

# AFA Red Siskin Project

## Conservation Breeding Program for a CITES Appendix I Bird

by Kevin M. Gorman, Chairman,  
AFA Conservation Committee

### Introduction

For those of you who are familiar with the Red Siskin (*Spinus cucullatus*), you know how much this species has given to the colored canary world. For those of you who have never heard of the Red Siskin, it is a small, red, South American finch which is now struggling for its very existence.

The Red Siskin is only about 3.5 inches long (1/3 the size of a domestic canary). This bird was native to northern Venezuela, northeastern Colombia, and the islands of Trinidad, Monos, and Gasparee.

Its numbers in the wild have decreased dramatically due to trapping and export to foreign countries. In 1975, the Red Siskin was listed on CITES Appendix I; in 1976, it was given endangered status by the U.S. government "Endangered Species Act," and in 1979 it was listed in the ICBP red data book.

### Status in the Wild

The only study on the wild Red

Siskins in Venezuela was performed in 1981/1982 by Sadie Coats and Antonio Rivero Mendoza. This study was conducted to assess the population size, geographic distribution, and natural history of the wild Red Siskins found in northern Venezuela. This study was co-sponsored by The Sociedad Venezolana de Ciencias Naturales (SVCN), The Venezuelan Ministerio del Ambiente y de los Recursos Naturales Renovables (MARNR), and The Instituto Nacional de Hipodromos.

The numbers of wild siskins estimated to have remained in 1982 were between 600 to 800 birds. These Red Siskins were found in small, isolated groups. Several recommendations were given by these researchers, including "the creation of a Red Siskin reserve in the central part of the Serrania del Interior of the Cordillara de la Costa," training of rangers to identify these birds to prevent trapping, and increased public education and awareness: "without public support in the long run, all other measures will be futile."

### How Has Aviculture Destroyed the Siskin?

It was discovered in the early 1900s that when the Red Siskin male was mated to a female canary, some of the male offspring were fertile. When fertile "F1" hybrids were mated back to canaries, the resulting offspring were orange canaries. These "orange canaries" became very popular and, as a result, the demand for wild-caught Red Siskins increased.

There are currently hundreds of thousands of red-orange canaries in the world, and many are perfect show specimens. Many of these red-orange canaries have a rich, deep orange color, and perfect size, conformation and *no* variegation. No canary will ever be as red as a siskin unless fed a diet containing canthaxanthin based carotinoids. The commercial market specializing in canthaxanthin-based coloring agents has evolved because breeders have never been able to (naturally) reproduce the red color of the siskins in their canaries.

Anyone who has ever experimented with hybridizing Red Siskins

to red-orange canaries with the goal of producing a naturally colored "red" canary will know that this is an impossible task. The first few generations of hybrid offspring might be a deep copper to orange color, but the color intensity is lost rapidly with each new generation. By the time a breeder obtains a perfect show specimen, so many siskin genes will have been lost that the breeder may as well have started with rich colored red-orange show canaries. Hybridizing with siskins only diminishes size, ruins conformation, and introduces variegation; all of these are bad traits to breed into a show quality red-orange canary strain.

Hybridizing endangered Red Siskins to make "dead end" hybrids can do nothing but steal precious genes from an already small population of endangered birds. If hybrids which look like pure Red Siskins are mistakenly (or intentionally) bred back into Red Siskins, then foreign genes will be introduced into the Red Siskin population, ruining any attempts to maintain a true (pure) Red Siskin population.

### Avicultural Practices Aimed at Conservation

The American Federation of Aviculture (AFA) has spearheaded a breeding consortium for the Red Siskin called "The AFA Red Siskin Project." This bird was chosen because its decline in the wild is directly related to trapping for the cage bird industry. It seems ironic, but the very group who derived such benefits from the Red Siskin (canary breeders, and aviculturists as a whole) are the very reason why this bird might be completely eliminated from the wild in our lifetime.

The Red Siskin Project has several goals:

1) To maintain a long-term genetically diverse, captive-bred population of Red Siskins which will be carefully managed to serve as "seed stock" in the event that the siskin becomes extinct in the wild.

2) To work with contacts in Venezuela and Trinidad to establish protected habitat for the wild Red Siskins.

3) To reintroduce the siskin into protected areas in the wild where it has become locally extinct.

4) To perform scientific studies to identify song/call note variances, genetic variability, and other important research which will give us a better understanding of this species.

5) To act as a pilot program for the



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American Federation of Aviculture. This program deals with an endangered species. Many restrictions and laws are associated with the movement of endangered species across the United States, and this program will be a learning tool which will pave the way for many other AFA-sponsored breeding consortiums.

Currently, the Red Siskin Project has approximately 200 birds registered in the studbook. "Red Siskin Project breeders" consist of qualified private aviculturists and zoos, who are given pairs of "Red Siskin Project" siskins to breed. Each member is given an individualized contract to sign, depending on their situation, and then some or all of the offspring are placed back into the Red Siskin Project to maintain the population. Many dedicated aviculturists from across the United States participate, and all the Red Siskins are treated as if in a single population.

Individual breeders (who are not members of the Red Siskin Project) who have siskins are continually encouraged to donate birds to the program. Birds from the project are also traded with private individuals for unrelated siskins, or are given out as breeder loans. In the breeder loan case, 50% of the offspring is given back to the Red Siskin Project, and the other half is kept by the private breeder.

The Red Siskin Project newsletter *Siskin News* has a circulation of nearly 130. *Siskin News* is mailed to interested parties in the United States, Canada, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Trinidad, England, Australia and Italy.

We would like to encourage a dialogue between our Red Siskin Project and any other country who would be willing to set up a coordinated breeding program for the conservation of the Red Siskin. Currently, we are in the process of communicating with the Avicultural Association of Australia, who has a sister program called the "Hooded Siskin Programme."

For further information on the American Federation of Aviculture's Red Siskin Project contact: Kevin Gorman, AFA Conservation Chairman, 204 Conrad Drive, Rochester, NY 14616, phone (716) 865-6414.

For further information on Australia's efforts on saving the Red Siskin, contact: Richard Chilton, Chairman, Avicultural Federation of Australia's Red Hooded Siskin Conservation Programme, 284 Cross Road, Clarence Park, 5034, South Australia.

### Related Literature

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