

CONSERVATION COMMITTEE ACTION

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Venezuelan Black Hooded Red Siskin on the Brink

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Among other matters currently being considered by the AFA Conservation Committee, plans are being conceived to help ensure improved breeding success and more conscientious management of the Venezuelan black hooded red siskin (*Carduelis cucullata*) in captivity. The information presented here is intended to sharpen the awareness of readers, particularly those maintaining the species in their collections, as to the extreme vulnerability of the red siskin at the present time. A concerted effort on the part of aviculturists to develop and maintain a long-term,

self-sustaining captive population of red siskins would certainly go a long way toward relieving pressures currently being placed on the few remaining wild populations. Without some sort of relief, the red siskin lies in imminent danger of extinction.

The current status of the red siskin in the wild must be considered extremely critical, probably numbering as few as 600 to 800 individuals. Formerly, the species enjoyed a rather abundant, continuous natural distribution across the northern portion of Venezuela and northeastern Colombia, as well as iso-

lated populations on the islands of Gasparee, Monos, and Trinidad. In addition to these, populations were established on Puerto Rico and Cuba, probably as a result of introductions or aviary escapes. The red siskin is now extremely rare throughout its range, last being recorded on Monos in 1894, on Gasparee in 1921, in Colombia in 1947, and on Trinidad in 1960. Its current status in Cuba is unknown.

The few remaining wild populations of red siskins to be found in Venezuela are scattered in isolated pockets throughout the northwest and north

central cordillera regions, where they are semi-nomadic, utilizing a wide range of habitat types. Even within their few remaining havens in Venezuela, they have been reduced in numbers so dramatically that, ironically, it is likely that the largest remaining single population of wild red siskins is now the introduced population on the island of Puerto Rico.

When reading of similar declines in naturally occurring wild populations throughout the world, many reasons are frequently quoted as the probable cause for such declines. Rarely is the cause so obvious as in the case of the red siskin. The precipitous decline in wild populations of the red siskin has been directly attributed to its long-term exploitation by man, which, in turn, is linked to the species' long-standing popularity as a cagebird.

Despite full protection by law on both the domestic level (within Venezuela) and on the international level, the species continues to lose ground at the hands of this exploitation, which dates back to the early 1800s.

The species was first described to science by Swainson in 1820, and although it was unknown to the European cagebird trade during the 1800s, it was already being exported to the Canary Islands where it was soon to be hybridized with the canary. By the early 1900s it was commonly being hybridized with canaries in many countries, which led to the demonstration in 1928, that through these crosses, the long sought-after "red factor" could be introduced into the domestic canary stock. These hybrids were not only colorful but retained the canary's size and song which placed them in great demand among canary fanciers.

In the early decades of the 1900s, interest in cagebirds grew as did the international trade in exotic birds. As a result of the United States and many of the European countries enacting laws prohibiting capture and trade of native species of birds, interest was generated in the canary and its many varieties. Red factor canaries became especially popular, and because the red siskin was the only vehicle by which the red factor could be introduced, the demand for it skyrocketed. Unfortunately, at that time, the red siskin was not protected by law.

As demand grew in the international market, their price rose abruptly, suddenly making them a lucrative target for bird trappers. Because of the species' rather limited geographical range and

the predictability of its movements within that range, it was an easy target. The most commonly used method of trapping involved the use of a caged siskin, known as the "pitador," whose purpose was to attract wild siskins with its calls. Around the caged pitador, perches, coated with sticky Ficus sap were arranged so that wild birds, responding to the calls of the pitador, would become stuck to the perches and hence be collected by the trappers. Many thousands of birds were collected in this manner, the majority of which died before ever reaching foreign markets.

In the early decades of the 1900s, the red siskin was afforded some protection by the simple fact that the areas in which it is found, particularly its breeding grounds in the higher elevations, were largely inaccessible. Trappers were unable to collect from the beginning of the rainy season in March until after the breeding season in July. More recently, new roads into these areas allow trappers, equipped with all-terrain vehicles, to follow the movements of the bird and collect virtually all year long. Even though the species is now so scarce that it cannot be collected in large numbers, the high price that they command continues to make them a highly sought-after prize.

It wasn't until the early 1940s that the first steps were taken to afford the red siskin protection by law. It was during this period that Venezuelan ornithologists William Phelps, Sr. and Jr., became aware of the red siskin's increasing rarity and of its persecution at the hands of the bird trappers. It was largely because of their efforts that the wheels were set in motion, resulting in a series of laws designed to protect the red siskin.

1944-1947—The Venezuelan Ministerio de Agricultura y Cria (MAC) adopted resolutions prohibiting sale and export of the red siskin, making it the first species ever to be protected by Venezuelan law.

1952—The International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) included the red siskin on its endangered species list.

1975—The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES) added the red siskin to its Appendix I, list of endangered species on July 1, 1975. CITES took effect for signatory parties in 1977.

1976—The United States listed the red siskin as endangered under the United

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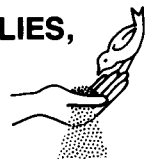
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States Endangered Species Act.

1979—The International Council for Bird Preservation (ICBP), in conjunction with the IUCN included the red siskin in the second edition of the Aves volume of the Red Data Book.

