

The Hitch-hiker's Guide to the Lizard canary: Episode 1

What makes the Lizard canary unique? In the first part of a new series, **HUW EVANS** takes a tour of the past and present of this remarkable breed, and outlines its principal features

COVER STORY: CANARIES

There is a moment in every dawn when light floats, there is the possibility of magic. Creation holds its breath.

– Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*

IT MUST have been a moment of magic, for how else do we explain the creation of the Lizard canary? Its origins are a mystery. It is the world's oldest variety of canary, with a history that spans three centuries. It is generally assumed to have come from France, but there are no records of it

there. It possesses characteristics shared by no other canary, yet no one has been able to explain how they were acquired (see box). It seems to have appeared from nowhere... as if by magic.

What we do know is that the Lizard canary was first described in detail in 1742, but in London, not Paris or any other part of France. The Lizard is an English breed created in the Georgian period and, against all the odds, it has survived to the present day. Think of it as a living antique.

The key to understanding the Lizard is that it is neither a type canary nor a colour canary; it is a bird of pattern. It combines colour, contrast and intricate detail to create an elaborate design. It is a huge challenge to get everything right, but

in the best specimens everything falls into place with remarkable precision.

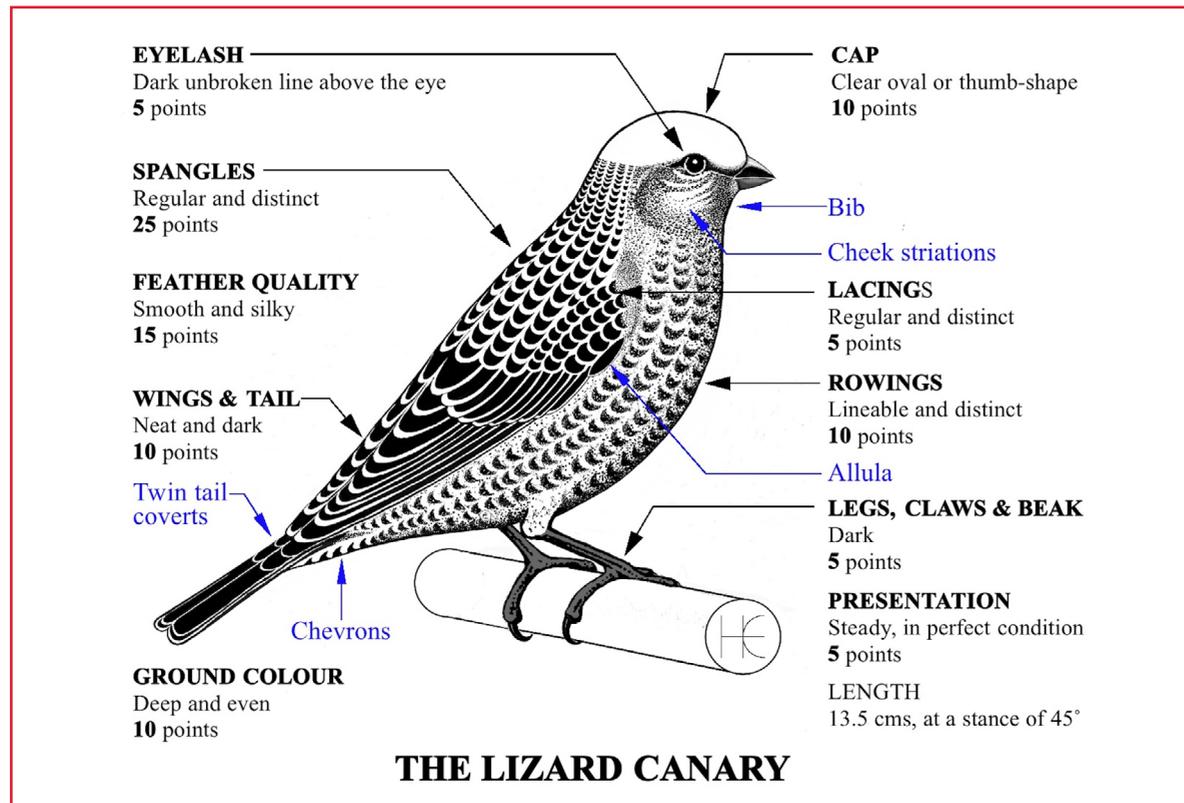
The pictorial model of the ideal Lizard canary is unlike any other because almost every feather is distinct and plays its part in creating the overall design. It is the combination of artistry and technical precision that makes the Lizard canary such a beautiful challenge.

