

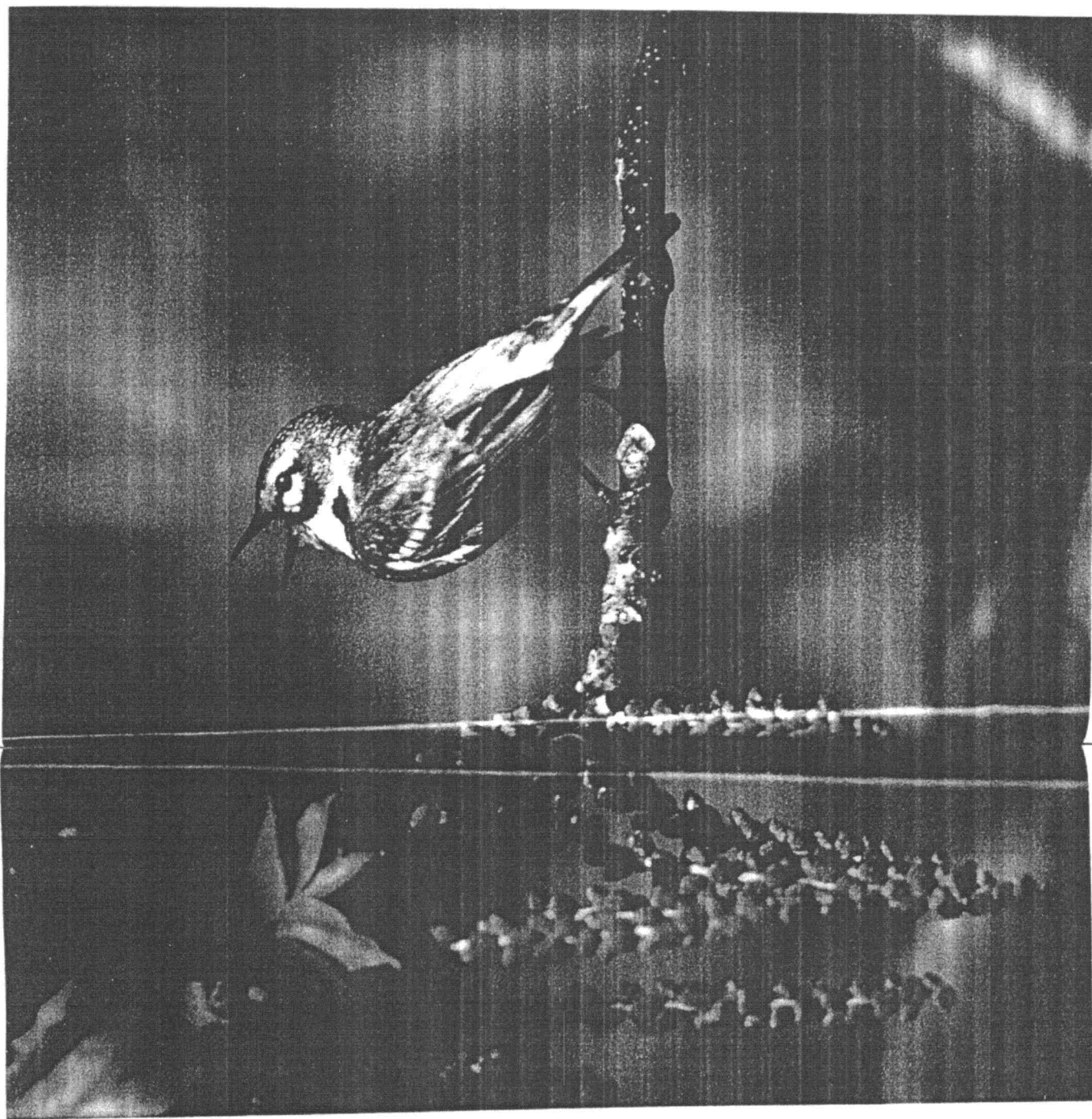
Silence of the Songbirds

By LES LINE
Photographs by
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THIS IS THE ROBIN STOP," SAYS biologist Sam Droege as we unfold from his subcompact at 5:19 a.m. and are greeted by a clamor from North America's best known songbird. "They're so noisy at this time of the morning, you can't hear anything else."

Well, not exactly. Over the insistent caroling of robins claiming possession of the shadowy lawns and churchyards in a still slumbering community, Droege's keen ears register a mourning dove, house finch, catbird, mockingbird, and chipping sparrow. And one second before the three-minute alarm sounds on his chronometer, a drowsy cardinal chirps a halfhearted call note.

Singing a sweet solo, a prairie warbler adds to the chorus of migrant songbirds in decline across the United States. As the scale of losses comes to light, alarmed experts ask: Can we save our birds of summer?





We pile into the car and dash for the next of 50 stops on our 24½-mile-long circuit of Calvert County, wedged in the tidewater region of Maryland between the Chesapeake Bay and the lower reaches of the Patuxent River. What a difference a half mile makes! Woodlots and meadows have replaced suburbia, and the wood thrush with its boldly spotted chest has overshadowed its red-breasted cousin. "The thrush alone declares the immortal wealth and vigor that is in the forest," proclaimed Thoreau. Few who have heard its ethereal song would disagree.

It is June 18, height of the nesting season hereabouts, and this is the month when 2,200 amateur ornithologists—from desert borderlands to treeless tundra—join in the annual North American Breeding Bird Survey (BBS). Organized in 1966 by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the BBS tracks changes in bird populations by yearly roadside counts along permanent routes. And if a sense of urgency now attends the exercise, it springs in large part from recent readings of BBS data showing major population decreases of migratory songbirds that nest in forests east of the Mississippi but winter in Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean. Many of our birds of summer appear to be in decline.

To find out why they are disappearing and what is being done to save them, I traveled to their summer homes in the deciduous forests of northern New England and the Midwest and to their winter haunts in the mangrove swamps and rain forests of the Caribbean and Central America.

For several months I spoke with people who are studying the lives of songbirds and searching for ways to slow the most destructive influence on them—loss of habitat. I would like to share some of what I learned.

Reflecting fowl weather, a National Weather Service radar in Slidell, Louisiana, picks up clouds of songbirds migrating across the Gulf of Mexico in April. Each dot represents about 20 birds. Analyses of 25 years of radar data show dramatically emptier skies over the Gulf.

A lifelong passion for ornithology often begins with an encounter with a special bird. Roger Tory Peterson, the bird-watching legend, calls it "the spark." He tells a story about John Burroughs, one of the 19th century's most famous naturalists. One spring day in the late 1840s when Burroughs was a boy, he spied a tiny bird neatly patterned in blue, black, and white. It was a black-throated

warbler as intimately as the everyday cardinal that nests in my front-yard spruce, and I would discover many other causes for the birds' decline but no simple way to stop it.

Saving our migratory songbirds may be the most daunting task ever faced by American conservationists. But everyone I met agreed that the effort must be made, even if success is elusive, because to allow them to decline further is to accept as inevitable the

