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An Insight Into the Red Siskin Breeding Project

by Yvonne I. Patterson, Promotional Director
Kansas City, Missouri

The American Federation of Aviculture's (AFA) Red Siskin Project (RSP) is a very stimulating and progressive breeding consortium. The AFA is a U.S. organization comprised of private citizens which seeks to preserve wild birds in their natural habitat through public education, habitat preservation and, where appropriate, captive breeding. Red Siskins are very difficult to breed and project breeders have been carefully selected to participate. Most birds in the project are AFA-owned birds that are loaned to project participants. A few own their own siskins and donate offspring to the project. Babies are banded and matched up on a "Cupid" computer system devised by ISIS (International Species Information System) which has a SPARKS (Small Population Analysis and Record-keeping System) studbook. This process of record-keeping ensures the best genetic diversity possible in the captive flock.

The studbook keeper is Orland Baker, M.D., of Dallas, Texas. His wife Virginia serves as the membership coordinator and decides which RSP applicants deem further investigation. Currently, the project has more breeders available than birds. This is not uncommon for a breeding consortium when it pertains to very rare birds. Many people see consortiums as a way to get free birds. Caution is taken to ensure that participants have the birds' best interest at heart.

RSP members work diligently not only in reproducing this lovely Venezuelan finch, but also in promoting the project in various ways. The selling of RSP videos, Red Siskin T-shirts, donated artwork of Red Siskins, television promotions and, last but not least, articles such as this one to enlighten others about our cause.

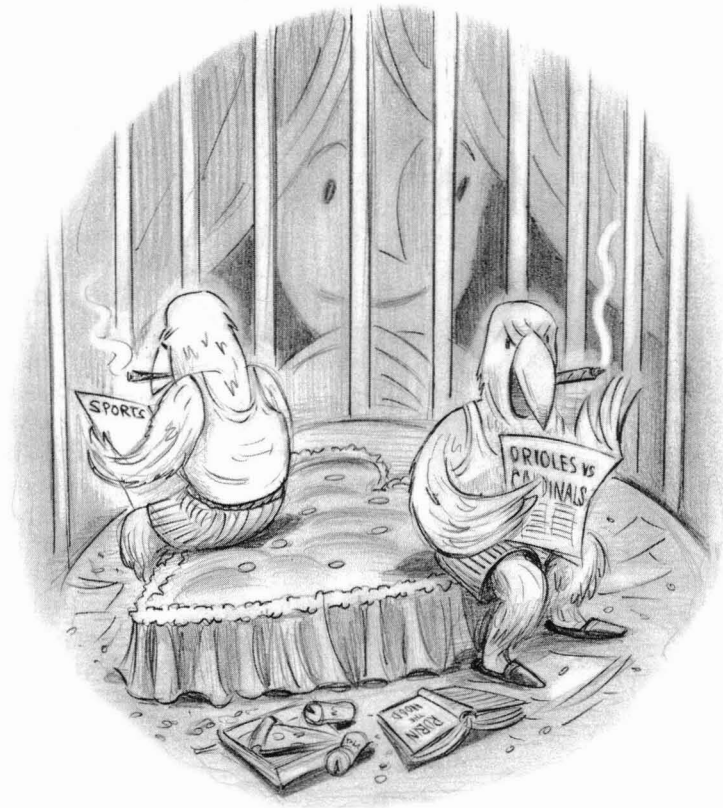
The Red Siskin *Carduelis cucullatus* is a four inch finch that has been extensively trapped in its native Venezuela. The siskins' rich colors of dark red and jet black began them on a journey to their demise. Their feathers and skins were very popular earlier this century as ornaments on ladies'

hats. Later, the Spanish began to cross-breed the Red Siskin with canaries, to inject a wild note in their songs and to promote an orange colored canary. A very small percentage of hybrid male offspring were fertile and could successfully reproduce offspring. This produced a red-orange canary, the red factor, which was prized by many throughout the world. Unfortunately for the Red Siskin, it then became one of the most sought-after birds in existence, creating a market very devastating to the wild populations.

This past August, a Siskin Summit was held in Kansas City, Missouri. Many project breeders attended this "peak experience" as it is referred to, and spoke on various topics. Professor Jim Hardin, Captive Wildlife Management at the University of Wisconsin, spoke on keeping wild traits in captive-bred flocks. Steve Fowler, a physicist-turned-bird breeder, spoke on designing the siskin breeding facility to minimize disease transmission. The Venezuelans were most impressed with his "modular breeding buildings" that housed the siskins and asked for blueprints to design the same in Venezuela (they, too, would like to establish their own breeding facility for Red Siskins).

