

Purity of Species is Conservation

by John Quatro, Sydney, Australia

Canaries and related birds have always held a fascination for me not only because of their color and appearance but because each species has its own uniquely pretty song. The breeder can learn to distinguish the species just by hearing an individual bird sing. Species include Siskins, Grosbeaks, Goldfinches, Greenfinches, Buntings, Chaffinches, Saffrons and Sparrows.

All of these species build a cup-shaped nest except for the Saffron Finches and Sparrows which nest in cavities.

Canary hybrids have been reported from each one of these species at one time or another (see *Canaries and Related Birds* by Horst Bielfeld). None of the hybrids are prettier than any one of the pure species and neither is their song better than the songs of the domesticated Canaries or wild Linnets. Red Siskins have been used repeatedly in producing the red factor Canaries

but most certainly not for their song.

Most of the hybrids produced turn out to be infertile and are referred to as "mules". Only the Red Siskins (being closely related to the Canary) occasionally produce fertile cock birds. The hens from this cross are always infertile. Even hybrids from the Yellowhooded or European Siskin crossed with the Canary are sterile.

As the Red Siskins have been used to get a red factor Canary, so has the Indigo Bunting been used by some breeders in an attempt to get blue Canaries. But this has not worked as buntings are a more distantly related species although occasional reports appear of such hybrids being produced. Indeed, one report stated that the hybrids were able to reproduce among themselves and even with Canaries.

Now I, myself, have never heard of blue Canaries. Nor has anyone that I know. If such a hybrid has ever occurred, it most certainly would not be fertile. If I am wrong then where are

all the blue Canaries? Nowadays some gray Canaries are being referred to as "blue" but most certainly they are not Bunting hybrids.

One could, perhaps, argue either for or against hybridizing with Canaries. After all, most hybrids are sterile. How could this possibly affect the finch species? It *can* affect them. The problem begins when back crossing or hybridizing with various finch species occurs. In such cases a bird that was genetically only one-quarter hybrid could look like a pure species and be bred with other pure birds. Some of the species are very closely related and look very much alike. This means that some of the hybrids *are* capable of reproduction. We are all familiar with the *Estrildidae* finches including Red-cheeked Cordon Bleu, Blue-capped Cordon Bleu, Blue-breasted Cordon Bleu or Ruddies and Strawberry Finches and certainly the Canary related large Green Singing Finch and the small Green Singing Finch to name just a few of the species.

The Australian Federation of Aviculture is strongly opposed to crossbreeding and so are most breeders and dealers. I know for a fact that most breeders in Sydney would not buy or offer hybrids for sale.

Often breeders of Red Siskins form groups of three or four members and exchange young Siskins among themselves. In this way they retain the birds' purity.



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Green Japanese seedheads are always grown in my garden.

Some breeders, on the other hand, believe that any reddish bird with a black head offered for sale is a true Black-hooded Red Siskin and are very happy to keep and breed these birds. As we all know, not all of these birds are pure Red Siskins. They can be called Red Siskins only if they are 100% pure. Hybrids that are 99% pure and can't be visually distinguished from a pure Siskin occasionally produce an offspring that can be clearly identified as a hybrid.

Perhaps we cannot stop some individuals from producing hybrids but we purists can certainly form groups to cooperate together to keep our few captive bred birds pure.

Here in Australia we have a newly formed Rare Species Management

Committee. It is the responsibility of committee members to keep in touch with those breeders who have rare species whether it's one bird or many and also to keep a watch on the status of all species in captivity. This committee is an asset to Australian aviculture.

I have been breeding Black-hooded Red Siskins for more than a decade now and am concerned about the purity of some specimens found in some breeders' collections. Unfortunately, very little has been written about this species and through sheer ignorance some breeders may be breeding or back-crossing from hybrids.

I am very fussy about the birds I choose for breeding. I look for the following when selecting Red Siskin pairs for breeding; the male should be a

rich red color, about 4 in. in length, have horn colored beak with a black tip, legs should be flesh colored, and undertail coverts should be red. The wing bar should be red (not white or yellow) and almost glowing like a red fluorescent light.

