Imagine that you are an American birder in the 1960s. You are a good local birder, and you know well the birds of your home area. You are going to The Bahamas for the first time. Specifically, you are going to Grand Bahama, where there are extensive pine woods. There you hope to see the Kirtland’s Warbler, a rare and endangered migrant that winters only in The Bahamas.

In the woods you see a warbler with a yellow breast and belly, and streaking on the flanks. It has white around the eye—not a complete eye-ring. Is it a broken eye-ring or a thin supercilium with some white behind and below the eye as well? The back is dark. Is it gray or blue, streaked or plain? The bird flies away. You check your Peterson and Bond field guides. Is it a Magnolia Warbler? No, it didn’t have a yellow rump. What other warbler might it be?

The closest fit is Kirtland’s Warbler. You are positive you saw a yellow belly and streaked flanks, and maybe that was a broken eye-ring. You check both field guides again. Nothing else comes as close. One funny thing, though: The bird was crawling up the trunk of a pine tree like a Brown Creeper or a Black-and-white Warbler. Peterson’s field guide doesn’t mention that Kirtland’s Warbler does that. Bond’s Birds of the West Indies does mention that behavior for a resident subspecies of the Yellow-throated Warbler, but this bird doesn’t look like a Yellow-throated Warbler; it had a yellow belly. Your desire to see a Kirtland’s overcomes any lingering doubt, and you check it off as a long-sought lifer. You have seen a Kirtland’s Warbler on its wintering grounds.

Wrong.

The False Kirtland’s

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The Florida Audubon Society (as it was known at the time) had exceptional good fortune in finding Kirtland’s Warblers on Grand Bahama in the 1960s. Dorothy Blanchard, a Michigan birder familiar with Kirtland’s Warblers, participated in the Florida Audubon Society’s tour of Grand Bahama in November 1963 during which they thought they saw a Kirtland’s. Here is her description (Blanchard 1965) of the exciting moment and the leader’s comments:

After many in the party had given up and loitered back to the waiting cars, and I was still looking around, a bird alighted on the trunk of a pine tree; so, as is customary, I announced quietly, “There’s a bird.” But after focusing my binoculars on it, I recognized it and could say with more excitement, “It’s a Kirtland’s Warbler!” After a short hesitation I added, “But it’s behaving like a nuthatch!” This behavior of the bird (working its way up the bare trunk of the loblolly pine, apparently finding food in the crevices of the bark), strange to us in Michigan, has been observed in November on Grand Bahama Island by Florida Audubon groups on every occasion when the bird has been sighted, Mr. Mason says, except in 1959, when it was seen only in Casuarina scrub.

This unusual behavior was ascribed to Kirtland’s Warbler on other tours, as well. In 1967 Margaret Hundley, one of the group’s leaders, listed 15 sightings of Kirtland’s by Florida Audubon Society tours to Grand Bahama between

Do you want to see a Kirtland’s Warbler (inset above) on its wintering grounds? As many birders know, the species can be found during the winter months only in The Bahamas. With a good look, this distinctive warbler—yellow below and blue-gray above, with white eye-crescents and black streaks on the flanks—ought to be unmistakable, right? Not so fast. There is another Bahamian warbler that matches this description, and it’s one that many visitors to The Bahamas have overlooked or been unaware of. This article introduces ABA Area birders to the Bahama Warbler (Setophaga flavescens), a fascinating endemic—and Kirtland’s Warbler lookalike—of the Caribbean pine forests of The Bahamas.

Hiawatha National Forest, Michigan; May 2004. Photo by © Robert Royse–VIREO.

1959 and 1966, and 27 additional sightings on the island. “On several occasions,” she stated, “an individual warbler landed on the lower section of a pine trunk and then worked its way upward, circling the tree and probing beneath the bark much as a Brown Creeper (Certhia familiaris) does. After reaching the branched portion of the tree, the warbler would fly to the base of another tree and repeat the performance.” She noted that this behavior by Kirtland’s Warblers had not been observed in Michigan (Hundley 1967).

Two ornithologists who spent considerable time on Grand Bahama reported only one Kirtland’s Warbler and did not mention the nuthatch-like behavior. Dr. Paul Fluck reported the results of his banding operations at the Rand Nature Centre, Grand Bahama (Fluck 1983). He had banded 10,550 birds, including 6,039 warblers of 37 species. Only one of those birds was a Kirtland’s Warbler. Dr. John Emlen studied the birds in the Grand Bahama pine forests in the 1960s and ’70s, writing the classic monograph, The Bird Communities of Grand Bahama. He never saw a Kirtland’s Warbler in 500 hours of field observation (Emlen 1977). More recently, the Kirtland’s Warbler Research and Training Program on Eleuthera Island has recorded more than 500 observations of Kirtland’s Warblers foraging and has never observed the trunk-foraging behavior described by Blanchard and Hundley (Joe Wunderle, personal communication).

