

The Hitch-hiker's Guide to the Lizard canary: Episode 4

HUW EVANS describes the Lizard's crowning glory, its cap, and the rules relating to this unique feature. Series continues next week

CANARIES

IN HIS detailed account of the Lizard canary, the renowned Victorian writer W.A. Blakston (see box, bottom right) stated that, of the Lizard's features, "the most important are spangle and sound body-colour." Amen to that, but they are not the features that most people notice when they see Lizard canaries for the first time. That honour goes to the cap.

The cap is a patch of clear yellow feathers on the head. They are the only clear feathers permitted on the Lizard; if they occur outside the designated boundary of the crown they are regarded as a fault leading, in the most serious cases, to



A faulty clear cap: the cap is too long and it touches the eye; there is no eyelash

disqualification.

The cap has been an intrinsic feature of the Lizard from the outset. It is first mentioned in 1742, but it is in 1779 that we get a detailed description (in Albin's *A Natural History of English Song-Birds*):

"The principal test of a good fancy bird, is the having a clean cap; that is, the crown of his head, defined by a horizontal line at the level of his eyes and beak, without being broke or spotted..."

Only a tiny minority of Lizards are true clear caps

That horizontal line from the beak, through the eye, to the back of the head is still used to define the limits of the cap today. When seen from above, it results in a neat oval or thumbnail shape, but even in 1779 it was admitted that "this degree of perfection is seldom found." Today's breeders would agree.

Only a tiny minority of Lizards are true clear caps; most birds have some dark feathers intruding around the edge of, or within, the crown. At the other extreme, known as non caps, there are few, if any, light feathers on the head at all.

The variations in the cap form the

basis of the Lizard show classification, which is split into clear caps, broken caps and non caps. The Lizard Canary Association (LCA)'s definition permits up to 10 per cent dark feathers in a clear cap, and up to 10 per cent clear feathers in a non cap, but Continental judges tend to be more strict than that. Broken caps account for everything in between. If in doubt, the safest option is to enter the bird in the broken cap class.

The shape and extent of a broken cap is almost infinitely variable and some look very untidy, but as long as no light feathers extend beyond the normal limits, the cap will be accepted. The most desirable form is known as a "patch cap", in which the dark feathers form an island surrounded by an oval of light feathers.

There are two further details that judges look for. The first is the "eyelash", a thin line of dark feathers (just a millimetre wide) that separate the cap from the eye. The second is that any dark feathers within the crown should look like miniature spangles.

The light feathers are generally confined to the crown of the head, but sometimes they can stray. Some birds suffer a "run cap" in which the light feathers run further down the neck than they should. The LCA handbook describes it as a serious fault.

The most serious fault is known as "bald face" in which the light feathers descend below the eye. It looks ugly and disqualifies



A clear cap is often the most eye-catching feature of the Lizard canary All photos: Huw Evans

the bird from exhibition. It also tells you that there is a worrying fault in the stock that bred such a specimen. Avoid at all costs.

A final thought on the cap: I have written 600 words on a feature that is the size of a thumbnail, and I have only

covered the essentials. Welcome to the intricate world of the Lizard canary!

Huw Evans is author of *Fine Spangled Sort*, a blog on the London Fancy and Lizard canary: www.finespangledsort.com

W.A. Blakston on canaries

IN THE book *The Illustrated Guide to Canaries and Cage Birds* (first edition, 1878-81), Blakston was responsible for the section on canaries, which takes up over half the book. The chapters on the Lizard are full of detailed observations and sound advice. It was originally published as a part-work and issued to subscribers who would arrange for the

leaves to be bound by their local bookbinder. They were bound in either one or two volumes, and the covers vary from basic cloth to tooled and gilded leather; thus each copy is slightly different from any other. A reprint was issued as a single volume circa 1890, but this has a standard cover. All copies should include 56 coloured lithographs.



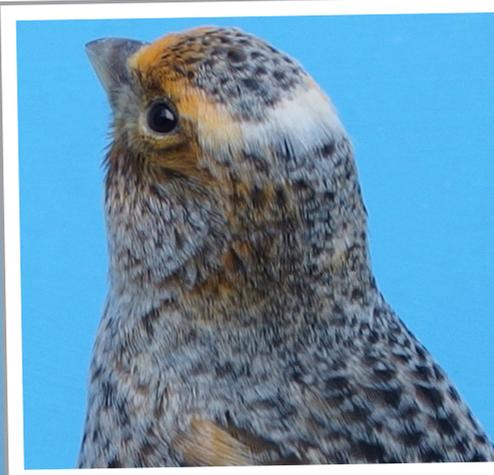
A natural coloured patch cap gold hen



The Lizard classification: from left to right, clear cap, broken cap and non cap. See: www.finespangledsort.com for an in-depth analysis



The cap of this silver male is a deep and even colour, but shorter than ideal



This colour-fed broken cap silver hen exhibits typical fading at the back of the cap



Note the miniature spangles on the head of this natural-coloured broken cap silver hen