

# Breeding the Endangered Venezuelan Black-hooded Red Siskin

by Kevin M. Gorman  
Rochester, New York  
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ing canaries. If you are a successful canary breeder, then siskin breeding should be second nature with a few minor changes.

## Pairing Birds — Egg Laying

Siskins are much more aggressive than canaries and it is advisable to keep the cock and hen in separate but adjacent cages for at least one to two months before pairing. This way they will become familiar with each other without having bitter battles which does nothing but stress the birds.

As with other birds, siskins are brought into breeding condition, and will lay eggs with increased photoperiod (increased daylength). I use "vita-lights" in the birdroom. When the birdroom lights are increased (by 15 minutes/week) from a "winter-time" low of 9.5 hours of daylight, "seasoned" siskin hens begin to lay eggs at approximately 11.5 hours of daylight. On the contrary, young (first year) hens may not lay eggs at all during their first breeding season, or they may require longer daylengths (than seasoned hens) to begin laying eggs. By comparison, my canary hens usually lay their first egg when the daylength reaches 13.5 hours.

My birdroom daylength reaches a maximum of 15.5 hours of daylight during breeding season. I hold the lights on 15.5 hours for four weeks and then start to decrease the daylength by 15 minutes per week (simulating summer/fall season) to slow down the hen's egg laying drive and to gradually bring the birds into a molt. My birdroom temperature is kept at between 70° and 75°F year round. I also keep the humidity at between 60 and 70% during the breeding season as high humidity helps increase the hatchability of fertile eggs.

The siskin cock will be ready to mate when he shows an extreme interest in the hen (lustily singing with wing bars exposed). A hen in breeding condition will allow the cock to feed her, and will tolerate his presence in her cage, but may not let him copulate with her until she is good and ready. Birds that are not in

The Red Siskin, *Carduelis (= Spinus) cucullata*, is a small (3.5 to 4 inch long) neotropical finch which has been excessively trapped for the cagebird trade since the early 20th century! As a result, the wild populations of siskins have been drastically reduced to very small, scattered groups in Venezuela. This beautiful bird may become extinct in the wild unless steps can be taken to preserve and enhance the existing populations.

The Red Siskin has been protected by Venezuelan law since the 1940s, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) since 1975, and has been listed as an endangered species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service since 1976. Illegal trapping and export of wild siskins from their Venezuelan homeland continues to put pressure on the remaining wild Red Siskin populations. The following steps might help preserve and enhance the few, existing wild Red Siskin populations:

- Increased law enforcement efforts to intercept smuggled birds.
- Pressuring all countries responsible for accepting smuggled birds (i.e. the Netherlands) into becoming members of CITES, and to abide by the rules dictated by this international convention.
- Creation of national parks where the endangered siskin can thrive.
- Reintroducing captive-bred Red Siskin offspring back into the wild to strengthen the existing wild populations.

The Siskin Subcommittee of the American Federation of Aviculture Conservation Committee is determined to build a strong population of captive-bred Red Siskins in the United States which will be used to enhance wild populations of the Red Siskin?

In the rest of this article I will provide observations seen and methods that I've used in raising the Venezuelan Black-hooded Red Siskin. I hope that these tips can help the first time siskin breeder successfully raise many birds for the siskin project.

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Five siskin eggs and one canary egg in nest.



Adult male siskin.



Three 10-day-old siskins sharing their nest with one 8-day-old siskin (bottom).



Sixteen-day-old siskins.



excellent condition will fight and growl at each other and should be separated with a wire divider until they show an interest in breeding.

Provide the hen with a canary nest lined with two thick felt liners as the siskin hen is much smaller than a canary hen. Nesting material made from burlap will suffice. Observe the hen for locations where she prefers to have her nest, usually in a bright, high place in the cage. When she is comfortable with the nest location she will build her nest. Generally, she'll build and the cock will tear apart. The cocks must be treated individually. If the cock bothers the hen too much (after successful copulation), take him out of the cage. I've put a siskin cock with his mate for only one hour and after copulating several times, I removed him. The hen laid the first egg of the clutch four days after copulation, and all five eggs in that clutch were fertile! Keep ground, hard-boiled egg shells and eggfood in the hen's cage at all times during the breeding season to provide essential nutrients for egg laying and rearing young.