What accounts for these glaring differences? The source of the problem is the bird known at the time as Dendroica dominica flavescens. Originally described as a separate species, the Yellow-breasted Warbler (D. flavescens), it was designated a subspecies of the Yellow-throated Warbler by Bond in 1930 (Banks 2010). The 1947 edition of Bond’s field guide mentions that the resident subspecies of the Yellow-throated Warbler is “somewhat of a ‘creeper’ in habits, but less so than the Black-and-white Warbler.” There is no mention in Bond’s field guide, however, of the bird’s distinctive plumage. Emlen (1977) described the trunk-climbing feeding behavior of this taxon, and Bond (1979) noted that the bird has “the entire breast and abdomen yellow [with] little white on the sides of the neck” (Griscom and Sprunt 1979). More recently, I discussed the possible confusion with Kirtland’s Warbler in a letter to the editor in Birding (White 1996). My letter was accompanied by photos by Bruce Hal-
The first photos, I believe, of this taxon ever published. Since then Dunn and Garrett's Warblers (1997), Raffaele and coauthors' Guide to the Birds of the West Indies (1998), my Birder's Guide to the Bahama Islands (1998), and Hallett's Birds of The Bahamas and the Turks and Caicos Islands (2006) have discussed and illustrated this problematic taxon. Despite these recent resources, visiting birders still sometimes put the name "Kirtland's" on the bird originally known as the Yellow-breasted Warbler. Cynical local experts have gotten into the habit of referring to this bird as "the False Kirtland's" or "the Poor Man's Kirtland's."

Recently, this False Kirtland's finally came into its own. It

In all plumages, the Bahama Warbler shows more extensive yellow below than does Yellow-throated Warbler. Although Yellow-throated Warblers are moderately long-billed, Bahama Warblers are very long-billed. The Bahama Warbler differs from the superficially similar Kirtland's Warbler in two important behavioral aspects: Kirtland's is a habitual tail-pumper, but Bahama is not; and Bahama is a habitual tree creeper, but Kirtland's is not. Abaco, The Bahamas; January 2011. Photo by © Bruce Hallett.
Finding the Bahama Warbler (*Setophaga flavescens*)

You must go to Abaco or Grand Bahama to see a Bahama Warbler, as those are the only islands where the species occurs. Bahama Warblers are fairly common on both islands and can be found with little difficulty in their preferred pine woods habitat. On Grand Bahama, you can find them in the woods east of Freeport between the College of The Bahamas and McLean's Town. An old logging road referred to as Owl's Hole Road has been especially productive, but that may be because it is a favorite with birders. Lucayan National Park is not a good site for Bahama Warblers because the trails do not penetrate the pine woods. On Abaco, Bahama Warblers can be found in pine woods both north and south of Marsh Harbour. In the south, the woods south of Crossing Rock are especially productive; this includes portions of Abaco National Park. Little Abaco, north of Marsh Harbour, has some of the oldest pines in The Bahamas and is very good for all the pine woods specialties.

Look in the pine woods for a warbler with a gray back, bright yellow underparts, and black streaking on the sides. On the adult male Bahama Warbler, the yellow extends to the vent, with only the undertail coverts being white. On females and sub-adults, the yellow extends about halfway down the belly. All plumages show a white supercilium (“eyebrow”), white behind the auriculares (“ears”), and a small white crescent under the eye. All of these marks are less prominent than on Yellow-throated Warbler. The Bahama Warbler’s habit of feeding on the trunks or larger limbs of pine trees is distinctive. Yellow-throated Warblers tend to feed in the crowns of palm trees in The Bahamas. Kirtland’s Warblers frequent secondary, successional habitats in The Bahamas and often feed on the ground or in low shrubs.

The song of the Bahama Warbler is similar to that of Yellow-throated Warbler’s except that the repeated phrases at the song’s start rise in pitch rather than fall. It can be found on Mark Oberle’s three-CD set *Caribbean Bird Song* (released by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology in 2008), where it is listed under its former subspecific name (*Dendroica dominica flavescens*).

Now that you are aware of the Bahama Warbler and its possible confusion with other warblers, you should have little difficulty identifying it correctly. Good luck!
Although no official conservation status has been conferred upon the species at present, the Bahama Warbler bears careful monitoring. The species has been flagged for assessment by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in preparation for the IUCN’s 2012 “Red List” (D. Wege, personal communication).

Finally, I note that this article is intended not as a criticism of the birders of the 1960s, who did not have adequate reference material. Rather, this note is intended as a broader exhortation to our ever-more-peripatetic birding community. There are more birds out there than the field guides show! That was true in the 1960s, and it remains true today. Be careful out there, and don’t be afraid of saying you don’t know.

Acknowledgments
I thank Elwood Bracey, David Ewert, Ted Floyd, Lynn Gape, Bruce Hallett, Bruce Purdy, David Wege, and Joe Wunderle for their assistance in preparation of this article.

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