2022: A year of new life

The Red Siskin Initiative is celebrating its seventh year!

Reversing the extinction of a species is no easy task, and from the start, we have faced many challenges. These last few years have been no exception: inflation, the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, and the COVID-19 pandemic. However, as always, we continue to pour our efforts into overcoming these obstacles and achieving results.

Despite hardships, 2022 will be engraved in the history of RSI as a year full of hope, reminding us that dreams do come true. A year ago, breeding Red Siskins at the Venezuelan Conservation Center still seemed like a distant dream, but the team was not discouraged and continued to work hard.

Now, we can finally say, "We have successfully bred the first Red Siskins in Venezuela for conservation purposes!". This milestone brings us a step closer to our dream, of restoring self-sustaining populations of Red Siskins across their historical distribution.

We will be forever grateful to all our allies who have supported our journey, and to our collaborators who have helped forge what we are today.

We will continue to work hard knowing that you too will continue to be part of this journey in 2023 and beyond.

The Red Siskin Initiative Team
RSI Highlights 2022

First chicks born in captivity at the Red Siskin Conservation Center: It fills us with joy to share that the first Red Siskins have hatched at the RSCC. Thanks to the RSCC team’s meticulous work, all parents and eight fledglings are healthy and doing well. A promising future awaits these young birds, which represent an unforgettable milestone for RSI and a great step forward in the conservation of endangered species in Venezuela.

Safeguarding 600+ hectares of Red Siskin habitat in northern Venezuela: Thanks to support from the US Fish and Wildlife Service’s Neotropical Migratory Bird Act program, this year we added another 200 hectares in the Venezuelan Coastal Range to our project area, which brings the total of forest and agroforest habitat we have protected to 600+. We were able to do this because of a novel innovation developed by ACAFLO, a co-op that was founded by our participating producers. ACAFLO pioneered the idea of “Model Production Units”, which encourages neighboring producers to join our project. We are excited to build on this innovation to protect even more habitat in the future!

Reducing demand for threatened Venezuelan birds: With a generous award from the UK Government's Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund (IWTCF), we started a new project called “Flying Together” (Volando Juntos). We designed and are now implementing evidence-based campaigns to reduce demand for the Red Siskin (Spinus cucullatus) and the Yellow-shouldered Amazon (Amazona barbadensis), two threatened bird species with contrasting illegal trade dynamics. We are also creating behavior change toolkits and guides that will be adaptable for use with other species and circumstances. This work is getting our scientific collaborators noticed! Dr. Ada Sanchez-Mercado and her team were invited to present at Silent Forest – Songbird Trade Side Event as part of the CITES Conference of Parties, about their evidence of the negative effects that Europe’s current implementation of CITES has on wild Red Siskin populations. Europe exempts captive-bred birds from CITES permit requirements, and currently incorrectly presumes that all Red Siskins in Europe are captive-bred, which allows traffickers to launder wild birds through Europe.

Building a network against cage bird trafficking in South America: Together with Project ECHO, a distance collaboration model for medical, educational and now environmental conservation training at the University of New Mexico, American Bird Conservancy and Fundación Temaikén of Argentina, we launched our first ECHO workshop, which was focused on reducing trafficking of cage birds on the continent. Twelve organizations from Venezuela and Argentina participated over three sessions, presenting case studies of commonly trafficked bird species. This exchange represents a first effort to create a regional network of practitioners working to understand and reduce illegal trade of wildlife.

Photo credit from top to bottom: Enrique Azuaue, Génesis Cardozo, Colombia WCS, Leonel Ovalle-Moleiro.
More 2022 achievements

01 Understanding the Red Siskin and connecting with people

02 Rescuing, raising, and reintroducing more Red Siskins

03 Ensuring bird-friendly habitats

04 Promoting only sustainable use

05 Promoting program sustainability

Red siskin chick from the first successful breeding season at RSCC (2022). Photo by: Samuel Beomon.

The Red Siskin Initiative uses a multi-dimensional approach, including research, education, and conservation actions to save the endangered Red Siskin, following our action plan. Here are our achievements for the year 2022, by strategic area. Enjoy!
Strategic areas 1 and 2: Understanding the Red Siskin and Connecting with People

Collaborating scientists conduct field and lab research to better understand the ecology and genetics of this species, while we all use training, education, learning, outreach, and awareness-raising to promote conservation action.

2022 Achievements:

- **New bioacoustic program**: In February, we began the first phase of a bioacoustic monitoring program, in collaboration with Dr. Brian O’Shea and the South Rupununi Conservation Society. We deployed automated recording units (ARUs) to passively collect Red Siskin calls and songs. These recordings will be used to create an AI model to help with automatic identification of this species from future recordings with ARUs in Venezuela.

