



AMERICAN

CAGE-BIRD

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A Consistent Show Winner

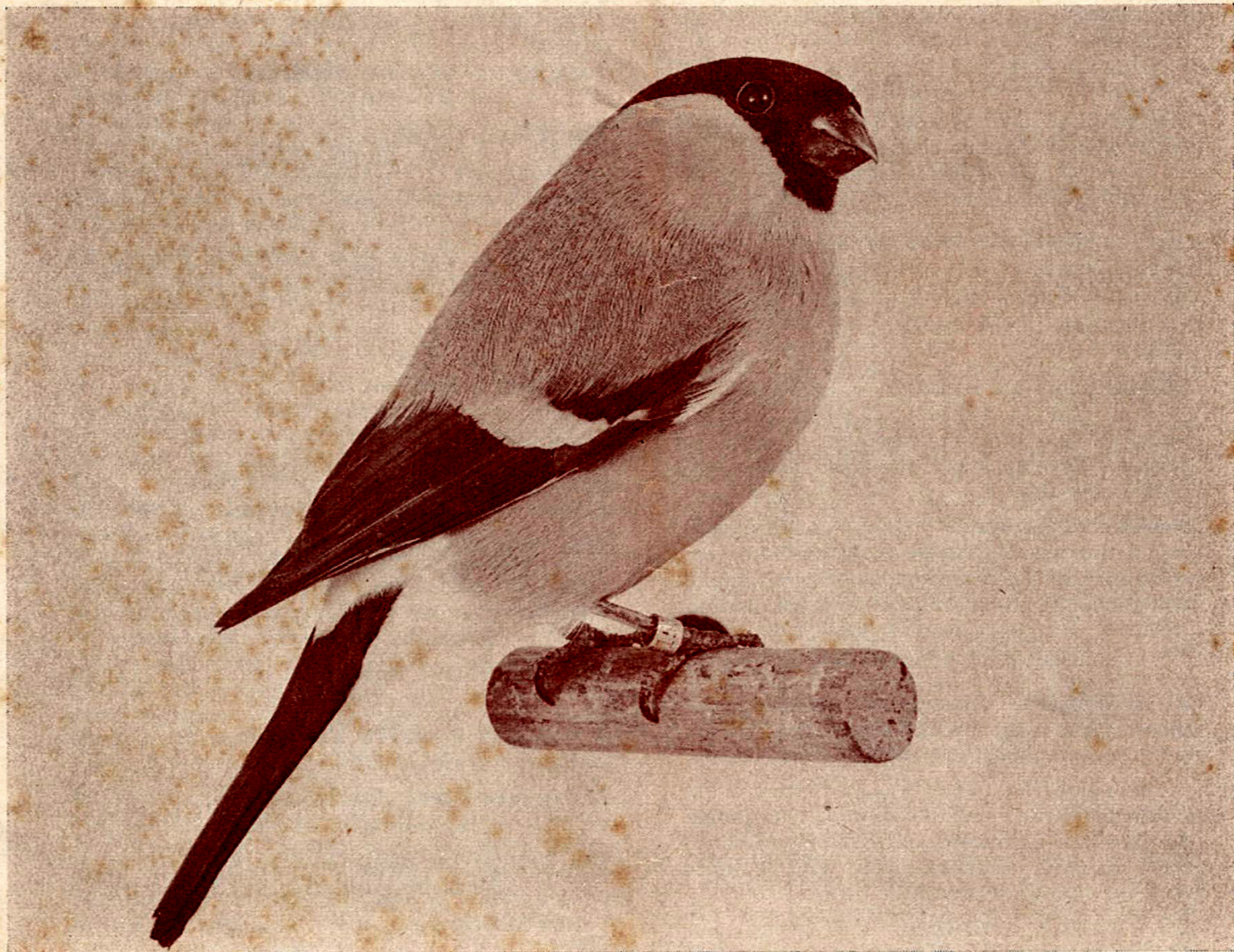


Photo by Harry Lacey

A WINNING BULLFINCH

This cock Bullfinch was a winner at Lisbon, February 1964. He was owned by Mr. Geoff Fear, Chairman, City of Bath Cage Bird Society, and took top awards in his class at the World Show in Lisbon of the International Ornithological Association. At the time he had taken nineteen top awards at nineteen consecutive shows.

A Sketchy History of the Canary

By A. DOUGLAS, Dallas, Texas

IN TRYING TO RECONSTRUCT the history of the Canary, we have to base our conclusions on the word of naturalists of the period, and on such pictures and material oddments as have been preserved up to our day.

