

The Venezuelan Black-hooded Red Siskin

a success story from Las Palmas, Canary Islands

by G.A. Abbate, Sr., Elizabeth, New Jersey
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The Venezuelan Black-hooded Red Siskin has been in demand for more than half a century, perhaps even more so today than when it was crossed with a canary to produce a red factor canary. Furthermore, every red factor color breeder throughout the entire world has or would like to have one or more Venezuelan Black-hooded Red Siskins. In fact, the demand for this species is greater than any other species of birds amongst color breeders.

During my extensive travels throughout the world where I visited hundreds of bird fanciers including color breeders, I noticed that every color breeder I visited either had some Venezuelan Black-hooded Red Siskins or they were inquiring as to where and how they could acquire some. Recalling from memory, many years ago I visited a highly reputable and successful red factor breeder in Argentina (I still remember his name, Mr. Iannuzzelli). I also wrote an article detailing that visit. The first thing that he asked me when I entered his birdroom was, "I would love to get a Red Siskin....even a first or second cross would help me. I heard that in America many of these birds are plentiful. Can you help me?" My answer to him was, "Mr. Iannuzzelli, you have such good deep red factor canaries—why would you want a Red Siskin to improve the color of them?" He answered, "I was told if I introduced a Red Siskin into my red factor canaries' blood line I would get a deeper and better red color." If I remember correctly, I told Mr. Iannuzzelli, "I don't think that the Red Siskin would in any way improve your red canaries. It would probably take many many years and I doubt very much if you would achieve any better results." Nevertheless, the Red Siskin is still in great demand today.

The Venezuelan Black-hooded Red Siskin can be bred and produced in captivity very easily. Just as any good bird fancier breeds canaries, so can Red Siskins be produced. The only thing required is a captive bred breeding pair, a good healthy environment, practical maintenance, and most of all a good, balanced diet. In addition, you will need to be dedi-

cated and implement lots of common sense. If there were no government regulations in the U.S. it would, of course, help the situation as well. For example, if a bird fancier in New Jersey wants to keep a Red Siskin he must pay \$35 to the state of New Jersey for a permit, plus is subject to inspection and God knows what else. Also, if a fancier from New Jersey wants to acquire a Red Siskin from a fancier in the state of New York, both fanciers must have a federal permit as well as a state permit. I don't know what the cost of that would be. So, as a result of this, the law abiding bird fancier doesn't even bother to go through all this nonsense! Thus, fewer siskins are bred in North America! Ironically, no imported birds were allowed to enter Australia for several decades. Yet there are no governing laws regarding breeding, etc., of the species within Australia. Siskins and other rare species of birds

have been bred in captivity throughout Australia very effectively, including the Venezuelan Black-hooded Red Siskin. By talking to several fanciers throughout Australia, as I understand it there were just a couple of pairs which were brought in several decades ago. Now there are many many Red Siskins throughout Australia which have been bred by serious and dedicated fanciers and the same are abundantly propagating. Furthermore, throughout every country in Europe and especially Italy, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, Spain, etc., the Red Siskins are bred by the thousands without any confusing and annoying government regulations whatsoever. In North America, if a bird fancier could freely acquire breeding stock of Red Siskins from other breeders without government interference, we could enjoy the same flourishing breeding activity. In fact, there are many many fanciers who breed Red Siskins in secret, because they don't want to go through government bureaucracy and the requirements mentioned previously.

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Palmas, Canary Islands, Carlos D. Suarez Rodriguez, went to the mainland of Europe and bought three pairs of Red Siskins. In November, 1990, during my visit he had in his possession approximately 600 healthy, colorful, large size, beautiful, Venezuelan Black-hooded Red Siskins out of those three original pairs. And believe it or not, out of those 600, roughly 300 youngsters

were produced in his birdroom in 1990. Furthermore, in the same year Carlos produced nearly 600 baby siskins.

