

Stories From Red Siskin Project Breeders

(The first in a series)

by Gail Gatewood Colwell, Ph.D.

The Beginning

If you had told me a few years ago that I would be living in the same house with a flock of Venezuelan Black-hooded Red Siskins, I would have told you to dream on! Like many of you, I have loved birds all my life. My love for birds took the form of feeding wild birds in the winter, donating money to good "bird causes," and bird-watching. As a full-time psychologist, I was never short of professional challenges, and my husband and I shared a full assortment of hobbies and social interests. Accordingly, I really didn't think I had the time or energy to invest in any additional bird-related activities.

Five years ago, I bought a "pet" parrot . . . for all the wrong reasons, I might add. He had a long, pretty tail; he hopped and danced; he said, "Hello Ricky" in the cutest voice I had ever heard. Thus began my education in the world of aviculture and bird-keeping. I soon found out what complex, demanding, majestic creatures they are. I also began to learn of the abuses and misuses of birds in the name of bird-keeping. My husband and I began to question the extent to which it is ethical to cage birds . . . ever.

Ironically, our thoughts were following two divergent courses during this period of our enlightenment. We were increasingly disillusioned with

bird-keeping, yet we had acquired another parrot and some canaries. Our bird family now consisted of the original Patagonian Conure, Ricky (the talkative, boisterous bird whom I often charge with starting this whole thing!); a Yellow-headed Amazon, Tara (who, at eight years of age, remains the most sweet-tempered parrot I have ever known); and canaries (most were Fife Fancy canaries, plus assorted "mutts"). On one hand, we loved keeping birds; on the other, we had serious ethical questions about the whole issue. We were in search of some kind of resolution of these two positions.

Getting Involved!

Enter the AFA! We began reading the *Watchbird* in 1990, and it seemed that there might be kindred souls out there somewhere. We didn't agree with everything we saw in the *Watchbird*, but we agreed with more of its contents than those of other popular bird-keeping magazines by a long shot. Then we encountered some articles about the Red Siskin Project.

The program gave full recognition to the damage done to this species by the pet trade. The project had a plan to correct that damage.

For those of you who could use a brief overview of the program, I will describe it. The project seeks to establish a genetically-diverse captive breeding population of these beautiful little birds, with the eventual goal of reintroduction into protected habitat. A network of breeders across the country (and someday, around the world, perhaps) are now building numbers of these birds, slowly but surely. Meanwhile, the project director, Kevin Gorman, is exploring politi-

cal, financial, and logistical dynamics for obtaining protected habitat. Captive-bred Siskins *may* someday be used to satisfy bird-keeping demands such that smuggling will not be necessary; hence, the pressure will be taken off the remaining wild birds. It is estimated that only a few hundred breeding pairs may be left in their native habitat (Venezuela). The project seeks participation at several levels, including fund-raising, program organization, and actual breeding.

We were a little nervous about getting involved in the project . . . we wondered if the director would be interested in relatively inexperienced aviculturists like us. We decided to be brave and apply for membership in the project and let the director decide how we might best contribute. To our relief, Director Kevin Gorman was warm and encouraging. Kevin explained to us that participation was needed at many levels. He first involved us in various organizational and clerical activities.

In 1991, I accepted the position of promotional director. Kevin assured me that I could be of help to the project in this way, so I decided to try it. Promotional goals, in general, included bringing the project to the public's attention, generating funds, and acquiring sponsors for the project's work. In my tenure as promotional director, we completed a massive mail-out campaign to bird clubs around the world, acquired various commercial and club sponsorships, and got some publicity in high-profile national bird magazines. Yvonne Patterson has since succeeded me as promotional director and has brought national and grass-roots publicity to the project.

The Siskins Are Coming!

The next big step came when it was time for us to have siskins! We had been given specific written and verbal instructions about preparations for their housing and care. Complete breeding instructions were also provided. Through Kevin's networking, we purchased two pairs and were given custody of three pairs of project-owned siskins. We picked up all ten birds (in a breadbox-sized cardboard box) one evening at the airport. We were terribly nervous as we drove home. I had the box in my lap, and the little birds dashed themselves against the box and each other in a

Photo by Kevin Gorman



Venezuelan
Black-hooded
Red Siskin

terrifying "popcorn-like" fashion.

We brought them home to a well-prepared condo-cage set-up at home and were profoundly relieved to find that all the birds were okay. Two of the hens were badly dehydrated and needed a bit of hand-watering, but within a day, all were seemingly healthy. As we went through this period of anxiety and adjustment, we once again entertained questions of ethics . . . were we doing the right thing, did the end (preserving a species) justify the means (caging and keeping these birds)? The answer was "yes;" we knew we could give these birds a good home, and the goal of reintroduction into protected habitat was an ethical goal. We still struggle with these issues at times, but we are stronger than ever in our dedication to making the project work.

