Destruction of Habitat Imperils Bird Species

By Mark Jaffe

KNIGHT-RIDDER NEWSPAPERS

There was a time when thin, dark waves of songbirds would fly through spring skies from Mexico and the Caribbean to the beech, maple and tulip trees of the Schuylkill Valley Nature Center in eastern Pennsylvania.

There, these warblers, vireos and thrushes would rest, fill the woods with their sweet, delicate music and then follow the summer's warmth and insects to mating grounds as far north as Canada.

Those times are gone.

"We just don't get the big waves of warblers we used to," said Dick James, a naturalist who has tracked the nature center's avian populations for 22 years. "We used to see 15 or 20 birds at a time, 11 or 12 species in week. Now, maybe we see three or four birds in a week."

Unfortunately, a number of biologists have quantified James' feeling and discovered that the populations of woodland songbirds — victimized by suburban sprawl, rain forest destruction and competition from heartier species — are declining in many parts of North America.

"In some cases, we've seen migratory songbirds completely disappear," said David Wilcove, a biologist for the Wilderness Society, a national environmental group. "Generally, the declines have been between 30 and 70 percent."

Gone is the "tee-ew-tew-tew-tew-ti" of the yellow-throated warbler and the elusive, brown ovenbird's rising call of "teacher-teacher-teacher." In place of these complex and melodious songs are the common grackle's rasping "hack" and the harsh "jee-hah" of the blue jay.

However, where the songbirds vanish, more than just the sounds of the forest may change. "You can't make such grotesque changes in the cast of characters in the woods without having some gross changes in the forests," Wilcove said.

"It could set off a whole ecological chain reaction," said John Terborgh, a Princeton University biologist.

The waning songbird population raises both scientific and political questions. First, biologists must determine why the birds are declining and examine what that tells them about migratory bird behavior and the ecology of forest communities.

Although the birds are disappearing from some woods, they appear to be thriving in others, and most of these species are far from being considered endangered.

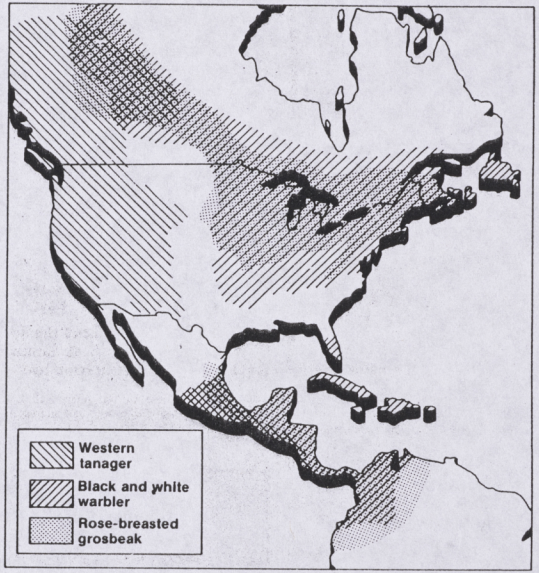
Many biologists believe that the principal culprit is suburban sprawl, which has destroyed too much woodland, provided too comfortable a home for some of the birds' predators, such as the blue jay and the raccoon, and generally disrupted the natural balance upon which the birds depend.

Some biologists contend that losing parts of the relatively small tropical rain forest areas in Mexico, Costa Rica and the Caribbean islands, where the songbirds spend the winter, is an equally, if not more, important reason.

SONGBIRDS AT RISK

The loss of the relatively small tropical rain forest areas of Mexico, Costa Rica and the Caribbean islands is a major threat to the survival of songbirds in North America, some biologists say. Migrant songbirds are more concentrated in their winter range than in their northern breeding areas, so the loss of one acre of Mexican rain forest is equal to the loss of five to eight acres of North American woods. Virtually all of these rain forests may be gone by the year 2000.

Migratory patterns of three common U.S. birds



SOURCE: Interior Department, World Wildlife Fund

"These songbirds all winter in a relatively small area," Wilcove said. Because the wintering areas are so small, the loss of one acre of rain forest is equal to the loss of five to eight acres of North American woods, said John Serrao, a naturalist and former director of the Greenbrook Sanctuary in Alpine, N.J.