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Red Siskin *Sporagra cucullata*

Chris Sharpe

Continuing our series on Neotropical birds categorised as Globally Threatened by IUCN and BirdLife International, Chris Sharpe discusses the ‘cardenalito’, a brightly coloured finch from northern South America.

Better known in our region as the *cardenalito*—by dint of its striking, largely scarlet plumage—Red Siskin *Sporagra cucullata* has long attracted the attention of the millinery and cagebird markets. Even before it was described for science in 1820, this finch was being trapped for its feathers. Interest in the species quickly spread to distant continents, judging from an account by a British collector from Fairfield, near Liverpool, “who received [a Red Siskin] with a few other rare birds from the Spanish Main” (Swainson 1820).

The 20th century

Despite such pressures, at the start of the 20th century Red Siskin was still considered common and widespread in its (then) known range of northern Venezuela. The distribution stretched across the mountainous regions north of the Orinoco—from the Andes in the west to the town of Carúpano in the *oriente* (Phelps & Phelps 1963).

The Siskin’s downfall was its unique and inadvertent ability to impart ‘red factor’ (pigment) to domesticated canaries (which are derived from Atlantic Canary *Serinus canaria*). During the first decades of the 20th century thousands of Red Siskins were captured and exported as cagebirds to be interbred with canaries.

By the 1940s the impact on its population had become clear and its capture and export were made illegal in Venezuela. Even so, exploitation persisted during the 1940s and 1950s, with bird-catchers—who presumably had no motive to exaggerate—claiming that “hundreds, even thousands... were sent to Curaçao annually” (Coats & Phelps 1985).

By the 1960s, the Phelps—who, given their exhaustive coverage of the country’s avifauna, were arguably in the best position to know—noted that Red Siskin was: “on the way to extinction because of exploitation as a cagebird. In 25 years of collecting, we have not seen a single one [in the field; the Phelps Ornithological Collection’s three specimens derived from cagebirds]. All [known]

localities... were collected 50–100 years ago” (Phelps & Phelps 1963).

Largely as a result of the Phelps’ lobbying, Red Siskin was added to Appendix I of CITES in 1975, and to the US Endangered Species Act the following year. Despite these measures, by 1981 the wild population in Venezuela was estimated at a mere c.600–800 individuals, with c.350–500 in the west and c.250–300 in the centre, having reportedly been extirpated in the east of the country (Coats & Phelps 1985).

A more optimistic, though frustratingly confused picture was painted by Rivero (1983, 2004) who put the figure variously at 2,000–20,000 or 6,000 individuals. Unfortunately, as indicated by Collar *et al.* (1992), the field data, calculations and resulting figures are difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile. In the 1940s, a small population had also been found in near Cúcuta (Norte de Santander) in neighbouring Colombia, with presumably feral populations established in Puerto Rico and Trinidad. Specimens had been obtained in Cuba, but were (in my view) probably not of wild provenance.

Current status, and a remarkable discovery

Thirty-five years later, the situation in its former stronghold of Venezuela is much the same. There has been no robust population assessment in the intervening years. Estimates range from 250–1,000, perhaps as many as 4,000 individuals, distributed over seven states (Rojas-Suárez *et al.* 2008), to more optimistic predictions that as many as 6,000 individuals survive (Rodríguez-Clark *et al.* 2014, 2015). In my view, the true total of surviving Red Siskins in Venezuela seems more likely to be at the lower end of the range. Moreover, pressure from trapping is likely to be ongoing, given that a highly-organised covert bird-trade network persists in the country.

What about elsewhere? The only known extant populations cover a tiny part of Colombia, north

Venezuela and south Guyana. The Colombian population may persist, given a single record in 2000 (e.g. López-Lanús 2000, S. J. Alvarez *in litt.* 2015). Populations in Trinidad and Puerto Rico appear not to have survived, with the most recent records in 1960 (French 2012) and 1999 (J. C. Eitner & M. Oberle *in litt.* 2015) respectively.

Out of the blue (or should that be 'out of the red?'), the outlook for Red Siskin assumed an unexpectedly positive hue when, in 2000, a population of perhaps 675 birds was found in the Rupununi savannas of southern Guyana (Robbins *et al.* 2003). Given that this population lies an amazing 950 km from the nearest Venezuelan locality this is surely one of the most remarkable ornithological discoveries of recent times. The population is speculated to number in the low thousands.

Guyana's Red Siskins

Given the distance separating the populations, it is understandable that questions are asked about whether the same taxon is involved. Guyanan birds appear to be morphologically identical to those from Venezuelan. Intriguingly, however, habitat preferences differ somewhat between the populations. Red Siskin occurs in lowland *Trachypogon–Curatella* savanna in Guyana, yet shuns large extensions of apparently similar habitat in Venezuela, where it is associated with more humid foothills and coffee plantations (Robbins *et al.* 2003, Clement & Sharpe 2014). Genetic studies are under way; these may determine the relationship between the populations.

Bird-trapping is common and widespread in Guyana, and there have been a few incidents of Red Siskins being captured and subsequently released (L. Ignacio & A. Wilson *per* B. Coyle *in litt.* 2016). Overall, however, trapping does not currently appear to be a serious threat, since bird-catchers claim that—unlike in Venezuela—there is no local market for the species, which is now legally protected in Guyana.