A couple of days before the first egg

is laid, the hen's abdomen becomes noticeably swollen and will continue to be until the full clutch is laid. This swollen abdomen seems to prevent the hen from incubating until approximately three eggs have been laid. I practice removing each egg as it is laid and replace it with a "dummy" egg, then when all the eggs have been laid I put all the siskin eggs back under the hen. This way all the chicks will hatch on the same day. Some siskin hens may be uncomfortable when incubating more than four eggs, and may toss additional eggs out of the nest, so make sure that all eggs in the clutch are being incubated.

#### Hatching and Rearing Young

There are usually four to six pinkish eggs per clutch, with or without brown speckles. As the egg matures, fertile eggs will turn white. The eggs are rather large for such a small bird (approximately two-thirds the size of a canary egg). The embryo in fertile siskin eggs can be seen by candling after three days (canary embryos cannot be seen until four days). Siskin eggs hatch after 12 to 13 days (usually, if you place the eggs under the hen in

the morning on day 0, the chicks will start emerging from the eggs about noon on the 12th day of incubation).

Siskin chicks have red skin with gray-black down. The siskin hen feeds the chicks well, preferring a soaked niger-based seed mix and egg food along with dandelion greens as the main rearing food. Hulled oats, freshly ground sunflower seed and spray millet are also fed.

The niger-based mix that I use is sold by Clifford's Seeds, Buffalo, New York<sup>3</sup> It is a canary song and treat (CST) containing niger, flax, hemp, oats, poppy, sesame, and some small wild seeds. My eggfood is made by adding one tablespoon Vionate (or 5-1-8) vitamin/mineral mix to two ground, hard boiled eggs, two teaspoons of 91% soy protein isolate, and approximately 1/4 cup of dry CST. This high protein eggfood is a modification of Black's recipe<sup>4</sup> The canary song and treat mix added to the eggfood keeps the hen interested in eating it. I replace all soaked seed and eggfood with fresh food three times per day to prevent spoilage.

When the siskin chicks are four to five days old, the hen stops sitting on

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them at night. A birdroom temperature of between 70 to 75°F is sufficient to keep the chicks from getting chilled. In contrast, canary hens continue sitting on canary chicks until they have sufficient feathering to keep themselves warm. The siskin chicks are banded when five to six days old, or when pin feathers start to appear on their wings and backs. Siskin chicks seem to beg more "lazily" than canary chicks while in the nest, possibly because the siskin hen keeps them well fed and they aren't as hungry. Usually, as the siskin young approach day 7, the siskin hen has an interesting feeding pattern: she'll land on the nest and give a gentle call, then, if there is no response, she'll fly away and return immediately to the nest. She'll repeat this several times, even while she is feeding the young. The hen's call seems to be the greatest factor in provoking the young to lift their heads for food. By day 12 the chicks are almost fully feathered with beige-brown body feathers and black wing/tail feathers. At this time they can be seen flapping their wings in the nest.

By day 12 or 13 the siskin hen is ready to copulate again in preparation for the next clutch of eggs. The siskin chicks leave the nest at between day 15 to 17. The chicks are very capable at this stage and can fly well, although they may still be a bit clumsy. I provide the chicks with a fresh orange slice, soaked CST, spray millet, and eggfood. The chicks start to peck at the orange slice almost immediately after leaving the nest. By day 18 the chicks are pecking at the soaked seed (preferring the dark seeds). The siskin chicks never seem to eat much eggfood on their own. On the other hand, I've noticed that canary chicks will leave the nest at about day 18 (maybe as early as day 16 or as late as day 21), and readily eat eggfood when they are capable of eating on their own.

