

The Venezuelan Black-hooded Red Siskin

another success story
from Las Palmas, Canary Islands

by G. A. Abbate, Sr.
Elizabeth, New Jersey

While I was attending and judging Color-bred canaries at the 40th, 1992 COM World Championship of Ornithology, in the beautiful island and one of the birth places of the melodious and colorful canaries, Las Palmas, Gran Canaria, Spain, I met another substantial and successful Venezuelan Black-hooded Red Siskin breeder. His name is Manuel Medina Rodriguez and he lives approximately 20 miles from downtown Las Palmas.

On the island in Gran Canaria there are actually quite a few siskin breeders. Although some are small, I was told that there were three or four which can be considered substantial breeders. For example, Carlos Suarez Rodriguez who lives in Las Palmas raised 420 Red Siskins in 1990. Furthermore, Manuel in 1991 raised a good number of siskins. In fact, almost 200 healthy, big, strong, colorful Red Siskins were reared in 1991.

By contrast, Carlos' breeding room location in Las Palmas was on a hill-slope overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. Manuel's home is located at a lower elevation — just a few hundred feet from the sea. I noted his breeding room, however, was located on the third floor of his house, approximately 25 to 30 ft. above the ground, as siskins like to breed at higher elevation levels. As for my personal experience, in the many years that I raised siskins, I had obtained better success when I used a breeding room on the 3rd floor of my house rather than the basement. Although I did achieve some success in my basement, it was considered rather poor by contrast to the breeding results obtained in the higher location of my

house. All Manuel's cages in his breeding room were the English type box cage, neatly located across the huge, approximately 20 x 40 foot room. The cages were assembled in three rows, beginning approximately 24" above the floor. I asked Manuel which of the cages in the room would produce the best results. He pointed to the top two rows. Consequently, the height from the floor was approximately six to eight feet. Manuel said, "The siskins experience better reproductivity in the higher cages." The bottom row of cages is used for housing youngsters and the extra breeding stock. Incidentally, Manuel at the time of my visit, which was the end of January, 1992, had in his possession 25 pairs of Red Siskins, plus extra pairs and other species of siskins, including Blackheaded Siskins. There were also some other species of finches which I didn't pay much attention to, and several small female canaries, which he sometimes used as foster parents when the parent siskin did not feed properly.

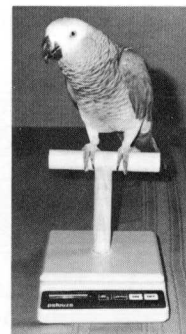
Manuel's breeding room is definitely an ideal environment. The construction of the house is 100 percent concrete and masonry. All the walls and ceilings were smooth plaster. The floor is terrazo tile, which makes it very easy to keep clean and hygienically sterilized. Along the outside wall of the room were several glass windows allowing natural sunlight to enter. This setup is the most ideal environment you could provide for the birds in captivity. I even said to myself I wished I had a room like that. The only negative thing in this condition was that I had to climb 20 to 25 feet of concrete stairs while I



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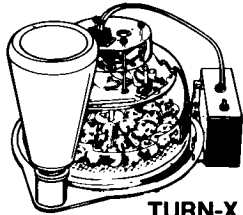
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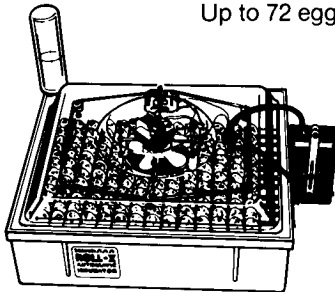
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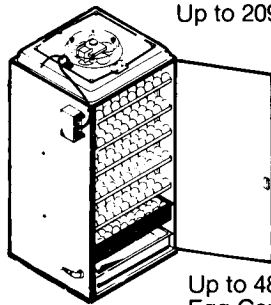
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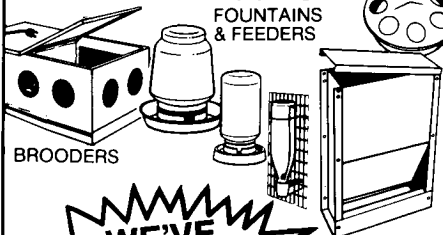
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was visiting there and, unfortunately, I had to go downstairs three times; once to answer the telephone, once to pick up the charged battery for my video camera and once again I had to pick up my notebook. After I did all that climbing up and down three times, I had to have lost more than three pounds (ha, ha). My legs felt it, too, for the next couple of days. Other than that, the room was an ideal environment, to say the least.