Let's evaluate what our fellow fancier and friend, Carlos, does in his birdroom in order for him to achieve such phenomenal success. I have video tapes of my visits that I took of Carlos's siskin room. They would really make your head spin. I showed

part of this tape to the Texas Canary Club in Houston where I was a guest speaker in July, 1991. A large crowd of fanciers viewed this tape. Everyone was truly amazed to see Carlos's phenomenal achievement with his siskins. For those of you unable to visit Carlos or see the video tape, I will try and describe what I witnessed there. Perhaps it will encourage many of you to try to breed and propagate these little treasured species of birds—the Venezuelan Black-hooded Red Siskin.

Carlos's house is located on a hillside overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, a couple of miles from the center of downtown Las Palmas. The area where Carlos's house is located enjoys sunshine from every direction, very dry climate, plentiful supply of wild seed, wild greens and wild weeds are bountiful on the surrounding grounds. In other words, a lot of natural foods that the wild birds eat are found everywhere. The room where the siskins are bred and kept is above ground level and the L-shaped room is approximately 40 ft. long by 25 ft. wide and approximately 15 ft. high. This is an approximate size—I am not a very good estimator on measurements. Let me stress—it was a very huge room. Large glass windows all the way around the building, actually very close to the ceiling, provided lots of natural light. Thus the interior of the birdroom is a very delightful, pleasant, natural environment, ideal in every aspect.

Spacious all-wire cages were situated in the center of the room which at that time were holding several hundred Red Siskins, young and old. Approximately 90 percent of the walls housed roughly 100 English type breeding box cages with professionally made cage fronts. They were stacked five rows high, beginning approximately 24 inches from the floor. Each row of cages could be divided into several double breeding cages approximately 36" x 16" high and 12" deep by either adding a wire partition or a solid partition. This part of Carlos's room resembled very much my breeding room, as well as our beloved president, Bob Garguillo's room, plus others where the partitions are removed at the end of the breeding season and the row of cages can be used as large holding cages. To say the least, Carlos's birdroom was practically built by using common sense.

I carefully evaluated everything



Carlos D. Suarez Rodriguez in his birdroom. Notice the dozens of siskins and the spacious cages where the siskins are held during the non-breeding season. Also noticeable are the bunches of wild seeding grasses attached to the cages.



Carlos Rodriguez with his flight cages which are full of beautiful, healthy Red Siskins.

Photos by Gino A. Abbate

Carlos was doing in the birdroom. I will try to describe every detail in order for you to benefit by reading this unbelievable success story of a good fellow bird fancier.

On the bottom of every cage, Carlos had several layers of simple, economical, old newspaper and every time he cleaned the cages he removed the top layer assuring a clean, healthy environment for his birds. I asked Carlos, "Why don't you use sand or cedar shavings or any other product available on the market to make it easy for you to clean your cages?" He answered, "Nope, newspapers I don't have to buy—I get them for free and I can keep my birds clean all the time. I don't have to worry about bacteria or parasites that might build up and accumulate in sand or cedar shavings, etc. After all, no one changes sand and cedar shavings everyday; yet, I can clean my cages by using newspapers daily." I agree with Carlos 100 percent. Unless anyone is able to clean the sand or cedar shavings every couple of days you are surely asking for trouble. If you allow this covering to stay in the cage for a long time, diseases, bacteria, parasites, you name it, may have the chance to build up.

A good mineral grit composed not only of oyster shells, but also egg shells, sea sand, plus other necessary minerals, was available in every cage in Carlos's room. A good seed mixture containing small millet, canary seed, oat groats, good rape seed, unsterilized niger seed plus small hemp was his birds' basic diet. In other words, a well balanced blend of seed was before the siskins at all times. However, I noticed that for economical reasons the common sense rule of not allowing the siskins to waste any seed surely prevailed. The mixture was eaten 100 percent without any waste. He supplied good millet spray every other day. The millet spray is attached with a clip on the side of the cages. By the way, the siskins cherish millet spray.

