

The Littlest Siskin

The Story of Siskin with Band #333, Studbook T363

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Photo by Kevin Gorman, Red Siskin Project Director

The pair arrived on a blustery February Sunday afternoon amid some confusion and turmoil. Opening the small cardboard box revealed two Red Siskins in sad shape: overgrown beaks, spiraled toenails, yellow plumage. They were both so weak they couldn't fly to the top of the small double-breeder I had prepared for them — the last spare cage I had on such short notice. The hen was blind in one eye, and called with a gravelly hoarse voice followed by loud wheezing.

I quickly recognized the urgency of the situation and went into gear. Out came the clippers, Ivermectin, Batryl and Gatorade. Supplemental heat, fresh greens and goodies and plentiful seed choices filled their new home. Over the course of the next couple weeks, their strength came back, and

their fecal smears were negative for TB. However, the Batryl and Ivermectin did not seem to treat the hen's wheezing, and I found it was to be a chronic condition for all the time I had her.

The male was named "Cimarron" which is Spanish for "wild" and the hen "Esperanza," Spanish for "hope." Their bleak condition upon arrival in Stevens Point is not unlike the tenu-

ous status of siskins in the wild today. The symbolic reference in their names reflects my heartfelt desire for the pair as well as for all of our siskins.

Esperanza was five years old according to her band, but had never bred. Cimarron was three years. They got along reasonably well together, but I was concerned whether Esperanza could fend off Cimarron's growing aggressiveness as he responded to the bright lights and extended day length. My fears were laid to rest when just five and one-half weeks after arrival, Esperanza had thrown all the sunflower seeds from her treat cup and nestled in it, looking at me as if to say, "Hurry up and get a nest basket in here!"

Of course, one basket was not enough — this siskin had to have options. She took her nest building quite seriously, all the while putting Cimarron in his place without any outward signs of problems other than her chronic wheezing.

From February to June, Cimarron and Esperanza attempted three differ-

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ent clutches in three different nests. Of the first, one of three eggs was fertile but died in shell when I fostered it to a canary at Kim Hardin's house (we're blaming the cold weather). Of the second, one of three eggs again was fertile, but was destroyed by a male when I tried to foster it to my green siskins.

Finally, I decided to give Esperanza a chance to fulfill her life and raise a family on her own, despite the risk of transferring her respiratory condition to her chicks. Cimarron was not of much help during all of this as his courtship feeding was limited — my first clue to the events that follow.

Esperanza's third clutch of four eggs had one fertile egg and she incubated faithfully. She laid her eggs every other day, instead of every day like other hens, so I know her advanced age was taking its toll. The eggs still looked normal so I was very much surprised on hatching day to observe such a *tiny* chick!

This siskin chick was a good 15 to 20 percent smaller than any of the over one dozen I had hatched this season. Siskin chicks are small to begin with, but this looked like an almost hopeless situation. The somewhat confused looks Esperanza and Cimarron gave me didn't help. It was time to gear up again and do some delicate intervention.

Lafeber's handfeeding formula was diluted and fed to the little guy off of about a dozen bristles of a fine artist's brush. I trusted only myself to this tiny bird and on one-and-one-half-hour intervals for six days. Esperanza then took over and fed him well for two days, and just as I thought the worst was over, she gave up. We made an agreement: she would brood, I would feed.

Although this chick was not the last to hatch in the 1993 breeding season, it was evident it would be the last to wean — undoubtedly an artifact of being handraised. On the 18th day after hatching, Omega, as I named him, fledged. Two days earlier I had moved the nest basket to an unoccupied cage so Omega could fledge without interference. It was a full 37 days after hatch before I was confident Omega was fully weaned.

Omega remained noticeably smaller than the other siskin young I put him with for socialization. Thankfully, he



Little Siskin "Omega" was fed with a fine artist's paint brush, but soon advanced to a 3 cc syringe.

had no trouble fitting in and taking care of himself. Cimarron and Esperanza began to molt and good red-orange siskin color began to show through. It looked as though the whole family had a positive experience in Stevens Point.

Summer is traditionally the time of offspring distribution around the country. Omega survived a harrowing flight to Nashville, Tennessee, in September, in which shipment we had

a 25 percent loss. Cimarron and Esperanza were returned to their original owners.

I don't know for sure what sex Omega was going to be even upon shipping. I will certainly be looking forward to hearing about how my first totally handraised baby siskin develops. Omega may have been the last chick to go through a siskin's life stages, but he will always have a number one place in my heart. ●

Photo by Kevin Gorman, Red Siskin Project Director

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