Let's evaluate in detail every aspect of his methods of diet and maintenance of his Venezuelan Black-hooded Red Siskins. Let's look at how he achieved such good results in order for our readers to benefit and perhaps we can be as successful as our friend and fellow fancier Manuel Rodriguez.

The environment was simply ideal—plenty of natural light, sunshine, fresh air and very little pollution. The breeze from the Mediterranean Sea, plus the very low humidity due to the fact that they have very little rain on the island also added to the perfect environment. With low humidity year round, the food in the cages does not get moldy, thus there is very little chance that the birds will get sick from mildew which occurs in many breeding rooms in many parts of the world (where the humidity is high) including parts of North America. Fungus and mildew can be very detrimental to the health of any species of bird in captivity.

Each breeding English box style cage measures approximately 30" long, 12" deep and approximately 16" high. Each cage has a removable divider. The bottom of every breeding cage, as well as the stacking cages, is covered with several layers of old newspaper. Manuel removes the top layer of paper often, providing a clean environment. It was obvious during my visit that he kept his birdroom very neat and clean. The cages were spotless. All his box cages were painted white and you could not notice even a small stain or any spots on any of his breeding cages. Each cage had cuttlebone attached on the inside by a wire. A clip, similar to a clothespin, contained a bunch of wild grass seed and other treats. Two cups on each cage each contained a siskin mixture consisting of small millet seed, canary seed, a small amount of oats groats, rape seed, flax seed, sesame seed, niger seed, small hemp seed and poppy seed. The mixture mainly consisted of small millet and

canary seed and there was only a small amount of the other above mentioned seeds. Manuel happens to use feeding practices similar to my own: birds must eat 100 percent of the mixture. Manuel makes sure that the birds do eat 100 percent of the food mixture, not only because the birds need to benefit from all of the ingredients and not pick and choose what they want, but because seed on the island is very, very expensive. To give you an idea, I saw a 2 lb. bag of U.S. imported exotic finch mixture which sells for \$8.00 in a major U.S. supermarket. I am sure that Manuel does not pay \$8.00 for 2 lbs. of seed. Let me repeat, the seed is very expensive on the island of Gran Canaria.

Each breeding cage, as well as the stacking cages, had a cup containing mineral grits consisting of clean sea sand and sterilized mollusk shell. Manuel, in addition to the above mentioned seed diet, feeds a basic soaked seed mixture and also gathers a variety of seeding grasses which are plentiful throughout the islands and very beneficial to the birds.

A variety of fresh greens is fed daily in a small amount. Manuel also mentioned to me that he makes his own nestling food which consists of a good commercial nestling food to which he adds freshly cooked eggs, soaked seed and occasionally he adds ground almonds. Incidentally, Manuel pointed out to me that the almonds are imported from California.

In evaluating Manuel's achievements and the breeding achievements of many other successful siskin breeders in other parts of the world as well, I have come to the conclusion that the following factors play a major roll in their success: Environment - a dry climate and a spotless birdroom; Location - the higher up the breeding birds are situated, the better they perform; Diet - a sensible feeding program with the addition of a variety of uncontaminated seeding grasses and seeding weeds available from the wild state (basically what the wild birds eat) and, last but not least; Dedication - total devotion and enjoyment of the hobby of siskin bird breeding. That is what I believe attributes to great success!

Since the early '60s, I, plus many other fanciers throughout the United States and Canada, used to breed many siskins. Recalling from memory, in the early 60's there were



Manuel Medina Rodriguez in his neat and well kept siskin breeding room.

many siskins being bred in captivity in North America. There were so many available in bird stores that it wasn't even worth breeding quantity because many fanciers were doing it for only a little bit of a profit and there was really no market for them. I can recall that Birdland of Miami, in Miami, Florida, was selling siskins for \$30.00 to \$35.00 each.