The main guest speakers were two gentlemen from Venezuela, Professor Robert Smith and Antonio Rivero. Rivero is the world's authority on wild Red Siskins. He knows their territory, behavior and numbers in the wild. It saddened us all to learn from him that wildlife biologists in Venezuela have spotted fewer than 10 Red Siskins in their last stronghold, the western states of Lara and Falcon, the past year. If this is true, this species may well be biologically extinct in the wild.

The problem with having only a few individuals in any group of animals is that the gene pool becomes extremely limited with no introduction of new genes. In a larger population, there are members of the group who inherit different genetic material which will



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give them a better resistance to some viruses or diseases. This enables them to continue reproducing with more genetic variability within their own species, thus creating a much more viable population.

Professor Smith reported on future national faunal preserves. The Venezuelan government has proposed to protect any future released flocks of Red Siskins in hopes of sustaining wild populations of this lovely bird. Smith also showed slides of some of the siskin's favorite food sources in the wild, many which can be found growing in the U.S.

Another problem compounding the endangered status of the Red Siskin is that people in South America keep it as a cage bird with no intent of raising any babies. "Everybody owns a Red Siskin" a Trinidadian recently told me. This, too, compounds the Red Siskin's problems. The people love their brilliant colors and the songs of the male Red Siskins but do not understand the difficult situation the birds are facing today.

Red Siskins have been shipped around the world by the thousands. A lot of the "old" genetic material needed to sustain this species, even in captivity alone, may lie in these South American cages. Europe currently has the largest numbers of captive Red Siskins. It is believed by some ornithologists there that perhaps 50 percent of their captive Red Siskins contain hybrid genes. In Germany, for example, many Red Siskins have been

crossed with the Hooded Green Siskin *S. megallanicus* in attempts to produce a larger siskin that could withstand colder temperatures and be bred outdoors.

The RSP goals are to produce a genetically diverse, disease-free population of Red Siskins for eventual release back into the wild territories of Venezuela. We are forever searching out new sources in Venezuela to help in this endeavor. Obviously, prior to ever releasing this species, we must be assured that illegal trapping has been halted and anyone caught doing so will face maximum fines and jail sentences. This will require a great deal of education on the government's part and by other ornithological organizations located in Venezuela.

Another pragmatic reality for this beautiful finch is that a trapper can feed his family for weeks from the sale of one Red Siskin. Today, because their numbers in the wild have been greatly diminished, this has pushed black market prices of Red Siskins higher enabling a trapper to support his family *months* for trapping and selling a Red Siskin. The trapper receives a very small income for a Red Siskin compared to what other bird dealers "down the line" receive for each transaction. It's not unusual for prices to be doubled with each deal.

The Red Siskin has been a protected species in Venezuela since the 1940s, when it lost out to the troupial to being their national bird. It has been internationally protected by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (F&WS) has also placed it on the Endangered Species Act (ESA), making it necessary for one to obtain a federal permit for any commercial transactions across state lines. Unfortunately again for the gorgeous Red Siskin, these laws have created a larger black market wherein people choose to go underground with their birds. Even though F&WS permits are only \$25 and good for seven years, people do not like to be told what to do with what they have so they choose to become illegitimate siskin breeders.

Our RSP Director, Kevin Gorman, is a scientist in New York state who enjoys keeping up with the newest avian technology. This year we will be purchasing kits for performing isoenzyme analysis on the project birds.

This will enable us to identify any pure blooded Red Siskins and eradicate from the project those birds that carry hybrid genes.

Realizing that our captive population was derived from a limited number of breeders, project birds may not exhibit all the genetic material the wild populations in Venezuela once had. The RSP represents a strong cross-section of available Red Siskins in the U.S. It's easy to believe you have a true Red Siskin when, in fact, it may contain hybrid genes from its parent's background. It is imperative that our captive population of Red Siskins remains pure and has the largest gene pool possible since they are the only birds we are able to draw upon for maintaining the species.

Gorman is greatly appreciated in the avicultural community for his achievements with the RSP. He has also received a couple awards from high school students. One was a plaque that had a chalk drawing of a male Red Siskin looking out a window at the world. Inscribed on the plaque was *Endeavor to Persevere*. It reads, "To one rare individual who believes a loss of species should never be just a way of life."

The other award is a poem to Gorman which reads, in part, "Realize everyone what you're doing hurting and killing these outstanding looking birds. Come on people! Just take time and do what's right for these endangered siskins and donate some effort to try and save these intelligent birds filled with color so bright that they make your eyes kick in and light up...."

