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### Drink Coffee Responsibly, Save an Endangered Bird Species

November 21, 2016 | [Lauren Ward](#)

Coffee progressives and enthusiasts have probably heard of fair trade certified coffee – a sustainable development practice that facilitates responsible working conditions for coffee bean farmers often marginalized by the industry. But how many people have ever heard of bird-friendly coffee?

The staple beverage is consumed globally – experts estimate that Americans alone drink about 382 million cups of coffee each day – which is why many coffee farmers in Venezuela now favor sun-soaked plantations that significantly boost coffee production over traditional plantations with distinct groves of shady tall trees.

Unsurprisingly, modern plantations have proven to be inhospitable to many

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bird species that rely on forests to forage and live. This issue, along with many others, is one of the biggest threats to a Venezuelan finch called the red siskin and bird-friendly coffee just might be one of the most innovative ways to deal with it.

“It’s a realistic approach to conservation, where we’re working with market opportunities,” says coordinator of Smithsonian’s Red Siskin Initiative Brian Coyle to the [Atlantic](#). A bird-friendly certification allows coffee growers to sell their goods a higher price allowing them to compete with environmentally damaging plantations.

Red siskins have been fighting an uphill battle for some time now. One of the most endangered birds species in the world, they have nearly been eradicated due to an intercontinental effort to export them out of the country. Why? Bird breeders want to evolve yellow canaries to have red feathers by using red siskin genes.

Conservation biologists had all but given up on the species when they encountered a lucky break. In April 2000, ornithologist Mark Robbins, geneticist Mike Braun and colleagues discovered a previously unknown population of red siskins living in Guyana. The team kept the birds’ whereabouts mostly secret until federal protection could be enacted into law several years later.

From this, the [Red Siskin Initiative](#) was born. Headed by Mike Braun and the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute, a team of scientists including Brian Coyle and partners in Venezuela are studying the species to understand their ecology and natural history in the field, identify appropriate release sites for future populations of red siskins, mitigate wildlife trafficking, and protect and expand habitat. That’s where bird-friendly coffee comes in. Without any habitat to return to, Braun sees little point in reintroducing the birds to their native environment. However, partnering with coffee growers has been both a success for red siskins and for the people who steward the land.

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