Over the years, I bred and kept many varieties of birds. Venezuelan Black-hooded Red Siskins have been one of my preferred species. My bird breeding was more of a hobby than a profit. Still, in the late '60s, I cut down on my production of siskins and other birds due to the fact that there were so many available. Therefore, it was no fun to be overcrowded!

I could name hundreds of fanciers and friends throughout North America who used to breed a lot of siskins. One particular gentleman by the name of Danilo Del Pup, residing in Toronto, Canada, came to visit me in the mid '60s. We became friends and I gave him, as a gift, two pairs of siskins. He went back to Canada and out of those two pairs, over the years, he had produced siskins by the hundreds. Dozens of fanciers from the U.S. as a result of my article on him became acquainted with Danilo Del Pup and they went to visit him in

Canada. They obtained many healthy, colorful, large Venezuelan Black-hooded Red Siskins from him.

There was another lady from Toledo, Ohio, the late Lillian Knagg. She used to visit Danilo Del Pup several times every year and consequently purchased a large number of siskins from him. Many of the fanciers who visited Danilo Del Pup during the breeding season would have enjoyed seeing the dozens of nests in Del Pup's birdroom containing four to five baby Venezuelan Black-hooded Red Siskins. One time while I was there, the late Lillian Knagg and her husband happened to also be visiting with Mr. Del Pup and at the same time obtained siskins from him. I distinctly remember her remark as follows, "Let me touch you for luck; maybe I will be luckier in breeding my siskins." Lillian Knagg also bred many siskins. Perhaps after touching Del Pup, she was more successful?

There were two or three more gentlemen from Chicago who bred many siskins. One was the late Joe Kreder (I am not sure of the spelling of Joe's last name). There were more, but unfortunately I can't remember their names. Scott Ritchie, from Chicago, also raised red siskins for several years.

In Florida there were dozens of fanciers breeding siskins. Among them

were Gerald Cherta, who until a couple of years ago used to keep and breed hundreds of siskins. I know Cherta personally. I visited his breeding operation and observed many baby siskins in the nests as well as in cages.

Domenic Tenuta, from the Los Angeles area, raised hundreds of Red Siskins, too. There were also many other fanciers in California whom I cannot recall. In New Jersey there were many people raising siskins besides myself. I remember there was an elderly gentleman from Bloomfield, whose name I do not recall. In fact, he succeeded in a most unusual and sub-condition way and raised many baby Red Siskins.

As for myself, everybody knows that about four years ago I made a terrible mistake by introducing a new canary in my birdroom without properly quarantining it and, as a result, I lost practically all my canaries and most of my siskin breeding stock. Ever since I have been struggling with three very old siskins — some day I shall overcome the loss and perhaps get back into breeding again.

Now, at this point, I would like to ask whatever happened to all that enthusiasm and to all those siskin breeders? Whatever happened to the obviously large captive siskin population in the United States?

In the past, if we would look in U.S. bird related publications, we would notice dozens of fanciers advertising Red Siskins for sale. Lately there are practically none. Why? Perhaps it is because many fanciers don't want to go through all the government red tape and regulations. As a result, are they keeping their Red Siskins a secret? Traveling throughout North American and visiting many bird fanciers, I have seen very few siskins. Again, what is going on? For the last two or three years I have been trying to find out why so many people throughout the rest of the world raise so many Red Siskins, and in the U.S. very few are being bred in captivity. For instance, Mr. Carlos Rodriguez from the Canary Islands, Spain, raised 420 in 1990; perhaps he raised a number close to that in 1991. Luciano Manfredini of Reggio Emillo, Italy, in 1988 raised more than 200; in 1989, 250; in 1991 perhaps more. Mr. Cartwright from New Castle South Wales, Australia, has been raising about 100 siskins per year for the last two or three years.

Carmelo Zappone is from Palmi,

Italy. When I visited him in 1989 and 1990 during the breeding season, he had hundreds of baby siskins. It was quite ironic that many years ago he bought some siskin stock from the U.S. and he mated them with siskins bred in Italy. He has successfully produced hundreds of healthy Red Siskins from that lot. I can go on and name hundreds of people from all over the world and I can fill up hundreds of pages of this publication, but again, where are the U.S. Red Siskin breeders? To where have they gone? Is it that most of the above mentioned fanciers who are still living today no longer keep or breed siskins? Why? Nevertheless, all of the above statements have been documented by hundreds of feet of video tape and also photographs and slides.

