CONSERVATION

The Black-hooded Red Siskin

(An interview with Patricia Demko) by Herschel Frey Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Recently Herschel Frey interviewed fellow Pittsburgher, Pat Demko, a long-time successful breeder and exhibitor of canaries and siskins. In 1980 Pat received a Silver A.F.A. AVY Award for outstanding achievement in exhibiting color-bred canaries. She has, in fact, won three Kellogg Awards and many best-in-show awards with both her canaries and her siskins.

Pat is one of but a handful of American aviculturists with an ongoing breeding program for the Venezuelan red siskin (Spinus cucullatus). This small, finch-like bird, which inhabits the semi-arid scrub country of Venezuela, is quite rare in that country and has been placed on the Endangered Species list. If its numbers in captivity are to increase, it will only be through the efforts of such capable and dedicated fanciers as Pet Demko. Her commitment to this goal is clearly demonstrated in what she has to say below.

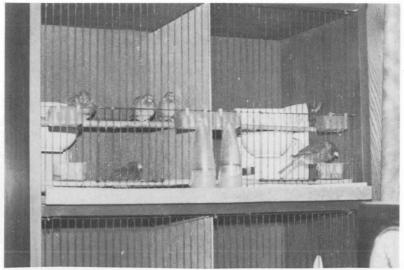
Herschel: Pat, wby is it, do you think, that mostly canary breeders get into siskins, and what, in particular, attracted you to this bird?

Pat: I think some canary breeders get into them, initially, because they intend to run them into their canaries, crossbreed them, produce hybrids, in order to increase depth of color. Then they find out that canaries are now as deep in color as we are going to get them, and there's no point in breeding these hybrids, that they will be smaller and with more variegation. Currently there are few breeders of the Venezuelan siskin with more than one or two pair, but in general they are becoming a lot more serious about producing pure siskins. I haven't had any inquiries in years from people who want a male, for example, to use with canaries - people are seeking pairs or trios, and this is a hopeful development.

I saw my first siskins at a bird show in Ohio in 1974 and I was immediately "hooked". They *are* beautiful and have a fine song.

Herschel: Would you say that we have a large enough genetic pool of these birds in this country to insure hardy, sustainable future generations?

Pat: No, probably not. Ideally, we need to acquire some wild-caught



birds to introduce into the domestic supply. Some groups in Venezuela have become quite concerned about the growing scarcity of their siskin and have begun to think about possible ways to insure its survival. I don't think we can count on other countries as a source of new bloodlines. But the siskin is not really as delicate or touchy as many people think. This year I'm breeding from 1980 and 1981 hens, in addition to younger ones, and I'm convinced that if enough of us make a real effort to firmly establish this siskin in the U.S., we can do so.

Herschel: What, in your experience, are the best bousing arrangements? Are they particularly aggressive? Can you mix them with other birds?

Pat: I've never kept them with other birds, except canaries. They *are* more aggressive than a canary, both the males and the females. They're pretty rugged for their size. If there's any fighting, it's usually the siskin that initiates the altercation. And naturally there's more squabbling during the breeding season. Since you can't keep two males together during this time, the breeder must have a sufficient number of cages.

I keep them in a 10' flight when they're not breeding. It converts into five breeding cages. Until January or February they are kept together, with little bickering.

Herschel: *Tell me about diet. Are there any particular problems or requirements for their diet?*

Pat: I feed the ABBA European Finch-Siskin Diet (1800), but I reduce the percentage of thistle content by adding other seeds. Many people lose their siskins or otherwise have problems because their birds eat too much thistle. They love it so much that they will favor it almost to the exclusion of any other, and inevitably you get liver complications. They can go light in short order and you're quickly in deep trouble. So I strongly recommend that you carefully regulate the diet. I accomplish this by not refilling the seed dish until it is almost empty. This way I can get them to eat enough millet and canary seed, instead of too much thistle. Starting with the young birds, mostly hand-fed and good eaters, I limit them to around 20 percent thistle. They also get rape, steel-cut oats, soaked seed (rinsed and drained), and ABBA nesting food - no. 92 for non-colorbred. They also get greens every day, usually mustard, to bring out color, since it is high in vitamin A. I've not seen a wild-caught male, but

Pat Demko's breeding cages for her siskins.

they likely don't lose much color in captivity. And they get plenty of grit, cuttlebone, and chicken eggshell. I start eggfood in December, in small quantities, gradually increasing to a treatcup full per pair. Once the hen is incubating they only get plain seed and water. I add a little Vionate vitamins to their food and I prepare a mix for the fledglings once they are eating on their own: ground hulled sunflower, high protein baby powder, and sunflower meal.

Herschel: Do you vary the diet to bring them into breeding condition?

Pat: Yes, a little bit, they begin to get eggfood. But it's mostly the temperature and the number of light hours that control the cycle. The temperature can rise to above 100° in the summer; in fact, it never falls below 80° even in the winter. But siskins seem to thrive in these high temperatures. I've never seen them pant or hold their wings out. In fact, the warmer it gets, the more active they become. From a low of 9 hours I increase gradually to 14 hours of light.

Herschel: Ok, now tell me about the breeding procedure.