The siskin hen may be ready to go back to nest on about day 20. She should be provided with a fresh nest and nesting material at the first signs of nest building. The chicks will not be fed by the hen when she starts to incubate the eggs, so if the cock is a good feeder, he and the chicks should be separated from the hen at this time. My hens have raised the young by themselves so when they went back to nest I've had to separate the chicks from the hen and handfeed them for about a week before they ate

on their own.

They will continue being fed by the hen or will be handfed until between days 24 to 27, by which time they should be fully self sufficient. If the siskin hen does not go back to nest, the young will continue to beg for food from her for a longer period of time (through day 35 to 40). When self sufficient, their staple diet consists of spray millet and soaked CST. They are slowly converted to a dry siskin mix containing approximately 30% canary seed, 50% canary song/treat (CST), 10% rape seed, 5% flax and 5% pelleted food). Spray millet is also given liberally. A complete vitamin/mineral mix is added to the water and this water is provided at all times throughout the year. Cuttlebone is also available at all times.

Toward the end of the breeding season, I've decreased the daylength by 15 minutes per week as I've mentioned before, so that by the time the siskin hens are finished raising their young, the lights are down to around 13 hours of daylight. This, in combination with putting the hens in a large flight area with other siskins (not adult cocks) seems to stop their nesting drive for the season.

I've noticed that the red wing bar, seen on adult siskins, is absent from the siskin chicks until they are approximately 20 to 23 days old. During this time, the primary flight feathers, which contain a portion of the wing bar, continue to elongate and the red bar starts to emerge from under the beige-brown (baby feather) wing coverts. After the juvenile molt (which is about half completed by 18 weeks) the baby feather (beige wing bar) wing coverts are replaced by adult wing coverts, which, along with the primary flight feathers, complete the adult red wing bar seen in both sexes. In the wild, where the red wing bar may be seen by predators, this mechanism of hiding the wing bars until the chicks are older may help the young avoid predators at the early, vulnerable stages of learning how to fly with the adults.

### Additional Observations

As a rule of thumb, it is wise to always have seasoned siskin and canary hens as backups to your breeding hens. They should be on the same egg laying cycle as your breeders. If anything happens to your breeding hens while raising young, then you can transfer the eggs or young to the backup nest. For example, one of my

breeder siskin hens was unable to incubate her eggs, so I put the siskin eggs under a canary hen (who had been sitting on dummy eggs). The canary hen hatched and raised all four siskin young from that clutch. This type of egg transfer can also be used to increase the yield of young siskins. By removing fertile eggs from the mother and giving them to a foster bird to raise, the original mother can lay another clutch and raise these herself. It is important to let the breeder mother sit on the eggs for at least a week so she can rest between laying cycles. I wouldn't recommend allowing any more than three clutches of eggs to be layed per hen.

After the breeding season, I have allowed the siskins free flight in a 7 by 14 foot aviary. Included are dead branches, live Weeping Fig (*Ficus benjamina*) trees, and cages with open doors on one end of the room. The siskins become adjusted within one to two weeks and like to use the natural trees provided while the majority of the canaries like to roost inside the open-door cages. Food stations are located in dishes on a table, and in tube-like bird feeders suspended from the ceiling. Dry siskin seed mix, millet spray and chopped sunflower are given liberally, along with daily greens.

Young siskins seem to mill around the room in small groups. They fly lightning-fast, and all the siskins group together at night to sleep, settling down on high perches. Competition for night-time roosts is fierce with plenty of bickering, growling, and feather plucking, but once settled in, there is one mass of tiny, clustered siskin bodies. My birdroom is run on artificial lighting so after the main lights are turned off, a 25 watt blue light remains on for several hours so all the birds can settle down for the night. When the blue light shuts off, a seven watt red light remains on all night so if the birds are frightened, they will be able to locate perches. If the siskins are startled at night they will be frantic (I call them "popcorn birds"). If they are out of control in the dark, it is important to turn the room lights on immediately so they will avoid injury. They are usually very calm at night and will be startled only if carelessly bumped by the bird keeper.

