

Exotic Finches Found Dead Near National Arts Club

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Zebra finches like the ones club president Aldon James admitted buying were found dead in Gramercy Park.



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By Amy Zimmer

DNAinfo News Editor

GRAMERCY — Residents of this elite pocket of Manhattan are buzzing about tiny, mysterious finches found Sunday — many dead — in and around Gramercy Park.

Sandra Kisiel, an avid birder who routinely takes morning walks with her husband in the gated green space looking for migrant birds, first noticed one finch that "was obviously not from North America" with a bright orange beak and black-and-white striped tail.

"As we continued to look at it to make note of field marks, we noticed that there were several other birds who had the same call note," Kisiel wrote in an e-mail. "We found approximately 18 other of these birds together, appearing very much like they had been dumped all together into the area."

Kisiel's research determined they were zebra finches, which are native to Australia.

"They are not birds that would be able to easily survive after living in captivity and not having survival skills," Kisiel said. "We are not aware that there are any records of zebra finches having established colonies after being released."

Indeed, after Sunday's heavy rains, several people told DNAinfo they found dead finches on the sidewalks and streets around the park. Some were also found in a bag in a trash can a few blocks away.

While it wasn't clear where the birds came from, nor how many were in the neighborhood, several locals wondered whether they had come from the National Arts Club. O. Aldon James, the president of the club, is an avid bird lover and is known to keep birds.

Bird breeder Pierre Brooks told DNAinfo Monday "I have no reason to divulge information regarding the National Arts Club."

But he confessed to the Daily News that he sold James more than 50 Australian zebra finches for \$1 each.

James initially denied to the paper that he had bought any birds, but later admitted to having bought them.

A club spokesman told DNAinfo that "the birds weren't released by the club."

One Gramercy Park resident, who declined to give her name, tried to rescue a bird she found "cowering" on the park step in the rain. But when she returned with a shoebox from home, the bird was gone. She then spotted a dead bird several feet away.

"At first, I thought the bird fell from a nest. The bird looked like the size of a ping pong ball," she said. "It was just weird."

Kisiel contacted the New York chapter of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and other wildlife agencies.

"We are currently investigating the matter," a spokesperson from the ASPCA said.

Zebra finches "will survive outside, but it has to be in August," said John Lund of the Empire Finch & Canary Club.

Though zebra finches were originally from Australia, Lund said most that were found in North America were now bred here. "They are about the cheapest finch you can buy next to the society finch," he said, estimating they average about \$10 a bird.

