

Red Siskin Project

Conservation Pilot Program for CITES Appendix I Birds

by Kevin M. Gorman, Chair
AFA Conservation Committee and
AFA Red Siskin Project
Rochester, New York

Introduction

The AFA Red Siskin Project has made great strides in 1990, thanks to the financial and moral support of you, the AFA members. We have worked toward several avenues of growth. We have streamlined the program and structured the organization so that it would be attractive to persons who would like to participate, and at the same time we could maintain a certain degree of control over the transfers of the endangered siskins which we are stewarding.

Since the Red Siskin (*Spinus cucullatus*) is a species which is on CITES Appendix I and on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Endangered Species List, there are certain controls which both state and federal governments put on the transactions of this species. The AFA Red Siskin Project is a program which will serve as a pilot program for other endangered bird species. Once all the groundwork (i.e. program structure/strategies) and limitations (i.e. international trade, endangered species law requirements) are established with the Red Siskin Project, then the AFA can plug another CITES Appendix I species into the slot and have another program of similar nature. The following article will outline the 1990 accomplishments of the Red Siskin Project.

Publicity / Education

As with any volunteer program, there must be a certain amount of publicity and education of the public. Without this, no one will know about the program and new members and support will not be there for you. In 1990, several members of the Red Siskin Project wrote magazine articles to inform the public about the Red Siskin,^{1,2,3,4} and of the importance of careful breeding of endangered finches.⁵

In January of 1990, a monthly newsletter, "Siskin News," was initiated. The purpose of this newsletter is to inform members about the Red Siskin and the developments in the project. It is used as an education tool

to teach persons about the care and breeding of the Red Siskin, its natural history, laws involving endangered birds, shipping, diseases, etc. The newsletter helps to keep all members informed, on a regular basis, about siskin project news events and what other siskin breeders are doing. *Siskin News* gives members a forum for asking questions and receiving answers from their co-breeders. Most importantly, this newsletter keeps the project members focused on the common goals of the Red Siskin Project. Therefore, no one should feel alone once they receive AFA Red Siskins. To date, *Siskin News* has a circulation of 90 persons across the United States, Canada, Puerto Rico, West Indies, England and Italy. Another publicity tool was the design of a beautiful, colored pamphlet which explains the purpose and goals of the Red Siskin Project. This pamphlet contains information on how persons can support the program. The pamphlet was laid out and final artwork performed by M. Jean Hessler (graphic artist for *AFA Watchbird*). These pamphlets will be circulated to bird clubs across the United States in early 1991.

Ray Shaw of California generously donated his artwork to the AFA by designing the colorful Red Siskin Project t-shirts which were first unveiled at the August 1990 AFA convention. All of the monies received from t-shirt sales go directly into the Red Siskin Project account.

We had begun asking for endorsements from a few bird clubs across the U.S. in late 1990 and will continue asking for more widespread endorsements in 1991, when we can utilize the colored pamphlet. To date, three very influential bird clubs have given us their endorsements: The National Colorbred Association (NCA), the National Institute of Red Orange Canaries (NIROC), and the National Finch and Softbill Society (NFS).

Federal Permits Not Required

The Red Siskin is an endangered

species and, therefore, regulated by the U.S. government. This very fact inhibited the early stages of the project because no one knew exactly which transactions could be lawfully performed with the Red Siskin, and which permits, if any, were required for these transactions.

In April of 1990, the Red Siskin Project chairman drafted a questionnaire for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Office of Management Authority (USFW OMA). This questionnaire asked for specific answers to our questions about which permits were required for transactions performed within the Red Siskin Project. Shortly thereafter, we received written documentation from the chief of USFW OMA stating which transactions needed permits. The following information summarizes that letter: If Red Siskins (i.e. endangered species) are transported across state lines in association with transactions that are NON commercial (i.e. money is NOT involved, such as trades, breeder loans, or donations) then no permits are required by the federal government. The reason is that these transactions are not performed for commercial gain, but are for the purpose of propagating and preserving the endangered Red Siskin. However, the person donating or loaning the siskins must give the AFA a signed affidavit stating that the birds were raised by them, or were legally obtained from another breeder.