The history of the Canary as a wild bird is largely a matter of speculation, but it can be based on present-day facts and general biological principles.

Today, wild Canaries are found on a series of islands in the Atlantic Ocean off the coasts of Africa and Portugal. The islands are of volcanic origin—that is, they originated as volcanoes pushed up from the ocean floor. Plants and birds found there must be descended from ancestors that arrived from over the sea after the islands had cooled and become inhabitable.

The Azores are the most distant from the mainland—740 miles out to sea. Their plants and animals are mostly of European species, largely brought in by man since the islands' settlement by the Portuguese in 1444. There were no tall trees there until some were introduced during the last century.

The Eastern Canary Islands (Lanzarote and Fuerteventura) have no wild Canaries, and there appears to be no good evidence of their ever having had any (Bannerman "BIRDS OF THE ATLANTIC ISLANDS").

As the Western Canary Islands are only about 55 miles away from the Eastern Canary Islands, and wild Canaries have long been abundant there, it seems safe to say that Canaries do not make 55-mile sea-crossings unaided, except on very rare and exceptional occasions.

When a population of birds has been isolated from the main population over a considerable period, the island population begins to differ in noticeable respects from the main population. This has been observed in many species, and its cause is well understood.

The Canaries of the Atlantic Islands certainly differ notably from other subspecies on the mainlands, where the Northern sub-species is the Serin (*Serinus canarius serinus*) and the eastern sub-species is the Syrian Wild Canary (*S.c. syriacus*) or Tristram's Serin.

This suggests that the island subspecies has long been isolated from the mainland, perhaps originating as a flock blown out to sea by a gale, or introduced by man in antiquity.

But there is little or no difference between the populations of wild Canaries on the Canaries, Madeira, or the Azores. This suggests that their dispersal to the various islands is relatively recent. Indeed, it seems likely that these attractive singing birds have been deliberately dispersed by man since 1400.

Many countries have wild native birds locally called "Wild Canaries." These have nothing

to do with the true wild Canaries of the Atlantic islands. Olina, for example, describing a "degenerate" race of Canaries on the island of Elba in the 17th Century, may have been describing the Citril Finch (*Carduelis citrinella*). I saw one of these Citril Finches in a cage in Le Puy in the Dordogne region of France. It was described by its owner as a "Serin Sauvage de Provence" ("a South of France Wild Canary").

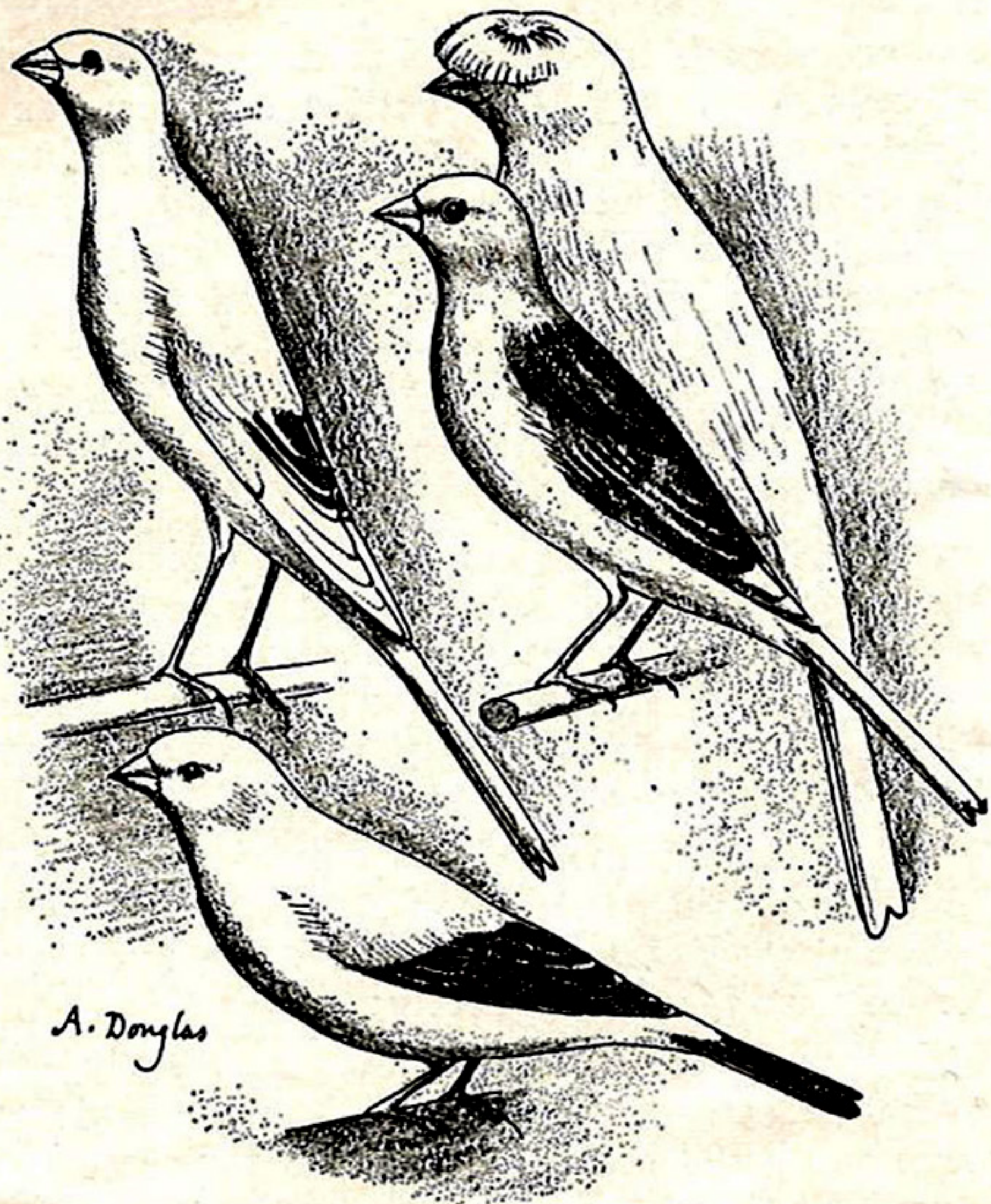
Colonization of the Atlantic islands by man began in the 15th century. The settlement of the Canary Islands (the nearest to the coast) began in 1402 when two ships landed there. The Canary Islands were already inhabited by a primitive race (the Guanches) and there is evidence of settlement in remote antiquity. Almost a century passed before contention and strife ceased between claimants for sovereignty.