At the time of my visit, virtually, every cage in Carlos's room, where the siskins were housed, included a big bunch of seeding heads from grass and other seeding weeds available on the island. I mean a generous bunch of this seeding head either in a dry state as well as in a milky state was placed in every cage. (Could the supply of this wild seed be one of the reasons Carlos is so successful in breeding the siskins? I think so!)

In addition to the above, Carlos feeds his Red Siskins a good mixture of soakable seed which he soaks for about 24 to 48 hours, then washes thoroughly under running water. He feeds it to his siskins all year round, and even more so when they feed their youngsters.

A well blended nestling food composed of precooked and raw grains and cereal, with the addition of fresh eggs, plus vitamins and minerals was also fed to the siskins all year round. Again, even more so every day when they feed their youngsters. Carlos

added to his nestling food finely ground American shelled almonds. Oh yes, Carlos brags about it. He said, "You see this? They come from California—only the very best almonds, of course. They are very good for the siskins." I said to him, "Carlos, everything that comes from America is good." Ha! Ha! Ha!

Red Siskins, as well as all other species of birds, love to bathe. Carlos supplies bath water to his siskins as often as he can.

I mentioned to Carlos that whenever cage birds are housed, avian par-

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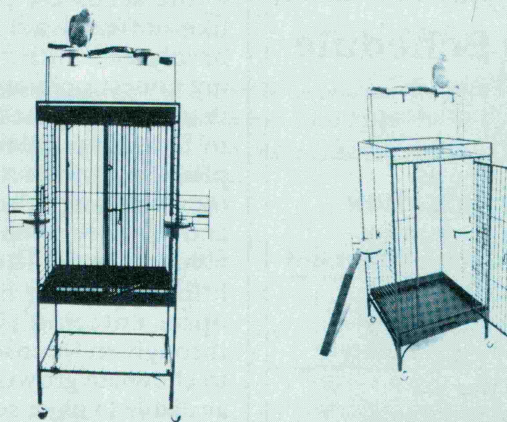
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asites are sure to be present and asked him, "What do you do to prevent the infestation of avian parasites?" Carlos lifted a bottle of some kind of insecticide and he showed it to me and said, "I spray with this everytime it is necessary." I asked him, "At least once a week?" He answered, "Yes." Carlos handed me the bottle of spray and I read the ingredients. The effective ingredient was the usual pyrethrin, similarly composed as the one we have available in the U.S.A.

For your information, the Canary Islands have somewhat of a sub-tropical climate. Carlos follows the rules of nature. He begins his breeding season in the beginning of spring.

In addition to Red Siskins I noticed in Carlos's room several very small canaries and I asked him, "What kind of canaries are those?" He said, "Oh, they are just small canaries that I use sometimes as foster parents. The small canaries make very good feeders."

To conclude, Carlos works very hard in managing his Red Siskins. He spends many many hours in his birdroom during the breeding season. As he said, "I am in this room from early in the morning until it gets dark. I feed many baby siskins by hand with a little toothpick. I practically raise every baby siskin that hatches, either the siskins feed the babies themselves, the foster parents feed the babies, or I hand feed them myself."

In conclusion, what I have seen in Carlos's room is sincere dedication and good common sense being well

implemented. No question about it, the environment in the room, as well as the climate on the island is the ideal place to raise Venezuelan Black-hooded Red Siskins, as well as any other species of birds.

One more point I would like to bring out, I noticed there was no heating system or air conditioners in Carlos's room. Obviously, in such an ideal climate it is not necessary. The temperature is just great for the birds, as well as for humans. Nevertheless, in our own birdrooms in North America we must simulate the perfect climate. It can be done by using common sense.

I wish all of you, by reading this successful story of a fellow fancier, Carlos, will be inspired to produce more and better siskins and that one day, I hope soon, they will be plentiful and readily available just as the canaries are today. We cannot be lazy—we must devote our time and efforts to achieve such spectacular results.

