

Outdoor Recreation *is* Outdoor Education

Our state bird, the greater roadrunner (*Geococcyx californianus*) shouldn't be a stranger to most New Mexicans. It can be found throughout much of the state, excluding some of the northwest, and is a larger, charismatic bird. It is actually a cuckoo and is the largest member of that family.

Though it can fly shorter distances, it prefers to run (as its name suggests) and can sustain speeds over 18 miles per hour. It uses its speed to catch prey, which consists of... everything! Roadrunners eat just about whatever they can catch and is palatable. Grasshoppers, spiders, caterpillars, small or baby birds, lizards, baby turtles, small frogs and toads, snakes and mice are all of the menu. Seeds and berries are also eaten. If the roadrunner takes on a venomous snake or a larger prey item, it subdues its quarry by grabbing the victim and bashing it from side-to-side against the ground until it is dispatched.



The greater roadrunner is monogamous (mating for life or for relatively long periods of time) and gift-giving (called "tidbitting") is a part of their courtship. The male will bring the female a food item which, if approved, may be held by the female while the couple mates. Three to six eggs are typically laid in the nest, which is usually situated somewhere that offers a bit of protection, like in a cactus or other spiny plant. As cuckoos often do, roadrunners will occasionally lay their eggs in the nest of other bird species and leave them for the unsuspecting parents to raise, a behavior called "nest parasitism."



Beneath its feathers, the roadrunner's skin is actually darkly pigmented. It uses its skin color to thermoregulate, or change its body temperature. On cooler mornings, the roadrunner positions itself with its back towards the sun, erecting the feathers on its back to better expose its dark skin, which absorbs the sun's heat. Just behind each eye is another patch of skin color consisting of white, blue and orangish-red.

If ours is named the "greater roadrunner," then is there a "lesser roadrunner" too? Yes, the lesser roadrunner looks very similar to its "greater" counterpart and is found in parts of Mesoamerica.

The oldest known greater roadrunner fossil is estimated to be 33,500 years old and was found in a cave in New Mexico.

Greater Roadrunner



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