The female should never exhibit yellowish feathers. The beak and legs should be the same as the male's. Of course, there is no black hood on the female. Overall, the female should have a gray coloring with a red patch on the breast which gradually increases and intensifies with age.

Canary related species are extremely territorial therefore I believe that for the best breeding results a small aviary should be given to each pair. From my experience I know that Red Siskins often fail to breed because of the presence of another bird in the aviary. In this situation they have to compete for a nesting site, nesting material, food, and also defend their territory. That is a bit too much to ask of a small bird. However, if one pair is kept in each aviary they often exhibit extremely aggressive behavior towards the occupants of the adjoining aviary. This is a healthy sign indicating that they feel at home and are ready for breeding.

One should never wait for the Siskins to start and finish building the nest. The nest should always be initiated by the aviculturist as soon as the female is seen hopping from perch to perch carrying nesting material in its beak.

The food consists of dry seed mix with sunflower and niger seed available at all times. One leaf of lettuce and a generous supply of seeding grasses is offered daily.

For nesting material I provide hessian and coconut fibers and the commercially available product "Fine Fibers Nesting Material". This product excludes undesirable synthetic fiber which if wrapped around a bird's leg could cut off circulation and lead to the loss of a limb.

All the above is based on personal observation and experience and could differ a little from the views and experiences of other breeders. This method works for me and I'm sticking to it.

I wish all of you good luck with the Black-hooded Red Siskin. And remember, crossbreeding within the species is not acceptable and is not conducive to the avicultural preservation of the individual species. ➤



Final results from back-crossing hybrid to normal. Note size and color of beak.

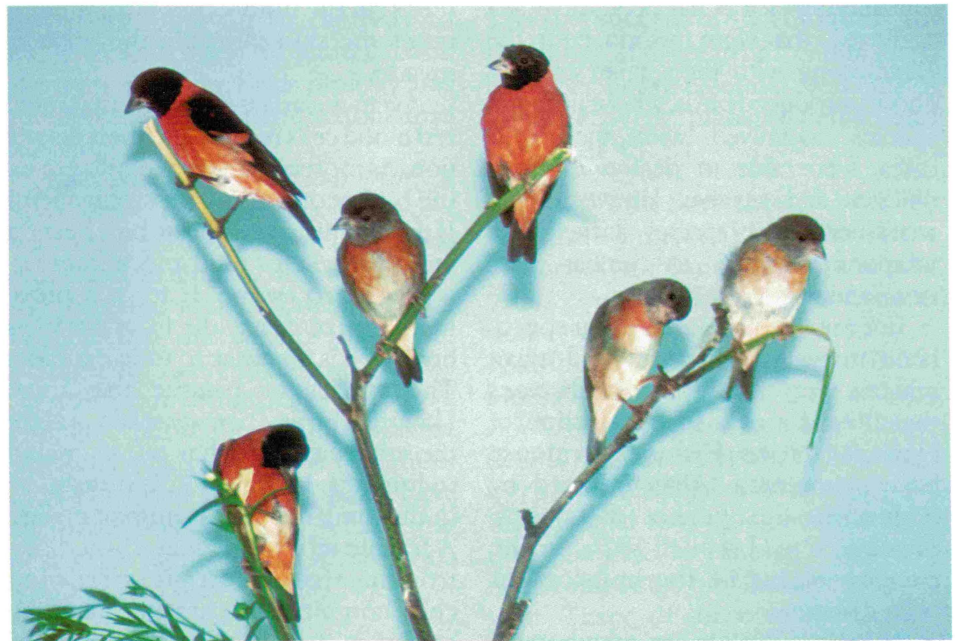


Males love to fight through the wire. They are only protecting their territory. Both hens are on eggs.

Photos by John Quatro



This Red Siskin is probably the victim of inbreeding. Why?



By the color on the breast, eight month old, one year old and the two year old females can be identified. Notice the hybrid on the top left (dark feet, dark beak and whitish undertail coverts). Birds like this should never be used for breeding.



This is a Yellow-hooded x Black-hooded Siskin hybrid. The white undertail coverts are quite distinct.



Two 16 day old Yellow-hooded Siskins.