

An analysis of 20 years of bird surveys from across North America has disclosed a severe decline in the population of many species of songbirds, especially those that winter in South and Central America and summer in the U.S. and Canada.

The study, which overcomes limitations that had led some to discount similar findings of previous bird surveys, was conducted by Sam Droege of USFWS at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center and Russell Greenberg, a research scientist with the National Zoological Park in Washington, DC.

"It's tragic. We're going to have fewer birds," Droege said. The survey was based on data gleaned from the North American Breeding Bird Survey, which covers the entire U.S.

Some scientists suspect the birds are being harmed by changes in their winter grounds in the tropics — others blame changes in their summer homes in temperate North America. Still others contend that forest fragmentation in North America is primarily to blame, cutting the forests into smaller patches and thus increasing the access of predators and parasites to forest-dwelling birds.

But Greenberg and his colleagues argue in their study that tropical deforestation is the most likely cause. Of the species that winter in Mexico's Yucatan peninsula, for example, 16 live in the forest and 12 live in open scrub. All 16 forest-dwelling birds declined in the past decade, while scrub-dwellers held their own or increased their numbers.