In the last two or three years, I have been trying to trace the cause of this decline of the U.S. Red Siskin population. Although my findings may not be 100% accurate or backed by scientific research, I strongly believe that a contagious bacteria infection which affects and kills many species of birds has also taken a high toll on the Red Siskin population. According to some sources, many dead siskins have been diagnosed with Mycobacteriosis, a

contagious bacterial disease similar to tuberculosis and difficult to cure. Even after antibiotic treatments, this disease is usually extremely fatal to small birds, especially the delicate Venezuelan Black-hooded Red Siskins.

Many years ago, some bird people discovered that in the interior of a high mountain on the island of Puerto Rico, the Venezuelan Black-hooded Red Siskins were breeding and propagating freely in the wild state. According to some quite reliable sources, over the years, it has been proven that some so called bird people have aggressively captured many siskins from the Puerto Rican habitat and smuggled them into North America for profit. In my honest opinion, I believe this was one and perhaps the most contributing factor in the depletion of strong, healthy Venezuelan Black-hooded Red Siskins in the U.S. captive-bred population. Ironically, many of these Red Siskins originated from Puerto Rico, and according to some sources were diagnosed to have a serious bacterial infection.

Personally, I never intentionally obtained any siskins originating from the wild state of Puerto Rico or from any other wild habitat. However, many years ago I saw many of these siskins who supposedly originated from Puerto Rico. The same were sick, very skinny and small in size. The breast bone of some of these siskins were like razor blades, a sure sign that they were suffering from severe maladies. I believe hundreds, perhaps thousands of siskins allegedly captured on the island of Puerto Rico and smuggled into North America, died and in the process of dying infected perhaps the U.S. captive Venezuelan Black-hooded Red Siskin population. The most horrible thing is that many bird keepers do not tell the truth nor ever admit their losses, whether it be through disease or other problems. As a result, we cannot fully correct the problem and eradicate the cause and, hence, the destruction of the U.S. Red Siskin population continues. What a shame!

I am in desperate need of some new, strong, healthy Venezuelan Black-hooded Red Siskin blood to improve my breeding program; however, rest assured, I do not want to introduce in my birdroom any Red Siskin which has been illegally captured or smuggled into the U.S. mainland from the island of Puerto Rico or

from any other wild habitat. I would like to see the sincere, honest fanciers and conservationists such as myself allowed to freely buy a siskin or any other bird from any other sincere, honest bird fancier anywhere in the world without any hassles and/or confusing red tape, which is always involved when dealing with the government. Nevertheless, what I would like to see is our law enforcement severely punish and incarcerate all of the illegal trappers and smugglers of illegal birds. Yes, indeed, the government should go after these people instead of preventing the honest fanciers from fully exercising their privileges and allowing us to fully enjoy the hobby of keeping and breeding the Red Siskins, as well as other species of birds, thereby preventing the extinction of the species.

I sincerely believe that another contributing factor in the decline of the U.S. siskin population has been caused in part by the deterioration in the quality of some of the seed we find in the U.S. market which is essential in the diet of the Red Siskins. Remember, diet plays a major roll in the successful maintenance and breeding of the Venezuelan Black-hooded Red Siskin.

Breeders in other parts of the world have at their disposal good, clean, fresh, unaltered niger seed (thistle) to feed to their siskins and other birds. Thistle is a necessity in a siskin's diet, along with lettuce seed, teazle seed, small hemp seed and other varieties of seed which are readily available in Europe. Many years ago, we in the U.S. had access to good niger, good teazle, good hemp seed, lettuce seed, etc. Now, lately, due to obnoxious weed seed discovered in the niger, the U.S. Agricultural Department does not allow the entry of any niger seed unless it has been heat sterilized. In other words, the same niger seed is now roasted like coffee; hence it does not germinate and therefore has no nutritional value. Subsequently, the diet of the Red Siskins, as well as any other bird which must have this seed, suffers a great deal. The hemp seed is another essential ingredient in the diet of Red Siskins, as well as other birds. The same goes through the heat sterilization process that the niger seed goes through therefore rendering it non-viable when it is roasted just like coffee leaving practically no nutritional value for the birds. ●

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