

The Black-hooded Red Siskin

an endangered species

(An interview with Patricia Demko)

by Herschel Frey

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Recently Herschel Frey interviewed fellow Pittsburgher, Pat Demko, a long-time successful breeder and exhibitor of canaries and siskins. In 1980 Pat received a Silver A.F.A. AVY Award for outstanding achievement in exhibiting color-bred canaries. She has, in fact, won three Kellogg Awards and many best-in-show awards with both her canaries and her siskins.

Pat is one of but a handful of American aviculturists with an ongoing breeding program for the Venezuelan red siskin (*Spinus cucullatus*). This small, finch-like bird, which inhabits the semi-arid scrub country of Venezuela, is quite rare in that country and has been placed on the Endangered Species list. If its numbers in captivity are to increase, it will only be through the efforts of such capable and dedicated fanciers as Pat Demko. Her commitment to this goal is clearly demonstrated in what she has to say below.

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Herschel: *Pat, why is it, do you think, that mostly canary breeders get into siskins, and what, in particular, attracted you to this bird?*

Pat: I think some canary breeders get into them, initially, because they intend to run them into their canaries, crossbreed them, produce hybrids, in order to increase depth of color. Then they find out that canaries are now as deep in color as we are going to get them, and there's no point in breeding these hybrids, that they will be smaller and with more variegation. Currently there are few breeders of the Venezuelan siskin with more than one or two pair, but in general they are becoming a lot more serious about producing pure siskins. I haven't had any inquiries in years from people who want a male, for example, to use with canaries — people are seeking pairs or trios, and this is a hopeful development.

I saw my first siskins at a bird show in Ohio in 1974 and I was immediately "hooked". They are beautiful and have a fine song.

Herschel: *Would you say that we have a large enough genetic pool of these birds in this country to insure hardy, sustainable future generations?*

Pat: No, probably not. Ideally, we need to acquire some wild-caught

birds to introduce into the domestic supply. Some groups in Venezuela have become quite concerned about the growing scarcity of their siskin and have begun to think about possible ways to insure its survival. I don't think we can count on other countries as a source of new bloodlines. But the siskin is not really as delicate or touchy as many people think. This year I'm breeding from 1980 and 1981 hens, in addition to younger ones, and I'm convinced that if enough of us make a real effort to firmly establish this siskin in the U.S., we can do so.

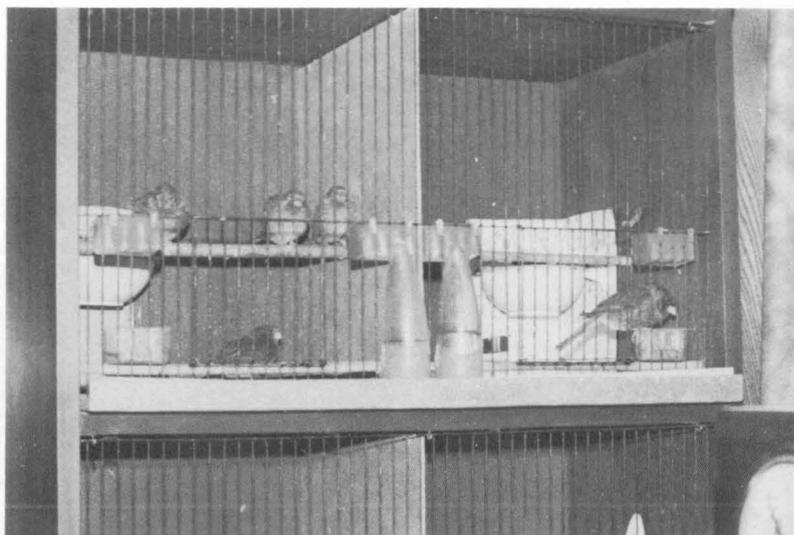
Herschel: *What, in your experience, are the best housing arrangements? Are they particularly aggressive? Can you mix them with other birds?*

Pat: I've never kept them with other birds, except canaries. They are more aggressive than a canary, both the males and the females. They're pretty rugged for their size. If there's any fighting, it's usually the siskin that initiates the altercation. And naturally there's more squabbling during the breeding season. Since you can't keep two males together during this time, the breeder must have a sufficient number of cages.

I keep them in a 10' flight when they're not breeding. It converts into five breeding cages. Until January or February they are kept together, with little bickering.

Herschel: *Tell me about diet. Are there any particular problems or requirements for their diet?*

Pat: I feed the ABBA European Finch-Siskin Diet (1800), but I reduce the percentage of thistle content by adding other seeds. Many people lose their siskins or otherwise have problems because their birds eat too much thistle. They love it so much that they will favor it almost to the exclusion of any other, and inevitably you get liver complications. They can go light in short order and you're quickly in deep trouble. So I strongly recommend that you carefully regulate the diet. I accomplish this by not refilling the seed dish until it is almost empty. This way I can get them to eat enough millet and canary seed, instead of too much thistle. Starting with the young birds, mostly hand-fed and good eaters, I limit them to around 20 percent thistle. They also get rape, steel-cut oats, soaked seed (rinsed and drained), and ABBA nesting food — no. 92 for non-colorbred. They also get greens every day, usually mustard, to bring out color, since it is high in vitamin A. I've not seen a wild-caught male, but



Pat Demko's breeding cages for her siskins.

they likely don't lose much color in captivity. And they get plenty of grit, cuttlebone, and chicken eggshell. I start eggfood in December, in small quantities, gradually increasing to a treatcup full per pair. Once the hen is incubating they only get plain seed and water. I add a little Vionate vitamins to their food and I prepare a mix for the fledglings once they are eating on their own: ground hulled sunflower, high protein baby powder, and sunflower meal.

Herschel: *Do you vary the diet to bring them into breeding condition?*

Pat: Yes, a little bit, they begin to get eggfood. But it's mostly the temperature and the number of light hours that control the cycle. The temperature can rise to above 100° in the summer; in fact, it never falls below 80° even in the winter. But siskins seem to thrive in these high temperatures. I've never seen them pant or hold their wings out. In fact, the warmer it gets, the more active they become. From a low of 9 hours I increase gradually to 14 hours of light.

Herschel: *Ok, now tell me about the breeding procedure.*

Pat: Well, when early winter rolls around I set up the males into the individual breeding cages, measuring about 23" wide, 20" deep and 20" high. Solid partitions divide the cages, so that the only birds the breeders can see are those that are across and at some distance from the pairs I have set up. The males can be separated into these individual cages for as long as a month before they are given a hen. This seems to conserve their energy for the nesting process. All the while, during this waiting period, the males constantly sing, and this incites the females to come into condition.

Herschel: *Have you tried the "natural selection" method for pairing, or do you arrange marriages because of bloodline considerations?*

Pat: No, I have always paired the birds the way I think best, and with no problem of low fertility. At some point, however, I would like to set up a planted room with several pairs. If they're not crowded I don't think there would be too much fighting.

Herschel: *What kind of nests do you use?*

Pat: Regardless of their cage, siskins like to be high up. I place the nests so high in the cage that there's little space between the sitting hen and the top of the cage. They'll select a seed dish instead, if you place the nest too low. The cages are designed with an access door



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