When most people talk about the Lizard canary, the image that springs to mind is usually a clear cap gold cock, but when it comes to a black-and-white pictorial (below), the markings are best expressed in silver hens. I will explain the reasons why in future episodes.

The model shown here is based on a silver hen and incorporates all the show features described in the Lizard Canary



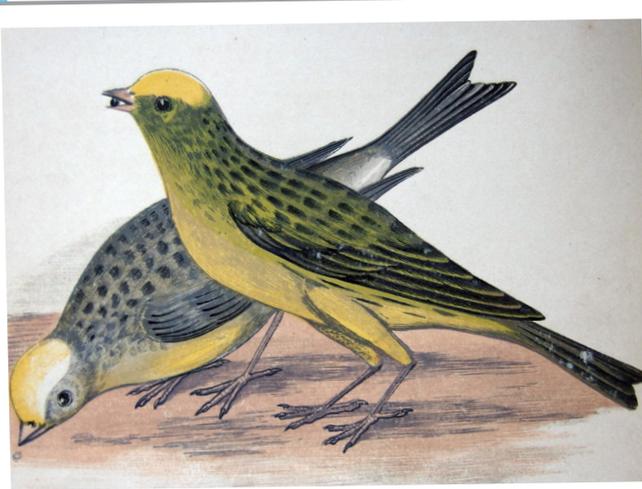
A clear cap silver hen. Can you identify the principal markings? Answers on page 12
Photo: Huw Evans



The intricate design of the Lizard: main features with points allocation. Blue text indicates other features Huw that will discuss Illustration: Huw Evans



Everyone's idea of a Lizard canary: a clear cap gold cock Photo: Huw Evans



The first colour illustration of Lizard canaries, from the Rev. Smith's *The Canary* (1st edition, 1868). The painting was done by his daughter Judy

Association (LCA) scale of points (in black type), but I have taken the liberty of adding some of the other features (in blue type) that are not mentioned. They have no official names; the annotation is mine, not the LCA's. No points are awarded for them, but they are an integral part of the classic Lizard canary.

The Lizard, like many old varieties, has acquired its own specialised vocabulary over the centuries; this is part of the charm of the breed. I will be looking at the most important features in more detail later in this series, and it's as well that you become familiar with them.

A drawing is one thing, a living bird another, so take a look at the photograph of a clear cap silver hen (above). All the principal features (i.e. cap, spangles, rowings and lacings) are present. See if you can identify them and then check the facsimile on page 12, in which I have delineated these zones.

That's all you need to know before we set out on our journey. Over the next six episodes we will explore the curious traits of a breed that seems more like an exotic

finch than a canary. Why not hitch a ride? ● Episode 2 of the Hitch-hiker's Guide follows in two weeks.

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

A bird of mystery

THE origins of the Lizard canary are unknown, and although various theories have been put forward, none have stood up to scrutiny. Unlike other varieties, its special characteristics are not based on the usual variations of shape, colour, frill or crest. They are too complex to have been caused by a single spontaneous mutation. The most popular theory is that the Lizard is descended from a fertile hybrid, but even though several finch candidates have been test mated, none have produced offspring that look anything like the Lizard canary. The mystery remains unsolved.

fine spangled sort
The London Fancy and the Lizard canary... for those who are very curious

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7: German Birds

Have a look at the engraving of the canary at the head of this article. If you have read History, part 6, it may look familiar. It is a copy of the engraving published in Olina's *Uccelliera* (1622), but it is not Italian. It was a product of international collaboration; an example of globalisation over 350

RECENT POSTS

Much information about the history of the Lizard appears on Huw's blog, *Fine Spangled Sort*