

Bloedel Bird of the Month – The Red Siskin



The Red Siskin is a South American bird in the Finch family. It is the same family as the Canary. The wild Canary is yellow and greenish with streaks of brown. Breeding Red Siskins with Canaries over the last century has given Canaries red genes. All Canaries that have red in them have some Red Siskin ancestors. Taking Red Siskins from the wild has put them at risk of extinction. Trade in Red Siskins became illegal in the 1940's, but this did not stop it. Bloedel Conservatory has a pair of legally sourced, captive-bred Red Siskins. The head of the male is black; that of the female is grey.

The Red Siskin *Spinus cucullatus* (formerly *Carduelis cucullata*) is 'Endangered'. The Red Siskin used to be a common bird. Nearly a century of capture for breeding has reduced their numbers a lot. Now there are only 1500 to 7000 of them left in the wild.¹ The red-gene gain of the Canary has been at the expense of the Red Siskin.² The Red Siskin is in Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). If you see any for sale, even if banded, it is best to check with the CITES enforcement office.³

The 'redness gene' that allows birds to have red feathers has another use in allowing birds to see red colours. The 'redness gene' does not colour the skin and feathers of every bird that has it. For red feathers, the bird must have the gene active in the skin in addition to the retina.⁴

Genes alone will give orange birds but not red ones. To be red, a siskin must have a source of carotene in its diet. Carotene is in carrots as well as in many other foods. Broccoli is a good source of beta-carotene. The feather colour is a result of the interaction of the genes and the environment.⁵

¹ <http://datazone.birdlife.org/species/factsheet/red-siskin-spinus-cucullatus>

² <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2016/06/sacrificing-one-species-to-change-the-color-of-another/486425/>

³ <https://www.thedodo.com/national-bird-day-2015-the-red-856034654.html>

⁴ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/grrlscientist/2016/05/20/how-birds-became-red/#2bef773a23f9>

⁵ <https://www.jci.org/articles/view/21127>

Red Siskins



Male

Female



Yellow Canary – Not Descended from Red Siskins



Red Factor Canaries – Descended From Red Siskins



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