

South American Finches

by Val Clear
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One of the best kept secrets of exotic aviculture is the finches of South America. They are numerous, varied, fascinating and challenging.

The definitive book on birds of South America by Dunning lists 87 species of finches, divided into three size groups. The smallest group includes the Jacarini (3" long) and the largest includes the Saltators and Grosbeaks (up to 7" long). Colors range from jet black to cardinal red and canary yellow. Seed is the modal portion of their diet, but many also

eat fruit and insects.

Probably the best known in North America is the Red Siskin (*Spinus cucullatus*). It has been bred by the thousands, mostly by canary fanciers who want its red genes, but there is now a consortium of AFA members raising Red Siskins for the purpose of re-stocking it in the wild. The *Watch-bird* has run several articles about this dazzling, tiny (4") bird, and, no doubt, will publish more.

Probably the next-best known South American finch is the Saffron Finch (*Sicalis flaveola*). The right pair will consistently turn out up to 15 young a year. Races from different parts of the continent differ considerably in shades of color, but they all have a crown and forehead orangish (saffron-colored) and the body yellow. In my experience, the Peruvian race is especially colorful, a pure canary yellow body, a black bill, a bright orange forehead and yellow wing feathers edged with olive.

My Saffrons breed freely in a cage 18" x 36" x 36", using a 4" x 4" plastic freezer box (for vegetables) with the front half open. Diet is basically seed, but especially when they are feeding babies they like eggfood, fruit and mealworms. I keep only one pair to a cage because the male can become assertive.

The third best known South American finch probably is the Blue-black Grassquit or Jacarini (*Volatinia jacarini*). This is a diminutive bird (about 3" long) that has several attractions. It is dimorphic in season; males take on a glistening blue-black plumage in breeding condition and females retain their drab brownish color with striped breast.

The male has a delightful nuptial dance. He picks the top twig of a 48" bush, then flies up about 36", does a somersault and returns to the perch, meanwhile singing madly. I have watched this courtship in the wild go on non-stop for an uninterrupted

half-hour at a time. The Spanish name describes him nicely: saltapalito (stick-jumper or pole vaulter).

My Jacarinis breed in an indoor planted aviary every December. They have retained their tie to the South American calendar, which has summer in January to March. A nest is built in an open, flat box the size of a cigar box, packed with dried grass. I put it on the floor where it is shielded with nearby plants about a foot high.

Two eggs are laid and usually both babies are raised, unless one of the larger birds chooses to have a live-food brunch. Young look like their mother until they are about four months old.

When I was asked to write this article I listed the species that I thought should be covered. There were 16, too many to be included in a single article. All 16 have been imported successfully and have been rewarding birds to keep in a mixed collection. I have to pare that list down to just a few more species to discuss.

My favorite on that list is the Parrot-billed Seedeater (*Sporophila peruviana*). It is a small brown bird but really quite colorful. Females are plain brown but the male has grayish brown upper parts, a noticeable light bar on the wing, a light spot at the wing elbow, a black throat and a black cummerbund. All of this is on a bird four inches long.

But the most striking feature is the hooked bill. The Spanish name is Pico Gueso (huge beak), and both names describe the bird well. It is not a psittacine (parrot-family) bird, of course. It really is close to one of Darwin's finches. But it can be described as a bird the size of a house wren with a parrot beak.

Evolution produced the Parrot-billed Seedeater by adapting it to feed on plants that require specialized harvesting utensils. This has continuing value for the bird; I find myself put-

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ting off catching one as long as I can. That beak is worse than a female budgie's when it finds your cuticle!

Lindsay Clack, Pittsburgh Aviary Director, has had good success raising the Chaco Finch (*Saltatricula multicolor*). This is an attractive, larger finch (about 6") from Argentina. It is basically brown, with black face, forehead and sides of the neck. Throat and belly are white and underparts are a rich cinnamon color. I think these are not now being imported but there may be aviary-produced specimens around.

Rather similar to the Chaco Finch is another that I find interesting, the Diuca Finch (*Diuca diuca*). It is more gray than the Chaco and has an eye ring. Undertail coverts are chestnut and the black tail has white tips on the outer feathers. The Bolivian and Peruvian species I have had have white wing patches. I never did succeed in breeding them and do not know anyone who has.

The Collared Warbling Finch (*Poo-spiza hispaniolensis*) is more beautiful than its word-description sounds. The male is in shades of gray, black and white. The female has a similar pattern but is more brownish. There is no problem sexing adults. The male has a black face with a white lower-lid. Sides are gray and underparts are white. There is a wide, black, breast band. The tail is black with white edges.

I have a self-sustaining colony of Collared Warbling Finches that has been in my atrium for about 15 years. I have no idea what generation they have reached, but it is several. I know when they have babies because the adults are waiting for me in the morning when I arrive with egg food and mealworms. At other times of the year they eat only seed. The male has a sweet song.

I mentioned the Red Siskin above. There are two other interesting Siskins, the Hooded and the Black.