The next step will be to deploy ARUs in areas across the species' historic range in Venezuela that have been identified as suitable habitats, but have not yet been surveyed. This has the potential to improve our understanding of the species’ current status, distribution and movement ecology, and to help inform conservation interventions such as prioritizing areas for habitat protection. We are also applying for funds to deploy ARUs to investigate the persistence of Red Siskins in Puerto Rico.
• **AZA SAFE program exploration:** We led a scoping meeting with current and prospective partners about applying to the Association of Zoos and Aquariums Saving Animals From Extinction program. AZA SAFE programs harness the energy and public support of facilities across the US to move the needle on the conservation of a growing number of species. SAFE programs receive financial and logistical support from AZA.

The RSI team outlined our conservation goals and opportunities for collaboration, while fourteen potential partner facilities described their priorities for the future, and how these align with ongoing efforts on behalf of the Red Siskin. We are now preparing a draft application for SAFE which will allow RSI and other non-AZA partners to join forces with the collective expertise within AZA by building on established recovery plans, and implementing and measuring strategic conservation progress.

• **RSI website interest:** In 2022, we registered visits from more than 5200+ unique users from over ten countries, representing an increase of 13.3% over the previous year.

• **Social media participation:** This year we reached more than 1,500+ followers on Instagram and 1,800+ followers on Facebook. We also engaged followers with 210+ social media posts and received more than 5,000 comments.

• **2022 Newsletter:** We reached 800+ newsletter subscribers with our special edition press release, announcing successful breeding at the RSCC in September 2022 in both English and Spanish.

• **Red Siskin children’s book:** RSI worked with Arte Fulani and Mecha Coop to produce the children’s book, “The Day I Learned to Fly,” in both English and Spanish, which we hope to release soon. This story will reach children at their schools and homes to help them understand the threats that endanger the Red Siskin and how we all can help protect wild populations.

**Cover of our new children’s book: "The Day I Learned to Fly"**.
• **Earth Day celebration at the Campo Alegre School in Caracas:** We had the opportunity to talk about the Red Siskin Initiative with parents and students of all ages. We served our Bird Friendly coffee, Café Cardenalito, and held two reading sessions of our book “The Day I Learned to Fly” with 60 preschoolers who asked many questions about the Red Siskin.

• **Implementation partnerships:**

  **The International Red Siskin Specialist and Aviculturist Network:** Over 200 aviculturists are now taking part in Red Siskin conservation through the **Red Siskin Specialist and Aviculturist Network (ReSSAN)**, sharing project updates and ideas about responsible aviculture in private Facebook and WhatsApp groups.

  **Association of Agroforestry Producers of Piedra e’ Cachimbo and La Florida:** Over 40 coffee producers have committed to using best practices in organic and Bird-Friendly agroforestry in coffee, fruits, beans, and more, and have organized themselves into the agroforestry cooperative, **ACAFLO**.

  **RSI section on the Hari website:** This year our allies at the Hagen Avicultural Research Institute, **Hari**, updated their **Supported Foundations** page to include our most recent developments and achievements.

  **Alliance with Woolis artisans:** The RSI formed an alliance with **Woolis** artisans from the state of Merida, Venezuela, who are committed to environmental preservation. Woolis specializes in the weaving of handmade crafts made with 100% sheep wool obtained in a sheep-friendly way through handmade shearing, an activity considered cultural heritage of the state. Measuring approx. 10 cm, we launched a plastic-free, biodegradable, hand-made and fair-trade Red Siskin plush toy from which we will get a percentage of each sale.
• **Interviews:**
  

  EcoMartes – CircuitoX. Radio interview with Arlene Cardozo. “Behavioral change campaign to reduce demand for wild birds.” March 2022.

  EcoMartes – CircuitoX. Radio Interview with Luis Arrieta. “Best agroforestry practices to protect birds like the Red Siskin.” May 2022.


• **Presentations:**


- **Press releases:**


- **News Features:**


  Fundación Temaikén. 2022. Provita y Fundación Temaikén establecen alianza para combatir el tráfico de aves. URL: https://www.temaiken.org.ar/novedad-provita-y-fundacion-temaiken-establecen-alianza-98. This news was covered by 14 national and international media outlets.

  La Opinión Colombia. 2022. ¿Por qué está en vía de extinción el cardenalito? URL: https://www.laopinion.com.co/pamplona/por-que-esta-en-de-extincion-el-cardenalito


Updated August 2022

Strategic area 3: Rescuing, raising, and reintroducing more Red Siskins

Confiscated birds are rescued from the illegal trade, rehabilitated, and raised to support conservation efforts, such as possible future reintroductions.