The Azores and Madeira were uninhabited when they were first settled by the Portuguese in 1444 and 1420. Sometime after 1402 bird-catchers must have been active on the Atlantic islands, and as wild Canaries are easily trapped, examples must have been caged and exported to the home countries of Spain and Portugal.

Claude St. John (*OUR CANARIES*, 1911) says that Bethencourt (a commander of the two French ships that landed on the Canary Islands in 1402) was the first person to bring Canaries to Europe when he returned for reinforcements



Raising Canaries over one hundred years ago. (Based on a wood-cut in Beckstein's "CHAMBER BIRDS")



Hardly recognizable today, breeders' ideal Canaries of a hundred years ago. Yorkshire (top left), Norwich, Lancashire Cobby (now extinct), and (bottom) London Fancy.

to Cadiz in 1404. Further, he states that male Canaries were being exported to other European countries during the 15th century from Spain.

We do know that Canaries were reaching England by 1544, since Turner speaks of birds "quas Anglia aves canarias vocat"—"birds called in England 'Canary-Birds'."

Wild-caught Canaries do not take readily to cage-life (Lucas Soto, "EL CANARIO Y DEMAS AVES CANORAS DE JAULA"), a fact noted as early as 1555 by Conrad Gesner of Zurich. After saying that these birds were rare and expensive, he writes "For it is known by experience that the younger they are taken, the better they sing. But adult birds shut up in cages twirl their heads about, and are not considered properly raised Canary Birds." He calls them "Suckervogele" or "Sugar-Birds" because they came from the Canary Islands with cargoes of sugar.

Olina, whose name is mentioned earlier, wrote a book on birds ("UCCELLIERA") published in Rome in 1622. In it he tells us that Canaries were being bred in Italy at that date, surplus young being exported to the Tyrol, Switzerland and Germany. The well-known story of the shipwreck near the island of Elba seems to originate with him. This "antique chestnut" (Dr. Cresell, "BIRD NOTES" vol. IV, 1905-06) is recounted as true history in many bird books and articles of later date. It could be true, or at least could contain an element of truth.

Whether the first Canaries to be domesticated came from castaways on the island of Elba near the Italian coast, or not, Olina's statement about birds being bred in Italy and elsewhere seems to be true, as we find Gent writing in his "EPITOME OF THE ART OF HUSBANDRY," 1675, that Canaries were being bred freely in Italy and Germany. He says that these birds were green, much like the European Greenfinch. In other words they were the common wild-type.