Gorman recently took a trip to Germany where there is interest in forming a breeding consortium for captive-raised Red Siskins. Members of the consortium will be performing isoenzyme analysis (with the assistance of the RSP) on their birds and they plan to donate some offspring to the RSP. We are already completing applications to the F&WS for importing these birds. With the passage of The Wild Bird Conservation Act here in the U.S. and tighter restrictions on importing birds, the RSP is fortunate to already be recognized as a legitimate breeding consortium by F&WS.

Mary Cahow is an RSP breeder from the University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point, Biology Dept. She has been studying vocalization patterns of wild

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Red Siskins and comparing them to the voice prints of captive-raised Red Siskins to see how much domesticity has changed their dialect. She will be speaking at the next Siskin Summit which will be held at the AFA's national convention in August in Knoxville, Tennessee. Cahow is also working with the Vortex Computer Program which is a simulation showing how long an endangered species' population will last if the population is started with a small number of birds. It determines the genetic fitness of the population. This program also projects what the species' survivability will be if exposed to disease, natural disasters, transfers out of the flocks and various other pressures. This will be a big help to the RSP in predicting how genetically fit future Red Siskins in captivity will be for release or long term preservation of the species.

Gail Gatewood-Colwell, Ph.D., is another project breeder who helps keep morale up. A New Mexico psychologist, she understands the grief and tragic experiences people go through when trying to reproduce an endangered species. Losses are emphasized in one's mind because of the rarity and importance of each bird. She reminds fellow breeders who may have lost eggs, adults, chicks, etc., "You're not a failure if you're still trying! . . . be more objective, and less sentimental . . . *we are doing the hard part!* . . . this is the trench work . . . the front line!" Gail and her husband Kirby have converted their home to a home for Red Siskins. We laugh over the time she spilled some seed for the siskins and when her carpet was cleaned, sprouts popped up all over for easy pickin's. Gail will also speak at the upcoming Siskin Summit.

The speakers at the August 4th-6th '94 AFA convention feature people who specialize in Australian and African species. Anybody can attend; there will be a separate registration for those who want to attend only the Siskin Summit which will be held Saturday. Other speakers include Professor Rainer Erhart and Graeme Hyde. Professor Erhart spent six months in Puerto Rico doing field studies on feral populations of birds, including the Red Siskin. Many Red Siskins escaped years ago from a shipment to Puerto Rico.

Graeme Hyde is a very well known Australian aviculturist. He is speaking



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for the AFA convention and will be asked to speak on Red Siskin breeders in Australia and any conservation efforts being undertaken there. For information on the convention, please contact the AFA's Home Office in Phoenix, Arizona at 1-800-BIRD-CALL.

Project breeders donate their expertise to raising these birds and are not reimbursed for their time and care of the birds. The AFA-RSP pays all shipping costs and other expenses such as phone consultation, etc. But mostly this is run strictly on a voluntary basis.

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Duro-test Corporation, which supplies at a discount Vita-Lite bulbs to aid in avian reproductive performance;

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dearly love.

We also greatly appreciate all individuals who donate money to help support the project and we list their names in our bi-monthly *Siskin News*.

The isoenzyme analyses will cost the project a great sum of money, as will other duties connected with running this operation. Please feel free to contact the author with any questions you might have. If you would like to make a *tax-deductible* contribution and become an RSP supporter, please make your check (U.S. dollars) payable to the **AFA-Red Siskin Project** and send it to Yvonne Patterson, Promotional Director, at 10735 East 40 Highway, Independence, MO 64055.

Or, if you'd like to receive something for your money, the AFA-RSP has various items for sale:

- *New* design of Red Siskin T-shirts, showing trio of birds (male, hen and offspring on branches) \$18 plus \$2.00 shipping and handling (S&H) as seen in this *Watchbird* issue advertisement.

- *Old* design of Red Siskin T-shirts, showing countries of U.S. and Venezuela, and pair of birds. Shirt explains, "Hatched here in captivity" and

"Released here in the wild." \$12 plus \$2.00 S&H.

- Signed and numbered prints, limited edition (as seen in March/April '94 *Watchbird* ad) of two pairs of Red Siskins on a Pringamosa plant. \$25 for black and white or \$50 for colored.

- Signed and numbered prints, limited edition (as seen in March/April '94 *Watchbird* ad) of two pairs of Red Siskins with three young in the wild. \$10 unmatted (8-1/2" x 10"), \$15 (double mat) and \$20 (quadruple mat). Mats reflect colors found in painting.

- VHS tape of Professors Antonio Rivero and Robert Smith talking at '93 Siskin Summit, Rivero on food sources of Red Siskins in the wild, habitat and current status, Smith on governmental faunal preserves. \$19.95 plus \$3.00 shipping and handling.

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