The Hooded Siskin, sometimes referred to as the Green Siskin or the Black-headed Siskin (*Spinus magellanicus*), is common throughout most of South America. In flight, it always reminds me of a butterfly or of the U.S. Southern Mockingbird. It has a large yellow patch on the wing that gives the impression of fluttering when it flies. There is a bright yellow collar and rump, a less brilliant yellow on the back, black tail and wings, and some white on the underside of the wings. All siskins are accom-

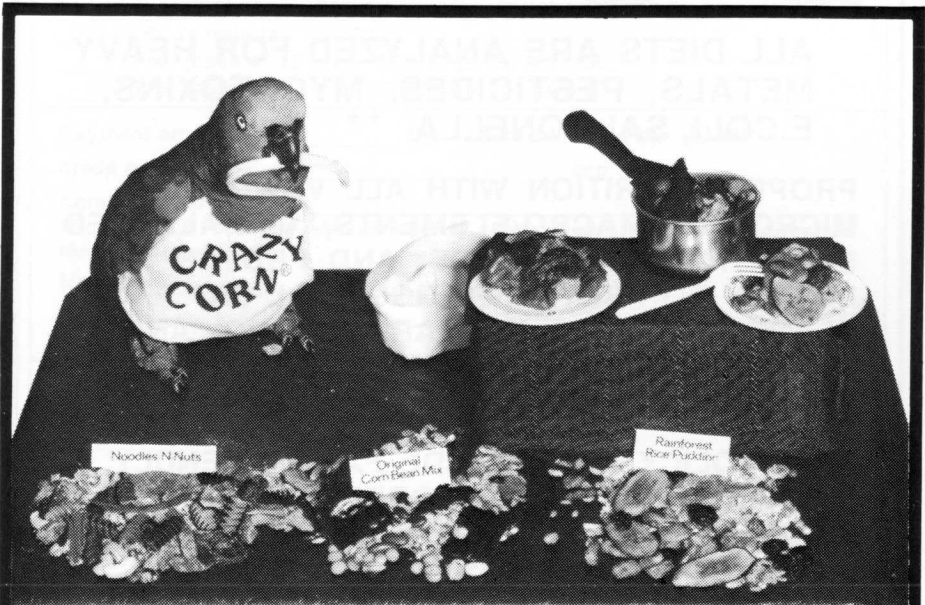
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plished acrobats, and the Hooded is no exception.

My favorite of the wild siskins is the Black Siskin (*Spinus atratus*). All the siskins are about three or four inches long, and the Hooded and Black are on the larger end of the scale. But when you say "Black Siskin," you do mean black! It is jet black all over except for a dramatic bright yellow wing patch that is quite obvious in flight, small yellow patches on the belly and base of the tail. Sexes are alike.

Both of these siskins have been imported for years but they do not do well in captivity and not many aviculturists have had consistent success in breeding them. I have always thought they could be maintained with proper husbandry if we knew what they needed to thrive, but I have never solved the mysteries.

When I was living in Peru, I studied the habits of these two species and found that they preferred a certain weed I found growing in sandy soil. I sent a sample of the seed to Kellogg's and Mr. Scannel (after whom the most prestigious award later was named) identified it as a kind of lambsworth, which is a weed in North America that farmers spend millions of dollars to eradicate.

After I returned to Indiana, I tried to grow lambsworth for my own use but had no success. As a weed it is irrepressible, but as a cultivated plant it fails. I also bought weed seed in Canada but the birds would not eat it. Somewhere, sometime, somebody will unravel this conundrum.

There is one other neglected bird that needs to have serious attention from exotic aviculturists, the Rufous-collared Sparrow (*Zonotrichia capensis*). This is about 5" long, a gray and white bird with a noticeable ruffled cape, almost as if he were wearing a burnt-orange scarf, looking a bit like a male Orange Weaver in color. He has a black crest that he erects when excited. The wing coverlets have white tips and there is a white stripe above the eye.

Television antennas were invented for the Rufous-collared Sparrow. The male prefers this stage from which he sings his frequently repeated aria, which consists of a high-pitched opening note followed by notes floating down-scale like a tumbling leaf in the gentle October breeze. The nearest song to it that I am aware of is the midwestern Meadowlark.

But of all the South American

finches, the most frequently pictured is probably the Red-crested Cardinal (*Paroaria coronata*). It is usually referred to as a Brazilian Red-crested Cardinal, but in actuality it ranges also into Bolivia and Argentina. There are several other South American Cardinals, including the Pope Cardinal (*P. dominicana*), which is similar to the Red-crested but lacks a crest.

However, the Red-crested Cardinal has the floor. Its permanently erect, brilliant red crest, face and chest demand attention, and the bird's demeanor displays abundant self-confidence. He knows he is beautiful! His back and tail are black, underparts white. Females tend to have less red, but visual sexing is unreliable.

Red-crested Cardinals are being bred successfully in North America. Young have brown faces rather than red but soon color up. I recently bought four babies about five months old and they are already half-red.

Breeding South American finches has been neglected by North American aviculturists. I do not understand this. They have all the beauty and glamour of African and Asiatic finches and could become as well domesticated as Australian finches before too long, but that is not happening.

About three years ago, I imported a shipment of Peruvian finches for Finchsavers and offered them at cost. The National Finch and Softbill Society graciously ran a full-page ad free and I advertised in other magazines. I sold only a few of them. The lack of interest explains the infrequency of South American finch imports. And perhaps that is not only effect but also cause: the infrequency of import leads to a lack of interest.

By contrast, when I import hummingbirds, tanagers or honeycreepers from Peru, they are mostly sold before they are out of quarantine. There is a ready demand for softbills and nectarines.

Despite the lack of interest in South American finches, I continue to get profound joy out of mine. Most of the species available have never been bred, but once they start they continue year after year. There is more satisfaction in seeing a rare species court, nest, hatch, fledge and mature into a new generation than there is in any of the more-traveled roads in exotic aviculture. ●

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