share

The Kirtland's Warbler — that little blue-gray bird with the bright yellow belly at the heart of *The Thing with Feathers* — is one of the pickiest creatures in North America. It will nest in exactly one kind of place: young jack pine forests, and only the dense, scrubby kind. Too young won't do. Too old won't do. This is a bird with standards.

Unfortunately, its favorite tree is every bit as fussy. Jack pines keep their seeds locked inside tightly sealed cones that pop open only in the blistering heat of a wildfire. No fire, no new pines. When settlers arrived and began inhabiting upper mid-west woodlands in the late 1800s, forest fire suppression became standard practice. The result? No more young jack pines — so, no more warblers. By the early 1970s the whole species had crashed to fewer than 200 nesting pairs, nearly all of them in central Michigan.

Then came a lucky break. In 1973, President Nixon signed the Endangered Species Act, and the Kirtland's Warbler was among the very first birds it protected. Passionate conservationists, biologists, foresters, and university researchers teamed up around a single goal: save this bird. They brought fire back on purpose — carefully managed burns — and planted jack pine seedlings by the millions. They also took on the Brown-headed Cowbird, a sneaky “brood parasite” that lays its eggs in other birds' nests and lets the unsuspecting parents raise their young, at the expense of the female's own chicks. (Cowbirds have a particular taste for warbler nests, which was the last thing this bird needed.)

It worked. In 2019, the Kirtland's Warbler was taken off the endangered species list, and by 2021 the count had climbed to 2,245 pairs — up from fewer than 200. A genuine comeback. And while Michigan does the lion's share of that work, a small but determined population nests in Adams Co, Wisconsin — with a handful of pairs across the border in Ontario — where fiercely determined conservationists are hard at work.

But here's the catch: the Kirtland's Warbler is what biologists call “conservation-reliant” — pull away the human help and it slides right back toward trouble. We got a reminder in 2025, when the latest census found only about 1,489 pairs — a drop of roughly a third in just four years. The work, it turns out, is never quite finished.

So why pour decades of work into one saving small, fussy bird? Because the Kirtland's Warbler is not alone. Saving it means saving an entire jack pine world — the insects, wildflowers, and other animals that share its scrubby, fire-shaped home. And beyond that: saving endangered birds preserves the delicate balance of nature. Birds act as vital environmental indicators (warning us of hazards), pollinate plants, control pests, and disperse seeds. Protecting them safeguards entire ecosystems and provides long-term environmental benefits.

Want to see for yourself how this hard work has paid off? Drive up near Roscommon, Michigan in June, and a guide from Michigan Audubon or the U.S. Forest Service will walk you into a stand of jack pines and show you the real thing: a male warbler perched at the very top of a little tree, throwing his whole

body into a song, claiming his territory and guarding the nest below. He has no idea he's rare. He's bold and loud and singing for all the world to hear. When dedicated people choose to listen — and to do the slow, unglamorous work of keeping one stubborn little bird in the world — it stops being just about one bird. It's about the kind of world we want to live in: one that looks with hope toward the future.

Dramatic license in *The Thing with Feathers*

While a Kirtland's Warbler has never been sighted in Door County, experts consulting on this show happily allow the possibility that a stand of jack pines in, for example, Peninsula State Park, could attract an individual Kirtland's Warbler blown off course during migration from its wintering home in the Bahamas. The likelihood that a nesting pair would make their way here? Well, that might take a bit more imagination. But then again, there's always hope.

(Many thanks to these folks who generously provided expertise – and enthusiastic support – during the writing of *The Thing with Feathers*: Steve Roels, American Bird Conservancy Kirtland's Warbler Program Director; Bill Rapai and Ray Stocking, Kirtland's Warbler Alliance ex-officio and current Executive Directors; Davin Lopez, DNR Wildlife Coordinator for Eastern Wisconsin; and Pat Weber, American Bird Conservancy Northeast WI.)