Prior to the enactment of such protective legislation, it is easy to understand how the commerce in red siskins could have continued, unchecked, resulting in severe population declines. However, even now, their numbers continue to drop at an alarming rate. Protection for the species within Venezuela has not succeeded to a large extent because of the government's inability to police the remote areas in which the illegal trapping takes place. Stimulus for this continued trapping comes, for the most part, not from the domestic Venezuelan market, but from the international market.

Protection offered the red siskin by CITES is somewhat limited. As you may well know, CITES protects endangered species only as far as international trade and transport is concerned. Within a country's boundaries or between a country's territories, endangered species are subject only to the internal law of that country. Most important of all, CITES applies only to *signatory* parties.

The red siskin's most serious remaining threat comes from the Netherlands, a country that neither conforms to CITES nor has any laws regulating the internal trade in red siskins.

Just off the coast of Venezuela lies the island of Curacao, a colony of the Netherlands. Curacao provides a convenient outlet for birds illegally trapped in Venezuela and smuggled out of the country by boat or plane. Once the smuggled siskins reach Curacao, they can "legally" be shipped from there to the Netherlands where they are utilized to produce red factor canaries. Commercial canary breeding is big business in the Netherlands and the market for the red siskin there is still so active that it eagerly accepts every single individual that the smugglers can provide.

This intense demand for the red siskin in the Netherlands combined with the Venezuelan government's inability to control the trapping and smuggling does not paint a promising picture for the species' long-term survival. Indeed, King (1981) suggests that the pressure on the species is so severe that the population's rapid decline is "unlikely to be changed until the last bird has been trapped."

It is obvious that more dramatic measures must be taken to afford the red

siskin a reasonable chance for survival in the wild state. Coats, et. al, (1985) suggests the following: "1) Creation of one or more national parks or protected nature reserves (in Venezuela), of size and location such that the total area used by a population throughout the year is protected, . . . 2) Further studies especially radiotelemetric, are needed to provide more precise information on daily and seasonal movements of local populations, . . . 3) Efforts in Venezuela to raise public concern and enlist support for protection of endangered native fauna should be continued and expanded, . . . 4) The cooperation of the Netherlands government and its participation in CITES must be sought. . ."

Concerning the introduced Puerto Rican population Raffaele (1983) suggests the following: "Based on the threat to this species, consideration should be given to declaring its range in Puerto Rico as critical habitat under the United States Endangered Species Act. Additionally, because the population in Puerto Rico may well represent the largest remaining pool of these birds in the wild, further investigations into the status of the species and the possibility of reintroducing the bird into well protected habitats in its native lands should be evaluated."

It remains to be seen how many of these measures, aimed at the protection of the remaining wild populations of red siskins, will materialize and what road must be followed to see them come to pass. However, the road to be followed by aviculturists in managing captive red siskins is overwhelmingly clear. The practice of hybridizing the red siskin with the domestic canary must stop and we must take the necessary steps to census all the red siskins currently being held in captivity. With this information as a basis, we must follow up by formulating a plan for their long-range management.

Methods used to successfully propagate the red siskin in captivity have been documented (Frey, 1985). Furthermore, the censusing process has already taken shape (Amos, 1986). The time is now for those persons maintaining the red siskin in their collections to act. Take part in the census. Take steps to ensure better breeding success. Commit yourself to a long-term propagation program, and, above all, keep this in mind. This colorful gem, which has graced our aviaries for so long, is in grave danger of being lost forever. Prompt, responsible action on the part of aviculturists could play a critical role

in retrieving the species from the very brink of extinction.

The AFA, through its conservation committee, is forming a "breeding consortium" for the red siskin. The goal of this project is to firmly establish this species as a long-term, self-sustaining population in captivity. Certainly Ed's article highlights the critical need for our immediate action. Among the consortium's initial objectives are:

1. to establish a reliable estimate of the number of specimens currently in north American collections.

2. to improve genetic diversity in the existing captive population through the exchange of stock among breeders.

3. to enhance management techniques for breeding this species in order to increase their captive numbers to a "safe" level.

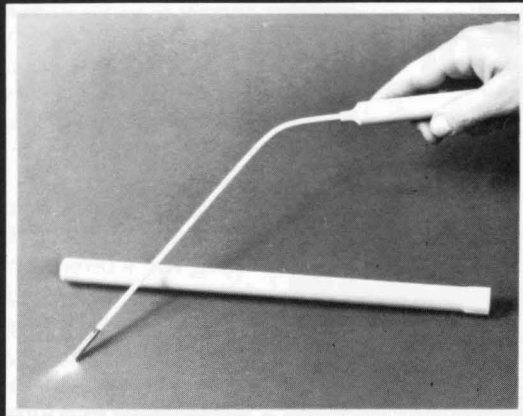
4. to encourage breeding a portion of these birds in enriched environments (planted aviaries vs. cages) to help ensure that they retain their "wild characteristics" should a release program ever become a future potential.

Certainly to see a bird that has contributed much to aviculture become extinct would be a tragedy. If you currently maintain this species or know of breeders who would be willing to support this effort, please contact the AFA Conservation Committee immediately. These birds need our help. The Conservation Committee needs you! Robert J. Berry, Curator, Department of Ornithology, Houston Zoological Gardens, 1513 Outer Belt Drive, Houston, TX 77030.

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