However, if a CITES Appendix I (endangered) species is transported across state lines in association with a commercial (money) transaction, then one of the following are required: Captive-bred Wildlife Registration or a Federal Endangered Species Permit. A Captive-bred Wildlife Registration (CBWR) is purchased for \$25 from the USFW OMA. This registration is good for a two year renewable term. The holder of a CBWR can only buy and sell birds with other CBWR holders who are registered for the same species (i.e. Red Siskin). The Federal Endangered Species Permit (ESP) is obtained only for single transactions with endangered species. The

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ESP is also \$25 each time you apply. Applications for both the CBWR and the ESP can be obtained by writing The USFW OMA at 4401 North Fairfax Drive, Room 432, Arlington, VA 22203, phone (703) 358-2104.

The Red Siskin Project is able to perform interstate transactions with Red Siskins *without* requiring any federal permits as long as all transactions are non-commercial and no money changes hands. The fact that federal permits are not required by persons participating in the Red Siskin Project gives us the ability to freely transport siskins all over the United States. However, transactions are limited *only* to bona fide breeder loans, trades and donations. This is why it is essential that persons donate siskins, or give siskins as breeder loans to the project. These three methods are the only ways we can legally bring new Red Siskins into the project.

The only other method of obtaining new siskins for the project would be to have a bird club raise money and purchase siskins from a siskin breeder who is in the same state, and subsequently donating these purchased siskins to the AFA Red Siskin Project. This exact thing was done in 1989! The Missouri Cage-Bird Association purchased a pair of Red Siskins for the Red Siskin Project in 1989 when the project was in its infancy and Paddy Lambert was named as the keeper of these birds (The Missouri Cage-Bird Association has been supporting us for a couple of years now. Thank you all, you kind-hearted MCBA people!).

Red Siskin Project Structure

The Red Siskin Project is run by a management committee headed by a chairperson. There are also several advisors and consultants who give us valuable information on a variety of topics.

The core program is based around the "Consortium Breeders" Consortium Breeders raise Red Siskins for the AFA Red Siskin Project. These breeders receive siskins from the AFA, free of charge, and breed birds for distribution to other Consortium Breeders within the project. All birds in the project are registered with the siskin project studbook keeper and entered into a population management program called "SPARKS." The studbook keeper gives input as to which birds to pair with the goal of maintaining a genetically diverse

captive population of endangered siskins. This population can then serve as a captive "reservoir" to ensure the species' survival in the event that they are extirpated from the wild.

"Associated Consortium Breeders" are persons who own their own flock of siskins, and who pledge a percentage of their offspring to the Red Siskin Project on an annual basis. These persons are valuable as they are experienced siskin breeders who can provide a constant influx of siskins into the program. Non-cash transactions (breeder loans, trades and donations) are used to infuse unrelated bloodlines into the project.

Consultations in 1990

Ed Diebold (past Red Siskin Project chairman) met with two population geneticists, Carter Denniston, Ph.D.; and Jim Crow, Ph.D., both from the University of Wisconsin at Madison. These two gentlemen were willing to help guide us toward a breeding scheme which will attempt to maintain at least 90% of the project's siskin population's genetic diversity over a 50 year period in captivity.

The Siskin Project Chairman has met with George Gee, Ph.D. of the USFW Endangered Species Breeding Program at Patuxant National Wildlife Refuge. He is involved with the Whooping Crane and Masked Bobwhite Quail breeding programs, to name a few. Dr. Gee gave us several tips including surface disinfecting eggs to prevent the spread of avian diseases.

We have contacted Sadie Coates who performed the 1982 field studies in Venezuela on the Red Siskin and who authored several articles on its activities in the wild;^{6,7} and Herbert Raffaele, who studied the siskin in Puerto Rico and wrote an article on its status.⁸ Both have indicated an interest in helping us create contacts in Venezuela and in Puerto Rico.

Health Checks

Any time birds change hands across the country, there is always a chance of disease transmission. This is why we feel we should certify the birds are clean before and after they leave the breeder. This way, we will avoid the spread of avian diseases to facilities within the project.