During our first season with the Siskins (1992), one female died (maybe from a calcium deficiency) soon after arrival. Another refused to have anything to do with nesting or breeding. Three pairs eventually went to nest. The first round of eggs was clear, but each pair had a successful clutch next time around, for a total of eight babies. One pair went back to nest a third time, but the female died while sitting the eggs (we think she had a nighttime accident during a fright). I tried unsuccessfully to foster these babies with a canary, but both failed to thrive after hatching. It was a hectic season: all stages of the life cycle seemed to be happening at once.

Let me say a few words about how we felt when a bird died . . . our sadness occurred at several levels. Of course, we regretted the loss of the individual bird itself. We also regretted the loss of an important member of our flock and an important loss of genetic material. We felt great regret at the idea that we had let the project down in some way, and of course, we sometimes felt that we were letting the species itself down.

The AFA Convention

The AFA convention in 1992 offered us the opportunity to meet many of the people we had been writing and telephoning over the past year or two. We also met some international figures of great importance to the project, including a representative of the Venezuelan government. Project members had special meetings where

breeding activities and project expansion issues were discussed. I was mortified when I was presented with an award for my participation in the project!

The camaraderie and comfort within the core membership was truly amazing. We established some personal bonds which I hope will last a lifetime. Director Kevin Gorman, and his wife, Sarah, were cordial and welcoming. As I said in a speech at one of our project meetings, Kevin embodies the best of leadership attributes: he combines strong structured management with a lively, encouraging personal style.

Yvonne Patterson, publicity director, is a sunny-natured energetic blonde with lots of business savvy. Her experience in running "Cool Crest," a recreation park with a fabulous collection of resident birds, gives her a unique vantage point on publicity and promotions. We shared some special moments as we talked of our love for birds and our gratitude for involvement in this project.

Virginia Baker, longtime project member, was very encouraging and supportive, especially in regard to coping with death and disappointment in the bird room. Virginia's husband, Orland Baker, M.D., serves as the studbook keeper for the project.

We are now readying for our second breeding season. We were sent two more pairs, and we traded two of our young males to Dr. Robert Dyer for two of his young females. This transaction afforded me the opportunity to discuss siskin breeding issues at length with this distinguished gentleman of aviculture. Yet another exciting personal contact, courtesy of the siskin project!

Public Exposure

Publicity Director Yvonne Patterson suggested to all breeders that they explore local publicity options. We contacted our local paper and, to our surprise, they were very interested in our project. A few weeks later, a big front-page article (with color pictures) appeared. The story was picked up by AP and soon was appearing in papers across Texas, New Mexico, and Colorado (we're really not sure how many papers in how many states ran the article). Next, our local public television requested our cooperation in a news feature. Not long after, a major

network affiliate called to do the same thing. We don't know how much farther our story will travel, but it's exciting to imagine. Incredibly, all of this began with a simple phone call to a local reporter.

Thus far, all media people have been very cordial and supportive and have assisted us in avoiding publicizing any information or pictures which might jeopardize our security. This is, of course, a constant consideration in seeking publicity of this sort.

Public reaction has been very gratifying. As a psychologist, I see many people throughout my business day. It seems that I seldom go for more than a few hours without someone saying, "I saw that article about you; what a great project!"

We have two experienced pairs from last year, and with new pairings of acquisitions and our babies from last year, we will start the season with eight pairs. We are simultaneously anxious and excited as we contemplate the possibilities.

I hope to approach this season with a little more confidence and calm than last year. We learned a lot about keeping our expectations modest and coping with disappointment.

It was quite a bit more peaceful at our house back in the days when we contented ourselves with sending checks to this sort of project. But the *doing* of the project (whether organizational or actual breeding) has its own special importance. As I say to myself in times of stress, "this is the hard part; we're in the trenches; this is where it really happens."

Despite all the changes, let me not belabor the hardships without pointing out the rewards. Indeed, the reason I wanted to write this article was to tell readers how *easy* it has all been to get involved, to be a part, to make a difference. Maybe captive breeding isn't your calling (it was a great way for us to satisfy our desire to keep birds and yet serve a noble cause), but there are plenty of other avenues of participation in this project or in countless others.

I urge you to dare to ask yourself if you are yet truly fulfilled in your avicultural pursuits, and then to search your heart for an answer. If you find that you are interested in helping our project in some way, please contact our director, Kevin Gorman, via the AFA main office. ●