In similar encouraging vein, the Guyanese population occurs almost entirely on the 4,400 km² Dadanawa Ranch property (see *Neotropical Birding* 2: 74–75), where managers have a long history of supporting conservation. Moreover, the discovery of the Rupununi siskins opens the possibility of finding further populations elsewhere in southern Guyana as well as in the adjacent Brazilian state of Roraima; there are no confirmed Brazilian records (A. C. Lees *in litt.* 2015), but at least one as yet undocumented sighting from very close to the border with Guyana gives some hope.

The future, overall

In the light of its small population, which has fallen significantly, and relentless pressure from trappers, Red Siskin has long been considered amongst the most-threatened birds in Venezuela and a top priority for bird conservation (Collar *et al.* 1992, Rodríguez *et al.* 2004, Sharpe 2008). Nationally, the *cardenalito* is considered Critically Endangered (Sharpe 2008, Rodríguez-Clark *et al.* 2015). Globally, the species is regarded as Endangered (BirdLife International 2016). Although its global numbers must be in the few thousands, there is hope that its remaining populations are remote enough to survive persecution and habitat loss.

A recent positive step towards conserving the species has been the creation of the Red Siskin Initiative (www.RedSiskin.org) by a consortium of organisations from three countries. These include Provita (Venezuela), Instituto Venezolano de Investigaciones Científicas (Venezuela), Parque Zoológico y Botánico Bararida (Barquisimeto, Venezuela), South Rupununi Conservation Society (Guyana), National Finch and Softbill Society (USA), and the Smithsonian Institution (USA).

Members collaborate on a range of measures to conserve Red Siskins both in the wild and in captivity. Activities range from field surveys and genetic analyses to community projects throughout the species's range. A decent summary is on Michael Braun's blog (<http://blog.umd.edu/braunlab/red-siskin-conservation/>). Future plans include reintroductions in Venezuela and promoting bird-friendly, certified shade coffee (B. Coyle *in litt.* 2016), since such plantations are a characteristic feature of the Andean foothills in Venezuela and provide important habitat for this and other globally threatened species such as Cerulean Warbler *Setophaga cerulea*. In a modest way Neotropical Bird Club has also helped the bird through an NBC Awards Programme grant for fieldwork in Colombia.

Such targeted conservation interventions give hope that, with luck, the tenacious *cardenalito* may indefinitely elude the trappers. If so, we can justifiably hope that the Red Siskin will eventually regain its status as a bird symbolic of wild places—a species whose extraordinary plumage will continue catch the eye of *campesinos*, indigenous people and birders alike without threat to its existence.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Nigel Collar, who sent me to Venezuela's *oriente* on a wild siskin chase 30 years ago; it would be seven years before I set eyes on my first bird. Pepe Clavijo



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This and facing page

1 William Swainson's lithograph of a male Red Siskin *Sporagra cucullata*, depicted from a specimen obtained in "the Spanish Main", and published as part of the original description in 1820. (Reproduced from Wikimedia.)

2 Male Red Siskin *Sporagra cucullata*, site withheld, July 2006 (Gerhard Hoffman; www.hofmann-photography.de)

3 Male and female Red Siskins in the hand. Holding the right-hand bird is Asaph Wilson, senior conservation ranger with South Rupununi Conservation Society, one of the partner organisations in the Red Siskin Initiative (Chung Liu).

4 Fitting a male Red Siskin *Sporagra cucullata* with a colour ring to enable individual identification in the field (Chung Liu).

5 Colour-ringed male Red Siskin *Sporagra cucullata* following release (Chung Liu)

6 Male Red Siskin *Sporagra cucullata*, site withheld, April 2015 (Jhonathan Miranda)





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7 Male Red Siskin *Sporagra cucullata* perched on a branch with *Tillandsia* bromeliad, larger specimens of which are used as nest sites, site withheld, April 2015 (Jhonathan Miranda)

8 Introduced in 2007 as one of a series of bank notes recognising the country's threatened fauna (in collaboration with Provita and employing artwork from the Libro Rojo de la fauna venezolana), Venezuela's Bs.100 note bears a reproduction of Mercedes Madriz's painting of a pair of Red Siskins *Sporagra cucullata* against the backdrop of the mountains of the Avila National Park (Jon Paul Rodríguez).

9 Partner organisations in the Red Siskin Initiative



Parque Zoológico y Botánico Bararida



Smithsonian Institution



RUHL WALKER Architects



SOUTH CONSERVATION SOCIETY RUPUNUNI

9

Michelangeli, Jorge Pérez-Emán, Mary Lou Goodwin, Mark Sokol, Joe Thompson, Erik Mølgaard, Stig Kjærgaard Rasmussen, Jesper Meedom, and the Danish Ornithological Society (BirdLife Denmark) shared time looking for (and occasionally finding) siskins in Venezuela, while Gary Sway and Leroy Ignacio took me to the reliable sites on Dadanawa Ranch in Guyana with Rockjumper Birding Tours.

Silvia J. Alvarez, Diego Calderón, Jack Clinton Eitnjar, Mark Oberle, Alex Lees, and Mike Braun kindly commented on status outside Venezuela; Brian Coyle reviewed and improved a draft and was quick to supply obscure bibliography. Brian Coyle, Ariany García Rawlins, Jhonathan Miranda, Miguel Angel Arvelo, Jon Paul Rodríguez, Kate Rodríguez-Clark, and the credited photographers helped source images.

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CHRISTOPHER J. SHARPE

Provita, Caracas, Venezuela

E-mail: sharpebird@gmail.com