An anonymous writer of 1677, in a book entitled "GENTLEMAN'S RECREATION" confirms Olina and Gent, saying that Canaries were being imported into England from Germany, and that they were mostly green.

Samuel Pepys, the diarist, has an entry lamenting the death of his Canary-bird about this time.

Although most Canaries seem to have been of the green wild-type in the third quarter of the 17th century, the yellow mutation was already known.

Hernandez, who died in 1587, but whose book "HIST. ANIM. NOV. HISP" was not published until 1631, wrote of a Canary that was "tota lutea"—all yellow, except for the tips of the wings. Also, Lazarus Roting of Nurnburg, before his death in 1614, had painted pictures of Canaries with patches of yellow and white—variegated Canaries.

Toward the end of the 17th century and in the early years of the 18th, several new mutations must have come to light.

The most informed writer of the early 18th century is Hervieux, who was keeper of birds and fancy poultry for the Duchess of Berry in France. In 1705, he published his famous "NOUVEAU TRAITE DES SERINS DE CANARIE"—"A New Treatise on Canary Birds." In it he lists all the varieties he had seen. The list looks ingenuous to us now, but it is apparent that he knew the green, variegated and clear (which he said was the rarest), cinnamon, white, agate, and perhaps frill Canaries. He also describes the usual mules, as well as some unusual ones, such as the Chaffinch X Canary and Yellowhammer X Canary. The white and the agate were lost to the fancy for many years, but have re-appeared in our century.

Later in the 18th Century, the prodigious naturalist the Comte de Buffon (1707-88) wrote an extensive account of the Canary in his vast "NATURAL HISTORY," listing the same varieties as Hervieux, and adding the crested or top-knot Canary.

Albin, in his book "A NATURAL HISTORY OF ENGLISH SONG BIRDS, etc." (1759) mentions a variety that might have been the Lizard, and another "of a bright lovely yellow with jet-black spots" which suggests the London Fancy.

Apparently the Canary's capacity for imitating other birds' songs was noticed at an early day. As early as the 18th century, Canaries were being trained with the aid of the flute and flageo-

let. Later, the "bird-organ" was developed. Some Canaries were allowed to hear the song of Europe's finest native song bird, the Nightingale. Birds so trained were used as "school masters" to train further generations. However, such improvements in the song are strictly learned, and have no influence on the inherited or natural song, so that present day singing Canaries (Rollers) must owe their accomplishments to selective breeding rather than training in the distant past.

Breeding "type" Canaries, that is breeding for shape, size, plumage and stance, seems to be a Western European tradition of the 19th century. Albin (1759) dismisses color and type as mere "fancy," saying that Canaries were valued in England mainly for song. It is often said that type Canaries, especially the Lizard Canary, were introduced into England by the Huguenots when they fled from the continent in 1685 to avoid religious persecution. The Huguenots were skilled in many crafts such as lace-making, silk-weaving, etc., and it is a fact that centers of Canary-culture sprang up where specific trades were practised. It is certain that the main cult developed in England, with Belgium specializing in a hunch-backed breed. The Frill Canary also was cultivated at an early date in Belgium—the "Malinois"—and was one breed that was cultivated extensively over Europe, giving rise to the Dutch and Parisian Frill Canaries (A. K. Gill, "NEW COLOURED CANARIES").

In England, some principal centers of Canary culture were among the shoe-makers of Norwich, the lace-makers of Nottingham, the weavers of Bradford in Yorkshire and Manchester in Lancashire, and the silk-weavers of the Spitalfields district of London. Glasgow in Scotland had its cult of the Scottish "Bird-o-Circle" Canary, a form of the Belgian Canary.

Each district specialized in a particular type. The Norwich birds were of moderate size and proportions, but of a particularly rich yellow color. They are said to have originated from the Lizard (which had particularly rich ground color), and the common German Canary (the "Chopper" of modern times). The Lancashire, at first cultivated almost exclusively in Manchester, was a huge, loose-feathered blond descendant of the giant Dutch breed. They were bred with and without crests or top-knots. The Lizard had many adherents in London, Nottingham and Lancashire. The London Fancy can hardly be regarded as having been anything but a clear-bodied Lizard. The Yorkshire Canary did not come into existence until the middle of the 19th century, when it was developed by crossing other breeds, especially the Lancashire and Belgian (Wallace, "THE CANARY BOOK" 1879).

