

THE HOODED SISKIN

Possibly one of the most difficult birds to breed, or should I say rear, the Hooded Siskin, during the breeding season presents many problems, and until their progeny are fully independent fanciers are very often forced to resort to unorthodox methods in an endeavour to increase their stocks. Fortunately these efforts have paid dividends, and accordingly a number of birds have been added to existing numbers, which in all probability would never have survived a stage beyond that of a fledgling in the nest. I must admit I am among the fanciers who have resorted to tactics that normally would not be attempted; most certainly the practice we adopted would not be recommended. More or less it could be considered a stab in the dark to overcome the adversities they have presented from time to time.



Generally, fully matured birds are no problem; in fact they are among the hardiest, and rarely will they take advantage of a comfortable shelter during inclement weather, and will always camp out in the open at night on the top of the tallest shrub in the open flight. First experiences are really worrying, particularly when they are noticed out in the open during the winter, settled for the night, and cold bleak weather prevailing. However, regardless of these habits, and the conditions they are capable of weathering, they still come up with their problems during each breeding season. As soon as the winter months have passed they again attain their beautiful, bright colour and soon come into breeding condition. The male gradually improves his song, and with wings drooped is a most conspicuous sight, and when finally

nesting has commenced they are at their best and are often heard in melodious song.

No preference is shown for any particular site; some will select a site in brush, others prefer to build in thickly-foliaged shrubs, the hen does all the building, and the material used consists of coconut fibre, teased up hessian, wool, cotton wool and fine dry grass and when completed it is a neat, cup-shaped structure, neatly lined with coconut fibre. Egg laying usually commences a few days after this is completed, and incubation commences when the first egg has been laid. These duties are carried out entirely by the hen. The incubation period is approximately 12 days, and they sit reasonably well, gently vacating the nest whenever they are unduly disturbed. After incubation, and for the first six or seven days, they spend a considerable time on the nest covering the chicks. After this period they relax this procedure, and depending on the weather may be seen off the nest for quite lengthy periods, returning to the nest towards evening to cover the young birds, and keep them warm. However, unfortunately, in all instances this procedure is not rigidly adhered to and when about ten days old they have a habit of neglecting to cover the chicks at night, and should this be experienced, chances are very remote of saving the young Siskins. This is most disappointing, and in desperation fanciers have taken the chance and removed the young from the nest as late as permissible, transferred them to a small box packed with material for warmth, and then returning them to the nest again at dawn. Others have resorted to taking nest and the contents, after having observed that the hen has no intention to sit on them, and placed them in warm quarters for the night, returning nest and young complete to its original position in the aviary at dawn. Gold Finches have been used as foster parents, and all these methods have been successful. It may involve a week or more of inconvenience, but the effort is worth it, particularly when eventually the young birds are seen in the aviary fully independent. I must confess I have resorted to these tactics, setting the alarm to make sure no slip would be made. I have been up at the crack of dawn, returned the young birds to their nest, and witnessed the pleasant sight of seeing the parent birds feed them soon after they were returned to the nest. It is remarkable the confidence this method develops after having been carried out successfully with these birds and other species, and here again I must admit that I have practiced it with other species, and some much more common than Siskins, and the results have been most gratifying and most certainly rewarding.

However, not all Siskins are a problem, and it is quite possible that an erratic pair may be quite the reverse the following season, and as ideal parents rear their progeny to independence without a hitch, or cause for

alarm. Their behaviour is hard to follow, particularly when their diet is exactly the same, conditions under which they are housed are identical, and weather conditions are relatively similar.

Catering for them is not a great problem; their diet differs from that of most birds, but is quite simple. Niger, crushed sunflower, crushed safflower, meets their requirements, and in season they relish the leaves of sunflowers and the seed heads of canary seed, also thistle heads. These should be grown in the aviary, and when matured sufficiently they strip the leaves on the sunflowers, starting with the bottom leaves and gradually working to the top, and eventually tackling the flower itself. When they have completed their task the remains are ready for the incinerator. The canary seed heads suffer a similar fate, and very few survive to mature. Thistle heads are stripped for the seed.

The parent birds, when rearing their young, are most attentive, diligently feeding throughout the day, and most concerned to park them, very often on the top of a shrub or brush. This again is alarming, but it is remarkable how they withstand the rigors of cold nights with only a small leaf covering them in most instances. However, with all their problems they make aviculture worthwhile and most interesting, and no doubt fanciers will continue to resort to unorthodox methods whenever the occasion arises for many more seasons to come in an endeavour to increase their numbers with these birds, and for that matter, many other species.

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