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My Experience With Siskins

by Lillian Knaggs

(Mrs. Lillian Knaggs is a long time breeder-exhibitor of canaries and finches. In the U.S. her name is easily associated with the breeding of the Black Hooded Red Siskin. In 1979, she raised 60 young and she is aiming for 100 in 1980. This article is her expression of her successful breeding of the endangered siskins. Ken Stubbart — Canary Editor)

It is very important that the siskins are housed in a very warm daylighted room where the temperatures are 72 to 75°F at all times. In my birdroom, I have box cages that are 24" wide, 10" deep, and 18" high. I use fine ground corn cob on the floors. I never put anything on the floor that rattles or moves when the birds light on it. If it does, they will not go to the bottom of the cage. My cages always face the light, but are never too close to a window.

For those people who have never tried to breed the Black Hooded Red Siskins and do not know how to begin, I would say first of all get a pair of aviary raised siskins.¹ A domestic bred hen knows no other life but a cage. The imported male would breed in captivity as long as he had an ambitious mate. My husband, Sam, made the nests for my birds out of 3½" tea strainers. I sew white felt into them for lining. However, the hens may pull and tug until they have torn the lining to shreds, which is likely to happen to the first nest. Do not get discouraged; let them tear it up for a few times, then sew in another. When the hen is ready to lay she will build her nest in half an hour or so. When she is not ready she will sometimes play for weeks with the nesting material. The hens will lay from three to five white eggs, which take twelve to fourteen days to hatch. Do not be too hasty and throw them away if they do not hatch when expected. The hen is small and some eggs may not get covered properly, so it may take a little longer for them to hatch, especially if there are five eggs.

Whatever you do, do not clean the cage while the hen is building. Do not disturb the nesting material that she has placed all around the cage. If you do, you will discourage her building her nest. Yes, the

cage gets dirty, but after she has her nest built, you can clean as often as you like. It probably will look more like you have mice in the cage than birds, but raising siskins is more important than keeping a cage clean. Remember, they really are wild birds and do not like to have their nesting tampered with. You should not touch the nesting material after you wash your hands with a highly scented soap or use hand cream.

You can leave the male with the hen during the incubation time, if he does not disturb her. If he does, remove him. She will set and raise her babies on her own. But if your male is not a mischief maker, leave him in. When she gets off to eat, he will hop onto the edge of the nest and turn the eggs for her. Soon, she will be ready to go back to the nest and mother her chicks.

Siskins like a variety of seeds. Their staple diet is thistle. However, they soon learn to eat any and all seeds. I keep the following feed before mine: thistle, poppy², canary, rape, ground sunflower, and a dish of Scarlett nestling food at all times. During breeding season, I soak thistle for twenty-four hours, rinse it well, and give it in a treat cup full every day or three times a day when the hen is feeding babies. I always give a last feeding before the lights go out.

The birds get a treat cup full of hard boiled egg, mashed fine, plus greens every day. Endive, chickweed, chickory, and dandelion are best. Cuttlebone is another must, along with plenty of red cross grit and sterilized egg shell. I know this sounds like a lot for such tiny birds, but they thrive on it, keep their beautiful deep red coloring, and are happy.

When there are baby siskins, I give them carrot pudding³. Some of the hens will feed that along with the egg and thistle. I never take anything away that the birds have been used to having in their cage or they may stop feeding. Some mothers will feed mostly thistle seed from the very first hour the baby is hatched. Do not worry about that; they know what they are doing, so don't change anything if you want siskin babies. As soon as the young are on their own, they should be put into a large flight cage so they can develop prop-

erly; otherwise the hens may become egg-bound when they are old enough to lay.

To keep the siskins busy, tie short lengths of binder twine around the perches, or hang the greens from a perch so that it is a little harder for the birds to get to. Exercise is very important.

The young siskins can be closed banded at 10 days of age.

NEVER give siskins an open water cup. They may crawl into it head first and drown. Always use a bottle or tube drinker. NEVER leave the first bath unattended. The young will get too wet, chill and die. They love water.

After having learned all the don'ts, you are ready to raise these beautiful little Black Hooded Red Siskins.

If mama siskin should need a little help, you may have to hand feed the young. They are really easier to hand feed than canaries. Take the nest down. They will raise their little heads the minute you touch the nest. I use an expanding tool, the kind that is used with the plastic split bands. It works like a charm. In this way, you never get too much food in their little beaks like you can with the glass hand feeders. I use the carrot pudding. I thin it with warm water and add 1 drop of Vita-Sol. When the young are eight days old, I add a small

or two of warm water, then place the nest back in its place in the cage, and mama will take over to keep them warm.

In case she doesn't, a hospital cage is a **must**. The hospital cage is kept at 82°F. A small covered container of water must be kept in the hospital cage so the babies will not dehydrate. The nest can be set on the floor of the hospital cage. When the babies start to feather, cut the heat to 80° and as they grow, cut it down to 75°. Keep the hospital cage where you pass it often. The little heads will pop up every time they hear you come near. Feed a few mouthfuls at a time. **Never** over feed.

(This is Mrs. Knaggs method of raising the Black Hooded Red Siskins. She has achieved great success with this method and has also achieved high respect among the members of the TOLEDO BIRD ASSOCIATION where she is both President and Show Secretary. She is also prominent in her promotion of zebra finches through her leadership in the Toledo Zebra Finch Club of America, Inc. I wish to thank her for her willingness to give her methods and assistance to aviculturists who are interested in preserving and breeding the Black Hooded Red Siskins. Ken Stubbart — Canary Editor)



Mrs. Lillian Knaggs hand feeding baby Black Hooded Red Siskins.

amount of sunflower meal which has been ground very fine. It can be purchased from the health food store. About three times a week, I sift the red cross grit and add a tiny bit of the fine siftings to the pudding. After every hand feeding, I always give each baby a drop

¹The Black Hooded Red Siskin is on the endangered Species List.

²Mrs. Knaggs has told me to be cautious about feeding too much poppy. She tells me that if they get it more than two to three times a week, or if they have a constant supply of poppy like they have niger seed, they tend to become sluggish. The poppy is the source of opium.

³CARROT PUDDING: Three (3) eggs beaten, one (1) 10-oz. can carrot juice (Ever Ready), ¼ cup wheat germ flakes, ¼ tablespoon sunflower oil, 1 tablespoon honey, ¼ teaspoon salt, ½ teaspoon Brewers Yeast. Heat just to boiling. Remove. Add one (1) cup Instant Cream of Wheat or Cream or Rice (or ½ cup of each), one (1) tablespoon unflavored gelatin. Soften in ¼ cup cold water. Refrigerate. Give each bird a small piece — whatever it can eat in two hours. Remove any left at night as it sours quickly. I wrap and freeze this in just the amount required for one feeding. It is removed from the freezer at night and stored in the refrigerator. When the young siskins are on their own, I add one (1) tablespoon Flamen Oil to the mixture and feed it every day through the moult. It is fine for all canaries, with or without the flamen oil.

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