In towns on the borderland of England and Scotland, most of the population were relatively poor and the expensive "show" Canaries being cultivated in English manufacturing towns were

beyond people's means, so that the common little "Chopper" Canary was cultivated there as a popular pastime. In 1889, breeders sought to give their product status, dignity and a name, choosing "Cumberland Fancy" for the purpose. A year later, the name was changed to "Border Fancy" to accommodate fanciers on both English and Scottish sides of the border. The breed made a virtue of its smallness, being dubbed the "Wee Gem."

Another diminutive breed was developed by Mrs. Rogerson of Cheltenham in the years around 1920. Her breed was recognized in 1925, when A. W. Smith publicized it as the "Gloster Fancy." It was produced by crossing the Crested Norwich Canary with a small Roller.

All breeds of Type Canary have been greatly "improved" since their early days, usually—unfortunately—in the direction of large size ("substance") and loose feathering.

Canary breeders in Germany and Italy seem to have been immune to the lure of Type and have continued breeding Canaries for song. The Harz (or Hartz) Mountains in Germany have long been particularly notable as a center for breeding song-birds. St. Andreasberg, a mining town, has been particularly associated with fine Canaries, enormous numbers being shipped to America and other countries.

Up to about 80 years ago, singing Canaries were simply described by their place of origin, such names as "German Canaries" "Tyrolean Canaries" being usual. Towards the end of the 19th Century, the word "Roller" Canary came into use. The earliest example of its use I have been able to find is in the third edition of Wallace's "THE CANARY BOOK" of 1893. There were birds with "silvery, sonorous voices" in the Tyrol before 1854 ("CASSELL'S NATURAL HISTORY," 1854.)

Breeding, or rather feeding, birds for color probably originated in Norwich about the mid 19th century. By 1870, moulting Canaries were being given saffron, marigold flowers and other color foods to enrich or bring out their yellow color. In 1871 some Canaries that were exhibited at Sutton-in-Ashfield, Cheltenham and elsewhere caused a storm. The birds were a patchy yellow and orange. In 1873, a team of birds of an even, rich orange were exhibited at every major show in England, taking the top prizes everywhere. At the end of that year, their owner, Mr. Edward Bemrose of Derby, told the world how they had been produced—by feeding cayenne or chili pepper.

The idea of breeding orange into birds, instead of feeding it, seems to originate with Bruno Matern or Dams of Königsberg (Duncker, "VOGEL FERNER LANDER") about 1914 ("KANARIA," Sept. 1, 1925). By 1928, Matern had developed orange Canaries from the Hooded Siskin hybrid "so beautiful that they looked as if

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RHODE ISLAND

RHODE ISLAND CANARY AND CAGE BIRD INC., Mrs. Frances Toporoski, Sec., 40 Cadoret Drive, Cumberland Hill, Rhode Island 02864. Meetings held every 2nd Sun. of mo., at Lincoln Lanes, Lincoln, Rhode Island in meeting rm. at 2 p.m. Visitors welcome. (3-68)

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Bird Keeper at Redstone—

(Continued from Page 31)

tion in the seemingly endless variety of color, shape, size and satisfaction in experimenting with new techniques. And there is the music furnished by his Canaries—"I never need a stereo with such a musical background," says Talley.

Perhaps most important of all, there are the enduring friendships with others holding common interests. "I often look back over the years," said Talley in a reflective moment, "thinking of how much I owe to so many local breeders of the past, friends from across the United States, and I am thankful that I can help others in return."

History of Canary—Douglas

(Continued from Page 12)

an artist had painted them" ("American Cage-Bird," March-April 1928).

Matern was far from being the first to raise the Hooded Siskin hybrid. Dr. Hopkinson ("BIRD NOTES," Vol. IV, 1905-06) describes one he saw in an aviary in Funchal (Madeira) a few years earlier. From his comments it appears to have been a usual hybrid there, locally known as the "Misto Cardenal."

Of course, Dr. Hans Duncker did much pioneer work with the Red Factor from 1926. His work seems to have inspired the finest writer in English on Canaries in our century, the late A. K. Gill.

A number of color mutations appeared or re-appeared in recent times. About 1900 P. J. Helder bred an agate hen from ordinary green parents (C.L.W. Noorduyn, "MANUEL POUR L'ELEVAGE DE BEAUX CANARIS ET METIS.") Recessive white appeared in New Zealand and England in 1908. Dominant white appeared in Germany about 1918 (A. K. GILL, NEW COLOURED CANARIES).

No doubt many interesting new facts will come to light concerning the Canary's historical past. The above account represents no more than the barest framework of the subject. But the framework seems fairly definite, and it seems unlikely that new discoveries will do more than enrich and modify the details of a story familiar to all who have looked into the history of the Canary.

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