The siskins share the open aviary with several canaries. Both species coexist in harmony, although the sis-

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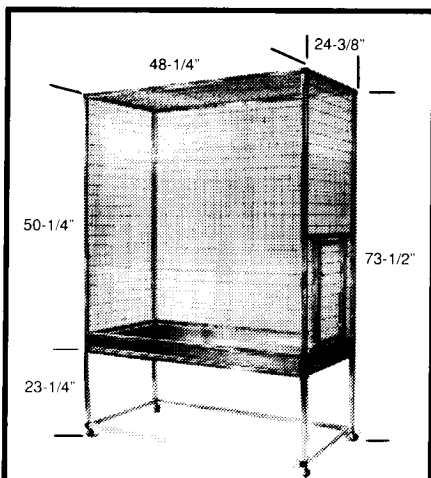
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kins tend to keep to their own species (with a few exceptions). The siskins eat the tree leaves, and spend quite a bit of time chewing at the spray millet stems as if to eat the pulp. Another delicacy seems to be dead tree buds and bark from the branches provided as perches (willow, maple, etc.) Siskins are very acrobatic and can hang upside down on branches as easily as any other position while eating. Many of the actions seen while watching the siskins remind me of the American Goldfinch (a relative to the siskin) out at the back yard birdfeeder.

One bad habit I've noticed is that siskins consistently pull feathers from around the head and neck of their siskin neighbors, leaving a lot of funny looking, partially bald birds flying around!

Siskins have a craving for oily-type seeds: sunflower, rape, hemp, sesame, and especially niger. Oily-type seeds contain a high amount of protein, linoleic acid, and some vitamin E. There is a possibility that this species (as well as other siskin species and goldfinches) require a large amount of some nutrient found in the oily seeds. For example, siskins require more oily seeds during breeding and moulting seasons. If siskins are fed *only* oily-type seeds, or a seed mix that has a high percentage of oily seeds year round, they may get fat and develop health problems, especially if housed in small cages.

I have noticed that some older birds may be prone to having an accumulation of body fat in the abdominal area. Some breeders put these overweight birds on temporary diets lacking fatty type seeds. This low fat diet may help the overweight bird, but the majority of siskins should remain on a balanced diet containing both oily and non-oily seeds. Siskins should be conditioned, as youngsters, to like to eat non-oily (high carbohydrate) seeds as well, such as canary seed, millet spray and hulled oats. I find that by supplementing the seed/green diet with a good vitamin/mineral mix in the water, and by regularly offering egg food mix containing vitamins and minerals, the birds should be getting all the quality protein and nutrients they require. It is important to follow a prudent, consistent diet routine.

I believe that to keep siskins in top physical condition, they should be housed in large flight cages and/or aviaries whenever possible. By allowing the birds space to fly, they will

remain lean, strong, healthy, and happy.

### Conclusion and Requirements

The Venezuelan Black-hooded Red Siskin is in grave danger of extinction and requires responsible breeding and management programs in order to reintroduce captive-bred stock back into the wild.

In the United States, it is unlawful to buy, sell, or ship/receive Red Siskins across state lines without a U.S. Fish & Wildlife Permit (captive-bred wildlife, endangered species permit). This permit is obtained by filing an application with the Office of Management Authority, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, P.O. Box 27329, Washington, D.C. 20038-7329. There is a \$25 fee every two years, at the time of renewal. Permit holders may buy, sell, trade, etc. only with those persons who have a valid U.S. Fish & Wildlife permit.

Individual states may also require state endangered species permits for buying, selling, and transport of the Red Siskin. For example, New York State residents need a NYS Endangered Species Permit. Write to NY State Dept. of Environmental Conservation, Div. of Fish and Wildlife, Special Licenses Unit, 50 Wolf Road, Albany, NY 12233-4752. There is no charge for this permit and it is renewed annually.

If you are interested in participating in the AFA Red Siskin project to help rebuild a strong wild siskin population, contact Jack Clinton-Eitniear, 218 Conway, San Antonio, TX 78209-1716.

### References

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### Further Reading

Diebold, E.N. 1986. Venezuelan Black-hooded Red Siskin on the Brink. *AFA Watchbird*, Volume XIII, no. 2, pp. 8-11. ●