We are currently testing siskins before and after shipping within the project to assure that birds are free from disease. We are aiming to estab-

lish a disease-free population of siskins to better ensure the survival of this captive-bred population. We are experimenting with procedures such as shipping surface-disinfected eggs, rather than birds, as another method of maintaining a clean flock.

Planned Studies

A study is planned to determine how related individual siskins (within the project) are through DNA (genetic) fingerprinting. This would be done by extracting DNA from a toenail blood sample. This method could be used to identify the parents of offspring born to a flock of siskins in a planted aviary. This procedure may also be extended to identify the extent of genetic diversity which exists in the wild populations of Venezuela and Puerto Rico.

To carry this further, we would like to perform DNA fingerprinting on the birds' mitochondrial DNA. We are interested in having only pure Red Siskins in the project. We would like to identify siskin hybrids at the genetic level. There is always the possibility that a bird might physically look like a Red Siskin when, in reality, it is a genetic hybrid between a Red Siskin and another bird species. For example, there has been quite a number of persons who have bred the Red Siskin (*Spinus cucullatus*) with the Green Siskin (*Spinus megalanicus*). All of the offspring are fertile and can be bred back into the Red Siskin. The final result might be a hybrid which physically looks like a pure Red Siskin, but which would be "contaminated" with Green Siskin genes. Mitochondrial DNA is passed down *only from the female*. So if a male Red Siskin was bred to a female Green Siskin, then mitochondrial DNA fingerprinting should identify any Red x Green Siskin hybrids in any subsequent generation (but only if future matings occur using the female hybrids).

Song and call note variations exist in the captive Red Siskin population. The original wild Venezuelan Red Siskins exist in isolated pockets across northern Venezuela. Sadie Coates indicated that these groups each have different call notes. We have acquired a tape of a wild Venezuelan Red Siskin from the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology and will use this and other wild siskin tapes to tutor all Red Siskin Project offspring so that the young birds will acquire the wild song patterns. By comparing existing

song patterns of the captive siskins in the project, with wild song patterns from several areas in Venezuela, we may possibly identify which area they originated from in the wild. We may, minimally, try to see if song patterns can also be used to identify relatedness, or breeder origin, in siskins within the Red Siskin Project.

We would like to continue working with various scientists and ornithologists and must establish ties to the Venezuelan authorities so they can continue to develop strategies to protect the wild Red Siskin from smuggling for the pet trade, and to ensure that there will be suitable habitat needed for the survival of this species. We must also identify methods of releasing captive-bred Red Siskins back into Venezuela so that they can be reestablished in the event that smuggling is eliminated.

Siskins Donated in Fall, 1990

The largest number of transfers of Red Siskins into the project, to date, occurred in the fall of 1990. The following persons donated siskins to the Red Siskin Project (number in parenthesis indicates number of birds donated). Frank Avoledo, CA (3); Joe Witt, CA (3); Paddy Lambert, MO (3); Robert Allen Dyer, NC (2); Anonymous, MI (1).

In addition to the 12 donations received by the Red Siskin Project, three additional siskins were obtained (from Robert Dyer) in exchange for an equal value of AFA canaries. There are



Photos by Kevin M. Gorman

Green Siskin male (Spinus megallanicus). Green Siskins have been hybridized with Red Siskins by some breeders in the U.S. and Europe. The resulting hybrids can ruin a pure blooded Red Siskin population if they are bred back into the Red Siskins.

a total of approximately 100 birds in the Red Siskin Project to date.

All of the above persons were very helpful in assuring transport of their donated birds to the proper (consortium breeder) recipient. In many cases, the persons involved with these transfers went out of their way to minimize shipping costs to the project by directly transferring birds themselves and, in some cases, absorbed the cost of shipping. We appreciate the efforts and cost savings

made by all the persons involved with these siskin transactions.

Reaction From a Consortium Breeder Who Received AFA Siskins in Fall 1990

November 18, 1990

"Every so often in life an event will occur which you feel so strong about that you find yourself making a statement pertaining to it. Before I decided to join the AFA, I had my misconceptions and reservations pertaining to joining another organization. In the last 12 years, I have been introduced to so many causes and beliefs. Every time, with the usual good intentions, but as with so many organizations, you find that no one will put forth a real effort into the cause. Inevitably, the organization would disburse without ever making a real contribution to the original belief.

