

The Hitch-hiker's Guide to the Lizard canary: Episode 5

As well as being correctly marked above, an exhibition Lizard must also excel in the quality of its underpart pattern: the rowings. **HUW EVANS** investigates another unique feature of the breed

CANARIES

SO FAR, we have looked at the Lizard from above, but now we need to look at the birds from below. I can't think of any other canary where you need to do that.

The ventral parts of the Lizard canary are dominated by one set of markings: the rowings.

The rowings have grown steadily in importance over the past century. Some Victorian writers regarded them as undesirable, but the Lancashire and Lizard Canary Fancier's Association (see box, bottom right) thought otherwise and allocated five points for rowings in the early 1900s. Their value has grown ever since.

They are allocated 10 points in the LCA show scale (1947), but COM's new

scale of points (2017) has raised their value to 15. Continental breeders can't get enough of them.

The rowings are the equivalent of spangles on the front, side and underside of the Lizard canary. They start under the chin and spread the full length and width of the breast and belly, run between the legs, and terminate with two lines of chevrons under the tail.

The likeness to spangles can only go so far. The feather structure is broader and the colours are not so intense. They also grow from the soft underparts and they lack the firm support enjoyed by the spangles. The result is that the rowings have less contrast between dark and light, and their pattern is not so regular.

The biggest difference between the two attributes, however, is that the spangles are always there (even if their quality varies) whereas rowings can vary from profuse to meagre. There are two reasons for this.

The first is that the Lizard is sexually dimorphic (meaning that the sexes are easy to tell apart). When I started keeping Lizards more than 30 years ago, there was a recognised hierarchy in the display of the rowings: silver hens had the most, gold hens rather less, silver cocks less still, and gold cocks very few. That no longer applies, because the rowings of male silver Lizards have improved so much that the best specimens now vie with silver hens.

The second reason arises from the influx of alien blood to produce colour variants of the Lizard. The original colour outcross would not have possessed genes for rowings; its ventral markings would have been scant at best.

The result is that without constant crossing back to classic Lizard canaries,

the rowings of the colour variants and their yellow-ground offspring regress. In the worst cases you see "Lizards" that are three-parts-dark; an accepted form of variegation in most type canaries, but anathema to the Lizard canary.

The best rowings, by far, are displayed by the true-bred Lizard canary, commonly known as the classic type. They possess four major attributes: Magnitude, Geometry, Intensity and Consistency (or "MAGIC" for short).

■ **Magnitude** refers to the extent of dark markings over the ventral area of the Lizard canary, from chin to tail, from wing to wing. Silver cocks, silver hens, and gold hens, are all capable of achieving this coverage at present; gold cocks generally do not, although they are improving.

Many fanciers make the mistake of assuming that a good quantity of rowings equates to good quality, but this is not necessarily so. It is their geometry that sets the best rowings apart.

■ **Geometry**, to use the wording of the LCA show standard, means "lineable and distinct". They should form straight rows of individual dark feathers with a light fringe, rather like spangles. Easy to say but difficult to achieve. Many birds display rowings that are mere stripes or a jumble of dark feathers.

■ **Intensity** denotes the "blackness" of the black and its contrast against the light fringe. This helps enormously to create distinct rowings. Most rowings are closer to dark grey in reality, but the best birds have a black core to the rowings that makes them stand out.

■ **Consistency** is the same quality that is seen in the best spangles: the rowings should always look neat and regular. This test is even more difficult to pass with the



A clear cap silver hen with intense and well-defined rowings from head to tail and wing to wing. All photos: Huw Evans



A clear cap silver hen with imperfect rowings: extensive but not well defined

rowings than it is with spangles.

The improvement in the rowings is undoubtedly the biggest single advance that I have seen in the Lizard canary over the past 30 years. I expect that trend to continue provided breeders understand, and focus on, the magic of rowings.

● *Episode 6 of the Hitch-hiker's Guide follows next week.*

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

The original association

THE L&LCFA show standard was drafted by C.A. House and published by Claude St John in *Our Canaries* (1911). Although centred on Lancashire, the L&LCFA was, in effect, the national breed society for the Lizard up to the Second World War. The Lizard Canary Association, a truly national organization, took over that role in 1945.



A broken cap silver cock with rowings almost the equal of a good silver hen



A non cap gold hen with regular and well-defined rowings



This clear cap gold cock shows good rowings for a male, but they cannot match the rowings of the other birds