**2022 Achievements:**

- **Eighth new Red Siskin chicks join the RSCC:** RSI had its first successful breeding season, welcoming four chicks to our flock. These new birds increase the number of breeding specimens, serving as important insurance against extinction.

- **More Red Siskins rescued:** Thanks to the growing awareness among Venezuelan aviculturists, this year two pairs of voluntarily surrendered birds were received at the RSCC: a pair of Red Siskins (*Spinus cucullatus*) and another of Lesser Goldfinch (*Spinus psaltria*). And from the Venezuelan authorities, we received another two male red siskins. These actions on the part demonstrate the growing effectiveness of our awareness-raising efforts and an increasing commitment to our core message: if you have birds make sure they are only captive-bred and never wild!
• **New native plant nurseries for our Red Siskins:** Tracy Aviary, Salt Lake City Utah, is generously supporting the construction of a native plant nursery to complement RSCC activities. Increasing native plants in Red Siskin enclosures and diets will better simulate a more natural experience for newly rescued birds, improving nutrition and welfare, while reducing operational expenses. It will also familiarize captive-bred individuals with wild food sources, supporting potential future reintroduction.

• **Creating a Red Siskin Seed Mix:** Based on three years’ experience and extensive consultation with experts worldwide, we have designed a mixture of seeds especially formulated for our Red Siskins. Now, thanks to the support of our ally Aviantecnic, a Spanish company specializing in bird care supplies, we will receive a donation of this mixture. In addition, the product has been launched in the European market with a message on its packaging to discourage the demand for wild birds in aviculture.
Climate-smart training for farmers: Thanks to support from the Small Grants Program of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), we provided training to more than 80 coffee producers in "climate-smart" technologies. Farmers learned to build and use systems to support nature-based fertilizers, and as a class produced 3 biodigesters, 40 barrels of organic fertilizer, 20 drying chambers and mycorrhizae biofertilizer units, and 12 tanks for beneficial microorganisms promoting plant growth.

Tree nursery production increase: This year we increased the number of coffee seedlings planted from 36,000 to 95,000, an increase of 163%! These seedlings are now growing in 36 nurseries throughout the project area. We also planted 11,600 native trees in the nurseries, which will be used to increase our 60 ha of already reforested terrain. Reforestation efforts are supported by Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act funds from USFWS, and the American Bird Conservancy.
• **Phase II of Migratory Bird Conservation via Shade Crop Farming completed:** We interviewed 36 producers to learn how satisfied they felt with the Birds and Coffee project and if they had experienced a shift in their previously held positions regarding agricultural practices and nature conservation.

  We applied a quantitative Likert scale instrument before and after the interventions, this helps us to understand the long-term changes and impacts of the project, by conducting the surveys we have found that producers present a powerful attachment to nature and the forest, as well as respect for biodiversity, in addition to recognizing their role in its preservation.

• **New commercial agreements support sustainable farming:** Through ACAFLO, we promote organic and Bird-Friendly farming by raising consumer awareness and facilitating win-win connections between farmers and buyers. This year, ACAFLO formalized marketing agreements with Aroma DiCaffe Bakery, Proyectos SPM C.A., and Grupo Tiquirito C.A., which have all committed in advance to buying coffee and guaranteeing a stable market for producers.

• **Strengthening ties with farming communities in the Venezuelan Coastal Range:** On April 24, we celebrated Coffee Grower's Day with 70 adults and 50 children from the communities of Piedra de Cachimbo, La Florida, Limoncito, Costa de Maya, Lajas Pintadas, La Peñita, and Portachuelo. Collaborating with local school teachers we held an organic coffee tasting and strengthened our connections with schools, producers and the communities, all part of our mission to rescue the tradition of Venezuelan shade-grown, organic coffee.

• **Involving students in reforestation:** Seeking to raise awareness and generate respect for nature in children, we have involved students from schools located in Venezuelan Coastal Range communities in a reforestation program through various activities that are part of our “Birds and Coffee” project. With great enthusiasm, student groups have made presentations about native trees, with emphasis on the species used for reforestation. Students have also created nurseries for trees that they will later use as shade on their parents’ or neighbors’ farms.
2022 Achievements:

- Co-designing a behavior change campaign (BCC): Changing the behavior of a group of people requires their participation and their awareness, and also requires overcoming psychological (habit, lack of self-efficacy) and social barriers (lack of knowledge, tradition, social norms, costs). In September 2021, RSI received a grant from the UK Government’s Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund (IWTCF) to create and implement a behavior change campaign called “Flying Together: Demand reduction behavior change in illegal Venezuelan threatened bird markets” that aims to reduce demand for wild birds by aviculturists. We are doing this by working together with them.
Within the framework of our Flying Together BCC project, we developed a Theory of Change (ToC), that is designed to reduce demand for the Red Siskin and the Yellow-shouldered Amazon. We engaged key stakeholders in BCC strategy co-design through two workshops. Fourteen people from Provita’s staff and avicultural communities (Ecoguardians and ReSSAN members) were convened to discuss target audiences, evaluate alternative behaviors, define outcome, strategies, assumptions and indicators. This pair of workshops resulted in the “Nesting Future” campaign; a document that describes our BCC for the Red Siskin which promotes adoption of sustainable breeding practices that exclude wild-caught birds among breeders from Venezuela, Brazil and the Iberian Peninsula (Spain-Portugal).