"When I decided to become affiliated with the AFA Red Siskin Project, I wondered if the potential goals were possible. Could people across the United States pool together nationwide and make one united donation to the comeback of this siskin? Would all volunteers believe enough in the project to put forth a real effort for successful rearing of disease-free babies?

"Each person must decide whether your individual efforts help to bring about success in saving the siskin, or hinder in its comeback. An individual



Red Siskin male (Spinus cucullatus)



The Watchbird offers free publicity for member club bird shows by announcing the dates and locations of the shows. To have your show listed it is necessary to get the data to the Watchbird four to five months before the show date. For example, if your show takes place the first week of October, it should be listed in the August/September issue. The deadline for that issue is June 1st. (Copy/article deadline is two months preceding publication date.)

**Bird Clubs of Virginia
7th Annual Convention & Bird Mart
April 12 - 14, 1991**

Sheraton Inn on the oceanfront
Virginia Beach, Virginia
For information contact:
Charlie Zoby (804) 480-3039
or
Dick Ivy (804) 898-5090
P.O. Box 2005
Yorktown, VA 23692

**Tennessee Valley Caged Bird Club
Annual Exotic Bird Fair
April 13 & 14, 1991**

Knoxville Convention Center
World's Fair Park
Knoxville, Tennessee
For more information contact:
Gary Reid, Fair Chairman
P.O. Box 51425
Knoxville, TN 37950-1425
(615) 690-0613

**National Capital Bird Club
presents its
Annual Bird Mart
April 20, 1991**

Contact:
Neil or Linda Elkins
9920 Green Valley Road
Union Bridge, MD 21791
(301) 898-5965

**Third Annual Bird Fair
sponsored by
Raleigh-Durham
Caged Bird Society
May 18, 1991**

10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.
Wake County Commons Building
Wake County Office
Park, Poole Rd., Raleigh, NC
For more information, contact:
RDCBS, P.O. Box 32291,
Raleigh, NC 27622 or call
Ralph Daniels (919) 790-1075

**Arizona Seedcracker Society
presents its
Birdmart
May 19, 1991**

Mesa Elks Lodge
9:00 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.
For more information, contact
Michael Ferguson (602) 934-3955

**Middle Tennessee Cage Bird Club
is hosting its annual
Spring Bird Affair
May 25-26, 1991**

Executive Plaza Inn
823 Murfreesboro Road
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**New England Finch Fancier
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and Bird Mart
June 1, 1991**

Sturbridge, MA
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23 Beacon Hill Road
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**Central Indiana Cage Bird Club
sponsors its
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June 8 & 9, 1991**

Exposition Hall
Marion County Fairgrounds
7300 E. Troy Avenue
Indianapolis, Indiana 46239
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or Mike McGinnis (317) 783-3592

**Central Alabama Avicultural Society
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**Motor City Bird Breeders
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St. Stephen's Hall
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Kathy Frank
19400 MacArthur, Redford, MI 48240
Phone (313) 538-6598

finally makes the decision based on the assumption that they just might possibly have some amount of knowledge and experience to offer this project.

"After becoming acquainted with the AFA Red Siskin project, I personally have found that all my fears and reservations became almost a paradox. When talking with Kevin, I found myself amazed at the devotion and dedication he put forth into this project. After working with other members of the project, again, I was amazed at how far they would go to work with me.

"I am associated with the breeding of finches, but was totally unfamiliar with the Red Siskin. After meeting the Red Siskin for the first time, I found that their pictures really did not do them justice! In real life they are so beautiful — so red — no, not just red but brilliant hues of red, all blending throughout the entire body. Such severe, detailed and defined markings on the face and wing. My first thought upon seeing them was just how much they made a Lady Gouldian Finch look almost amateur and dull. Another realization I found pertained to their personality. Being such a small bird, I was under the assumption that there really was no personality or definite characteristics. I could not have been more wrong!

