CHARLIE BEAT THE BAN

When the Commonwealth Government placed a sudden total ban on the import of birds into Australia in 1949 one of our then members, Charlie Knuckey, had a consignment of Black-hooded Red Siskins, *Carduelis cucullata*, on route from South America. Back then, of course, shipment was by boat and the voyage took several weeks from South America to Australia.

When Mr. Knuckey enquired about the fate of his birds, legally ordered, and shipped, prior to announcement of the ban, he was told they would be destroyed on arrival. Charlie was, to put it mildly, far from happy with this decision. However, the authorities were adamant, destruction would be the Siskins fate. In those days, brutal as it may seem, it was common practice to incinerate live illegal small vertebrates seized by customs.

When birds and other “pet-type” animals regularly arrived by sea it was one of the perks of a ship’s butcher to trade in these animals. Mr. Knuckey managed to get a message to the butcher on the ship bringing his birds asking that he be kept fully informed of when the ship was due to dock in Port Adelaide. The butcher contacted him and Charlie was waiting on the wharf as the ship docked.

Customs officers duly seized the birds, and Charlie’s entreaties to save them at first fell on deaf ears. However, when a more senior officer was consulted he was so taken with the beauty of the Siskins that he agreed to allow them to be released subject to strict quarantine conditions. At that time the Adelaide Zoo was an official quarantine facility, as I assume it probably still is. So off to three months quarantine in the zoo went the Siskins. There was, however, a small snag with this plan...the zoo wanted nothing to do with the birds whatsoever. Consequently, Charlie had to go to the zoo every day after work for the full three months to feed, water and clean out the his birds.

When the three months were up Mr. Knuckey was able to take the birds home and release them in his aviaries. The senior customs official’s decision to disregard the new avian import ban, resulted in this then almost nonexistent species in Australian aviaries being established as the basis of the stock we hold today.

So, Black-hooded Red Siskin breeders of Australia, next time you admire your birds, charge a glass and raise it in a toast to Charlie Knuckey and the customs official taken with the species’ beauty.