

The Hitch-hiker's Guide to the Lizard canary: Episode 2

Underlying the unique markings in a Lizard's plumage is a gorgeous rich yellow. **HUW EVANS** introduces this 'ground colour' and the two feather types that define the 'gold' and 'silver' Lizard

CANARIES

HOPE you will have gathered from the introduction to this series (see *Cage & Aviary Birds*, August 26) that the Lizard is a canary like no other. The pattern of its plumage is unique, but the Lizard possesses another distinction that sets it apart from all other canaries: its ground colour.

The ground colour of the classic Lizard canary is yellow, but it's not just any old yellow. It is

lutein-yellow. Lutein is a naturally occurring yellow pigment produced by plants, but only one canary is able to deposit lutein directly in its plumage, and that is the classic Lizard canary (see Note 1). All other canaries and serins have to convert the lutein into pigments known as canary xanthophylls before they can be deposited in the feathers.

You may think that this is just a technicality, but it has two profound consequences. The first is that the classic



Colour-fed silver cock. Note the rich colour with a frosty edge both above and below

Lizard canary has a different colour metabolism from all other canaries. No one knows how the Lizard acquired this capability; it is yet another mystery.

The second is that lutein-yellow is a different shade from the yellow you see in other varieties. It lies at the orange end of the yellow spectrum, whereas canary xanthophylls lie in the middle, hence the term "canary yellow". The natural colour

■ The first is a frosty edge to the spangles of a gold hen. Such birds often do well at shows because the frosty margin makes the spangles stand out, but it is actually a colour fault that has gone undetected.

■ The second is a brownish cast to the ground colour caused by an excess of phaeomelanin brown. A Lizard canary should never look drab.

The final consideration is whether the birds are colour-fed or not. Colour feeding is a longstanding tradition

Getting the colour right is an art form that testifies to a breeder's skill

of the Lizard is all too often described as "green", but under bright light it displays an amber tint. It really is different.

The classic Lizard comes in two feather forms: "gold" (known as intensive or yellow in other breeds) and "silver" (non-intensive or buff in other breeds). Gold and silver are very apt terms; the birds are easy to distinguish.

Gold males should not only have a deep ground colour, but the edge of their spangles should also display the same colour, with no hint of frostiness. They are the most intensely coloured of all Lizards.

Silver males can never match the golds for colour, but I have known them to come close, especially on the head and breast. This can confuse newcomers, but fortunately there is a simple work-around: always go by the colour of the spangles, which will always have a silver-white margin.

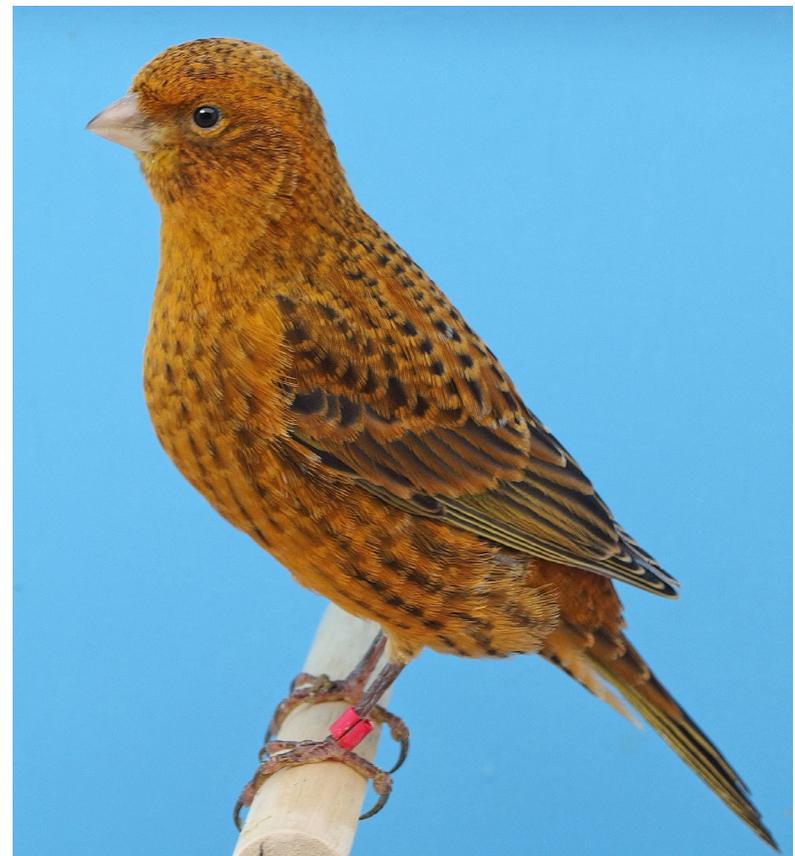
Inevitably, **females** do not display such rich colour as the males. The colour of top-quality gold hens isn't far short of the cocks, but there are two potential flaws to beware of.

in the British Lizard fancy, going back to at least the 1870s. It turns the golds into a rich golden chestnut (see Note 2) and the silvers into a "warm buff", although this is much more apparent in cocks than hens. Getting the colour right is an art form that testifies to the skill of the breeder (see Note 3).

The alternative, which is almost universal on the Continent, is not to colour-feed Lizards. This allows the true ground colour to be seen; it has a natural beauty of its own. Natural-coloured Lizards are becoming more popular because they are simpler to care for, and they can compete on equal terms at the World Show and other Continental events.

Fortunately, both systems are now accepted by the LCA. The choice is yours. ● *Episode Three of the Hitch-hiker's Guide follows next week.*

Note 1: Newcomers to the Lizard fancy need to be aware that it is only the true-bred classic Lizard that displays the lutein-yellow ground colour. Colour variants, and their yellow-ground



Colour-fed gold cock with super colour. This and other photos are by Huw Evans

descendants, do not. For further information, please refer to my article in *Cage & Aviary Birds*, September 18 2019. For readers who don't have that copy, back issues are available from www.pocketmags.com.

Note 2: The LCA description of the ideal Lizard describes the ground colour of gold Lizards as a "rich golden chestnut". Note the word "golden"; the yellow foundation should not be obliterated by the red pigment. Some birds display a mahogany red colour, which gives the impression of extra depth, but it is actually the result of

excessive colour feeding. Others are a pinky-red, which indicates a worrying deficiency of lutein-yellow in the ground colour. Don't be misled.

Note 3: One of the faults in a colour-fed bird is a greenish tinge in the feathers, a sign of incorrect colour feeding. This obviously does not apply to natural-coloured Lizards.

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Natural-coloured gold hen. Note the amber tint, which is unlike the ground colour of a 'green' of any other variety



Colour-fed gold hen, less bright than the male (top right)



Above: natural-coloured silver cock. Right, natural-coloured silver hen. Typically, she is much less bright than the male