"Now that I have met and studied this remarkable bird, it is so easy for me to see why the need is so strong to save them from extinction. These birds have become so burrowed into my heart, I find myself wondering what more can I do to help them? My only idea was to call attention to the remarkable work that everyone affiliated with the AFA Red Siskin Project is doing. I would like to give a very special thank you to Paddy Lambert from St. Louis, the anonymous siskin donor from Michigan, and Rainer Erhart from Kalamazoo. Through the pooling and efforts of these people, I have been lucky enough to receive AFA Red Siskins. Now I can find out, first hand, how important this turn around is for the Red Siskin. I only hope that my efforts and devotion to this organization will, in some way, say thank you to them. Sincerely, Malinda Fitzgerald Kidd, Kidds Kradle, Green Bay, Wisconsin."

Red Siskin Project Membership

The project is growing at a fairly steady rate. Our biggest challenge continues to be locating persons who

have their own flocks of siskins and who would like to donate a pair or so to the project. The numbers of birds that we have are still from a limited number of sources. In order to reach the goal of being able to have a viable, genetically diverse population, we still need many unrelated bloodlines to be represented in the project.

Management committee:

Kevin Gorman, Rochester, NY (chairman)
Steve Amos, Glover, VT
Lindsay Clack, Dir. Pittsburgh Aviary, PA
Virginia Baker, Dallas, TX
Val Clear, Anderson, IN
Ed Diebold, Milwaukee County Zoo, WI
Steve Fowler, Cornville, AZ
Malinda Fitzgerald Kidd, Green Bay, WI

Studbook keeper:

Orland Baker, Dallas, TX

Consultants:

Robert Allen Dyer, Winston-Salem, NC
Rainer Erhart, Kalamazoo, MI
Alberto Berrios, Tampa, FL
Rochelle Plasse, Houston Zoo, TX
Linda Sun, Riverside, CA

Consortium breeders:

Tony Menendez, Dearing, GA
Malinda Kidd, Green Bay, WI
Lynn Page, Thousand Oaks, CA
Theresa Brown, Mt. Juliet, TN
Kent Hylton, Oregon City, OR
Richard Sisler, Mendota, IL
Milwaukee County Zoo, WI
Gail Colewell, Las Cruces, NM
Michelle/Don Rietz, Phoenix, AZ
Linda/Lee Carangi, Buxton, NC
Tony Munoz, Toms River, NJ
John Friedel, East Meadow, NY
Eleanor Adams, Winslow, AR

Associated consortium breeders:

Joan Callum Kinser, Bent Mt., VA
Paddy Lambert, St. Louis, MO
Joe Witt, Orange, CA
Kevin Gorman, Rochester, NY
Val Clear, Anderson, IN
Steve Fowler/Laurel Croft, AZ
Rainer Erhart, Kalamazoo, MI
Virginia Baker, Dallas, TX
Bob Metheny, Burlestone, TX

To date, we have a total of 22 breeders participating in the Red Siskin Project. They are representative aviculturists from 18 different states!

Summary

The Red Siskin Project has accomplished many tasks and has made some very large strides in 1990. We hope to accomplish many more goals in the coming years (for example, obtaining siskins from other countries). Most breeders listed above joined the project in 1990, and we continue to add both siskins and participants to the list on a monthly basis. 1991 will be the first breeding season where we have had a substan-

tial population of birds and we hope that our members have good luck with reproducing this endangered bird.

We still have a long way to go with the project. We are in desperate need of more persons to make tax-deductible donations of Red Siskins from their own flocks. We need to receive more birds of unrelated bloodlines to enrich the genetic diversity of our current siskin project population. We thank all of you for your past support and donations, and we hope you will continue with your support of this program.

This pilot program will not only help the Red Siskin, but will also help the American Federation of Aviculture establish a niche in the arena of breeding endangered species. This program is serving as the "ice breaker" for the private aviculturist to show that they too can contribute to saving endangered species by participating in well organized breeding programs.

This project has the potential to prove that the AFA and private aviculturists are an invaluable resource for saving endangered species. Together, as private aviculturists, we could potentially make just as much (or more) impact on saving endangered bird species as the existing endangered species breeding programs sponsored by zoos and the government.

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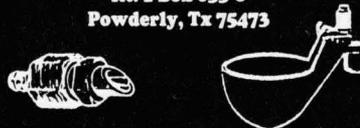
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