Keep in mind that the good niger seed and hemp seed which constituted a good portion of the diet of Carlos's siskins, unfortunately, are not available in the USA. We must improvise in our own birdrooms by providing a well balanced seed diet and offering a variety of natural foods such as seeding heads and grasses which, contrary to common belief, we do have available in our areas. You cannot be laxidazy about your birds' diets. Just seek and you will find. The imported niger seed and hemp seed we have access to in the U.S. go through a sterilizing process — the seeds are practically roasted like coffee, leaving the same with hardly any nutritional value and in my honest opinion I believe are even detrimental to the health of the birds. In fact, if you place plain niger and plain hemp before any kind of birds they will gorge themselves for hours and yet they obtain little nutritional value from it. The niger and hemp imported from Ethiopia or India, upon entering the U.S., must go through an intense roasting process to eliminate growth of a certain weed available in niger seed which our government is trying to prevent the infestation in our U.S. land. The process is important to the government because the niger seed is used heavily in wild bird mixtures which is fed to the wild birds outdoors. In the winter months, God knows how many wild birds gorge themselves on this seed

and practically starve themselves to death. Thus, if you make an excess amount of niger available to the birds, before long you will kill all the siskins and perhaps any other birds you feed this seed to. In the last three to four years, the hemp and niger seed available in the U.S. will not sprout if you put it in water for 24 hours. It will swell when you squeeze the kernel and will look like a piece of charcoal. No nutritional value left in it whatsoever. The hemp is sterilized through a roasting process so people don't try and grow marijuana plants.

Personally, I substituted the niger for my siskins with kernels of freshly shelled sunflower, also sesame, poppy and flax seed. I caution, however, do not allow the siskins to eat an abundant amount of any seed, such as sunflower, flax, poppy or sesame. The same seeds in large quantity can be detrimental to the health of the birds. Feed your siskins and other birds a *variety* of seed. They must eat canary seed, some millet, oat groats. In other words, they must eat 100 percent of a well balanced mixture without any waste. This is the most sensible way to feed your birds. Any straight seed, as previously mentioned, when fed in large quantity will be detrimental. Just as humans feeding and gorging on only one type of food—eventually they cause an imbalance of nutrients in their diet and as a result become ill.

Try to feed wild grass seed and weeds in the milky stage, as well as the mature stage. The North American countrysides, as well as Australia, Europe, etc., are bountiful of all foods from nature. Take advantage, we have access to essential, healthy foods which can make you successful in your birdroom. However, remember to be careful where you gather the wild foods. They should not be contaminated by spray insecticides or contamination from wild birds, such as sparrows, starlings, etc. Make sure you wash everything thoroughly that you gather from the wild state. You may soak the wild foods and wild seed, etc., in water with an additional few drops of iodine. Soak for a couple of hours then wash thoroughly. The iodine will help eliminate any bacteria if there is any present in the food.

Share your success. I would like to hear from many of you who raise siskins and what you are doing to take care of your birds. ●

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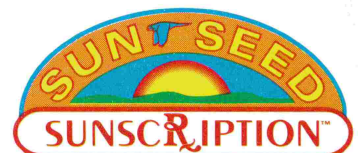
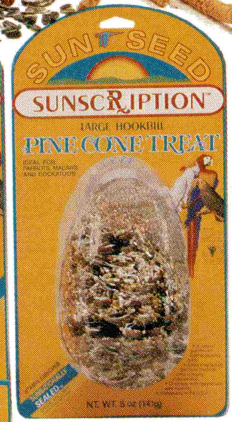
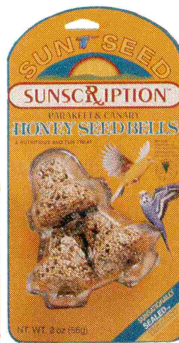
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