For more information about the Kirtland's Warbler:

Kirtland's Warbler Alliance: <https://www.kirtlandswarbler.org/>

American Bird Conservancy: <https://abcbirds.org/birds/kirtlands-warbler/>

Wisconsin DNR: <https://apps.dnr.wi.gov/biodiversity/Home/detail/animals/6467>

U.S. Fish & Wildlife KW Tours: <https://www.fws.gov/project/kirtlands-warbler-tours>

Why Save Species? <https://www.fws.gov/story/why-save-species>

The Northern Cardinal: To Brood or Not to Brood

By Robin Share

If there's a bird that knows how to make an entrance, it's the Northern Cardinal. The male is impossible to miss: a head-to-tail blaze of red with a jaunty pointed crest. The female is the quiet showstopper, dressed in warm buff-brown with rosy blushes and that same sharp crest. They're homebodies, too. Cardinals don't migrate. While half the bird world packs up for the tropics each fall, cardinals stay put through every season. That is why folks up here in Wisconsin get the year-round gift of a brilliant red bird against the white snow.

Now, about our leading lady. For starters, she sings — and that's a genuine rarity. In most North American songbird species only the males do the crooning, but the female cardinal belts out her own songs, sometimes longer and more elaborate than his. When suitors come calling, she's the one doing the choosing. And she's a discerning critic: a male's red is no accident. That color comes straight from his diet, so a brighter, bolder red is basically a resume line that reads "excellent forager, reliable provider." She reads those resumes closely.

Which brings us to the courtship circus. In spring you really can spot a cluster of males trailing a single female through the shrubbery, in what birders cheerfully call a "cardinal chase" — all flashing red, raised crests, swaying displays, and dueling songs as each male tries to out-sing and out-shine the rest. It's also an audition, giving her a live demonstration of whether this fellow can actually deliver once there are hungry chicks to feed. So our play's premise of persistent suitors flaunting their stuff? Completely true to life.

To brood, or not to brood?

Here's where our heroine does something bold: she surveys her field of admirers and says, "not this time." Is that allowed? In nature, absolutely. Female choice is one of the great driving forces in the animal kingdom. Because she's the one who'll pour enormous energy into eggs, incubation, and feeding, she has every reason to be picky — and "no" is a perfectly valid answer. A female might pass if none of the suitors measures up, if she isn't in peak condition herself, or if the timing is simply wrong: too early, too cold, too lean a year to risk it. Raising a family is expensive, and a smart bird weighs whether the moment is worth it. Skipping or delaying a breeding attempt is a real, documented strategy across the animal world. It's the difference between living to breed another (better) day and gambling on a bad bet.

So how much is the play taking liberties? A little, in the fun way. Real cardinals aren't singing internal monologues or staging dramatic rejection scenes, and a healthy female in good habitat usually does pair up, sometimes raising two or three broods in a single season. But the bones of the story are solid biology: females really do assess, really do choose, and really can decline. Our cardinal isn't being unrealistic. She's just being selective — and in the natural world, that's not a quirk. That's her biological prerogative.

Want to “bird nerd” out? More fun resources below!

Bay Beach Wildlife Sanctuary (Brown County)

Learn More and Visit: <https://www.greenbaywi.gov/WLS>

Cornell Lab of Ornithology

All About Birds: <https://www.allaboutbirds.org/>

Global Big Day: <https://ebird.org/globalbigday>

eBird Mobile App: <https://ebird.org/about/ebird-mobile>

Humane Society of Wisconsin (Various Counties)

Wildlife Rehabilitation Center: <https://www.wihumane.org/services/wildlife/>

International Crane Foundation (Sauk County)

Visit the Foundation: <https://savingcranes.org/visit/>

Annual Midwest Crane Count: <https://savingcranes.org/annual-midwest-crane-count/>

Open Door Bird Sanctuary (Door County)

Resident Raptors: <https://opendoorbirdsantuary.org/resident-raptors/>

Events and Private Tours: <https://opendoorbirdsantuary.org/events-calendar/>

The Ridges Sanctuary (Door County)

Hike the Ridges: <https://ridgessanctuary.org/hike-the-ridges/>

Event Calendar: <https://ridgessanctuary.org/events/>

Schlitz Audubon Nature Center (Milwaukee County)

Raptor Program: <https://www.schlitzaudubon.org/raptors/raptor-program/>

Birding Academy: <https://www.schlitzaudubon.org/learn/the-bssb-birding-academy/>

Wisconsin DNR

Wildlife Rehabilitation Directory and Resources:

<https://dnr.wisconsin.gov/topic/WildlifeHabitat/directory>

Wisconsin Society for Ornithology

Birding Clubs and Nature Centers of Wisconsin: <https://wsobirds.org/bird-clubs-and-nature-centers>

Guide Sources

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<https://www.allaboutbirds.org/>

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