- **“Nesting the Future” campaign launch:** In June we launched our “Nesting the Future” campaign, which aims to support behavior change in aviculturists, away from buying and holding wild-caught birds. The campaign made its debut on Facebook, Instagram and multiple other online spaces, such as webinar, forums, and meetings where breeders can acquire, discuss, and disseminate sustainable breeding practices among their peers, while discouraging demand for wild birds in aviculture. We have an ambitious goal: we hope that 60% of participants will increase above our measured baseline in their knowledge, their positive attitudes, and their communication with others about alternative behaviors to illicit trade. Only 4 months after the launch of the campaign (which will run until September 2023), the Nesting Futures campaign has reached 26,000 users.

- **Measurement of baseline behavioral indicators:** We assessed the communication network of our audience of avicultural communities, as well as their perceptions about proposed alternative behaviors to buying wild caught birds. Specifically, we surveyed audience members about their intentions to adopt proposed new behaviors; their attitude towards them; perceived social norms regarding alternate behaviors; and the self-perceived control to adopt it.

We surveyed 216 breeders from Venezuela, Brazil and the Iberian node, which is the most intensive sampling effort done for a BCC baseline for any native Latin American bird species. This data provides a detailed snapshot of the current behavioral profile of our focal audience which we used to develop communication strategies. Encouragingly, intention to acquire wild-caught RS among interviewed breeders was low, while their intentions to adopt the alternative behavior was high. Our campaign focuses on fostering positive perceptions and social norms that promote adoption of breeding practices excluding wild-caught birds, and a sense of agency and control to make better choices particularly among young breeders.
- **Bringing a behavior change toolkit to life:** We are developing a three-part series of adaptable toolkits to promote behavior change around other threatened wildlife. We are thrilled to announce that our toolkit 1, covering concepts and approaches to understand behavior and audience is now available on the [Flying Together Initiative website](#). The aim of this first toolkit is to provide an accessible reference for those people or institutions wanting to compile baseline information to design evidence-based BCC for reducing demand for wildlife. It includes multimedia resources that are designed to share both technical knowledge and lessons learned through the implementation of the Nesting Futures campaign. Through examples and diagrams the toolkit 1 describes what is a BCC, what is behavior and how to assess it, how to develop a baseline study to understand behavior and define the audience, and which ethical principles must guide these studies. Forthcoming documents will cover other topics to design BCC - such as development of a Theory of Change, communications, implementation and monitoring. All our toolkits will be freely available through Provita and partner websites in Spanish and English.

Training workshop for birding guides, held by the Flying Together team and directed to the Ecoguardians and INPARQUES personnel with the purpose of building local capacities for birding guides, an activity that promotes the enjoyment of the Yellow-shouldered Amazon in its habitat without the need to keep it as a pet.
Strategic area 6: Promoting RSI sustainability

2022 Fundraising efforts

Some of the faces of the Red Siskin Conservation Center team. Photo by: Samuel Beomor.

2022 Fund raising efforts:


American Bird Conservancy (2022) $12,000, A. Cardozo, L. Arrieta, R. Bron, Project: “Continuation of USCAFE II project, reforestation activities and bioinputs for new production areas” (Submitted April 2022 and Approved August 2022, amount approved $11,600).


American Bird Conservancy (2022) $19,500, A. Cardozo, M.A. Colina. Project: “South American Core Group to tackle illegal wildlife trade for birds - Phase II” (Submitted August 31, 2022, awaiting decision).


Darwin Initiative Main Project Round 29 – Stage 1 (2022), £ 345,000, B. Sucre, L. Arrieta, A. Cardozo, Project: “Co-creation of community agroforestry models to conserve a biodiversity hotspot” (Submitted July 25, 2022, awaiting decision).


Premios Fundación BBVA a la Conservación de la Biodiversidad XVII edición (2022), € 250,000, B. Sucre, M. Siso, A. Cardozo, J.M. Briceño, “Improve the conservation status of threatened species and ecosystems through the involvement of local actors” (Submitted March 31, 2022, rejected).
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