Pat: Well, when early winter rolls around I set up the males into the individual breeding cages, measuring about 23" wide, 20" deep and 20" high. Solid partitions divide the cages, so that the only birds the breeders can see are those that are across and at some distance from the pairs I have set up. The males can be separated into these individual cages for as long as a month before they are given a hen. This seems to conserve their energy for the nesting process. All the while, during this waiting period, the males constantly sing, and this incites the females to come into condition.

Herschel: Have you tried the "natural selection" method for pairing, or do you arrange marriages because of bloodline considerations?

Pat: No, I have always paired the birds the way I think best, and with no problem of low fertility. At some point, however, I would like to set up a planted room with several pairs. If they're not crowded I don't think there would be too much fighting.

Herschel: What kind of nests do you use?

Pat: Regardless of their cage, siskins like to be high up. I place the nests so high in the cage that there's little space between the sitting hen and the top of the cage. They'll select a seed dish instead, if you place the nest too low. The cages are designed with an access door



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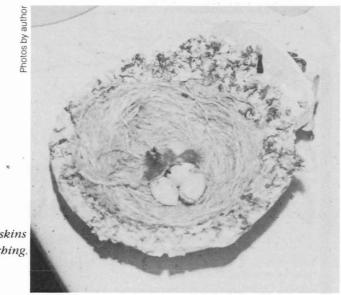
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Baby siskins just hatching.

to the nest for any checking you need to do, so that the nest can be taken out quite easily — and I do this often. They don't object, and even if they did, I'd remove the nest anyway. On the other hand, once nest building begins, I'm careful not to make changes inside or around the cage, since they get upset at this. I'm even careful not to change the color of the seed dishes.

I use a 4" plastic canary nest, lined with felt. I used to tape in a burlap liner, but they always pulled it out, so I went to the felt, which I sew in. Some don't make a good nest out of the burlap strings and goat hair I give them. But it doesn't matter, because they will incubate, hatch and rear the young on the felt liner, with no sign of any nesting material. Only the hens build the nest, and many males remove most of the material. Once the hens start incubating the nest building ceases and the males leave them alone. Occasionally I remove the male and have never had a hen desert the nest because her male has been removed. I normally set them on the fourth egg. The eggs are clear white, so in 4 days or so you can determine on sight if they are fertile, due to their changing color. The normal clutch of 4 eggs - 3 is unusual and 6 is rare - will hatch in 12 to 14 days. I don't sprinkle the eggs for extra humidity, but then I keep the room at 70 percent.

Herschel: You handfeed most of the young, don't you?

Pat: Yes, but only in order to get more clutches. The siskins are actually excellent parents and will do the job perfectly well on their own. I usually handfeed the first two clutches and let them handle a third. I will even handfeed the third clutch if it is late in the breeding season. I remove the babies at 5 to 6 days, up to 10 or 12 days, but this is a bit old. They fledge at around 16 days. It seems to take longer when the mother feeds, and depending on how many young she has. I keep them in a hospital cage at 90 degrees and lower the heat gradually to zero as they become fully feathered out. The hen ceases to incubate at 4 days, perhaps because the temperature is so high in their room. While she sits during the day, she will perch on the edge of the nest at night. Obviously, they're warm enough at night. The hens put up a big fuss when I steal their babies. If you've had the young out of the nest for more than a few hours and change your mind and decide to return them, the hen won't accept them.

Herschel: *How often do you feed them, and what is your recipe?*

Pat: Every two hours, the crop will be empty at that time. They beg very



Baby black-booded red siskins.

well, until the time they fledge. At that point they're more interested in flying than eating. So you have to coax them.

At their youngest, I take a little bit of boiled egg yolk and mix it up with warm water to a liquid consistency, adding enough ABBA Green nesting food to thicken it up somewhat. As the babies get larger I gradually use a thicker mixture. To wean them, I force them to take the food from the feeder, instead of putting it directly into their mouth, despite their preference. Once they're flying and won't stay in the nest any longer, I put them in a cage with an older bird and I increase the time interval between feedings and the amount I feed each time. I actually count how many mouthfuls I give them – about 14, but some will take up to 20. The males will beg indefinitely, while the females are easier to wean. The females are always the first to eat on their own. One would think that since the males are more aggressive, they would be the first to eat on their own.

You get more males than hens. Not because of a higher mortality for that sex, for once they hatch I rarely lose one. I would ideally want to raise more hens than males.

Herschel: Any medical problems?

Pat: Not really. You have to watch the diet, as I have said. And since they are so active you should inspect the cage thoroughly to make sure there are no spaces in which they could get their feet caught. I've had this happen a couple of times.

Herschel: *Any points of comparison with the canary?*

Pat: The siskin has a very nice song, quite high-pitched. Some will sing longer than others. The females also sing. The courting song is much more forceful and rushed than the solitary song — the same as with the canary. Siskins are more active than canaries. And weaned young will sometimes pull feathers, perhaps they're bored. So I hang strings in the cages to cut down on this bad habit. In a large walk-in flight this probably wouldn't happen.

I've begun to experiment with fostering siskins under canaries, to cut down a bit on handfeeding. You have to wait until the babies are several days old to transfer them, and you have to choose a canary hen that already has babies. Few canaries that haven't already hatched their own would accept transferred newborn siskins. But the canaries that I've tried so far have done an excellent job.