



WILDLIFE NOTES

Roadrunner

Geococcyx californianus

Star of folk legends and cartoons, the roadrunner is probably the best known and most distinctive bird in the state. It was adopted as the New Mexico state bird in 1949 under the name "Chaparral Bird". In Mexico it is called "*El Correcaminos*" (roadrunner) or "Paisano" (countryman or fellow traveler).

RANGE

Greater Roadrunners are found throughout the Southwest in the Mojave, Sonoran, Chihuahuan and southern Great Basin deserts. In addition to New Mexico, look for them in Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Arizona, Colorado, California, Nevada, southern Utah and Mexico. During the 20th century, their range expanded all the way to southern Missouri, Arkansas and western Louisiana. Their range continues into southern Mexico, where their closest relative the Lesser Roadrunner (*Geococcyx velox*) becomes the dominant species. Roadrunners are non-migratory birds.

HABITAT

The Greater Roadrunner inhabits open, flat or rolling terrain with scattered cover of mesquite, cactus and desert scrub. Roadrunners are most common in southern New Mexico and in the river valleys of the Pecos and Rio Grande, usually below 7000 feet.

DESCRIPTION

Roadrunners grow to the size of a scrawny chicken, 20 to 24 inches from tail to beak. The upperparts are conspicuously streaked in black, brown, olive and white. The birds are buffy white below with some dark streaking.

The foot-long tail is bronze on top and white tipped. Underneath, the tail sports the cuckoo family characteristic of white crescent-shaped spots. Roadrunner wings are short and round, revealing a white crescent during flight. A ragged crest of blue-black feathers can be raised at will. Behind the yellow eyes are bare patches of bluish skin that become vivid blue grading into orange in courting males.

Roadrunner feet have the cuckoo characteristic of two toes pointed forward and two toes pointed backward. Roadrunners are easy to track since their footprints look exactly like an X.

With coarse plumage topped with a bad hair day crest, wings too short, tail too long, a decurved bill too big for its head, Greater Roadrunners appear just a little bit disheveled.



Photo: Wikimedia

BEHAVIOR

An early naturalist described their demeanor as half magpie, half chicken.

They are known for their curiosity and the juveniles play. During the cold desert night roadrunners lower their body temperature, going into a slight torpor to conserve energy, then warm by solar heating each morning. They often can be seen sunbathing with their feathers raised so that their black skin can absorb heat.

Roadrunners are able to sprint 15-20 miles per hour and generally prefer running to flying. Unlike their cartoon counterpart, however, real roadrunners tire quickly and generally use these sprints only for catching speedy prey like lizards or for escape.

Although Greater Roadrunners are generally quiet birds, they do have a range of vocalizations. A common song is a series of 6 to 8 low, dovelike coos, dropping in

pitch. During the mating season males will also make a whirring call. The alarm call is a clattering “perrrrrrp” noise produced by rapid bill clicking. No beep-beeps.

DIET/FEEDING

The Greater Roadrunners’ principal diet is lizards and grasshoppers but they are opportunists and take what is abundant and/or easy to catch. Other common items include caterpillars, crickets, snakes, mice, eggs, carrion, prickly pear fruits, and young quail. They eat many venomous prey items including scorpions, spiders, tarantulas, wasps and, occasionally, rattlesnakes. Two birds may cooperate to kill a large snake.

Usually they forage on the ground, scanning for prey, and then dashing forward to make the catch. To kill and tenderize larger prey, roadrunners hold it in their bill and whack it repeatedly against a rock.

Since roadrunners have efficient kidneys and nasal glands to excrete excess salts, they can get along without drinking water if their food has a high enough water content, but they will drink readily if water is available. Roadrunners avoid overheating and water loss by reducing their activity by 50% in the heat of midday.

REPRODUCTION

Roadrunners are sexually mature at 2 to 3 years. These monogamous birds have an interesting courtship behavior. The male will tempt the female with a morsel such as a lizard or snake dangling from its beak and will dance about in front of her, bowing, wagging and fanning his tail, raising and dropping his wings and making whirring or cooing sounds. If the female accepts the offered

food, he then jumps into the air and onto his mate. The pair will stay together for their entire life that can encompass 7-10 years. Pairs defend their territories year-round.

Both parents help build a shallow platform nest hidden in a mesquite, shrub, yucca, or cactus 3-15 feet above the ground. It is a rude pile of sticks lined with grass, feathers, bark, dry dung, or snakeskin. The female lays 2 to 8 white eggs over a period of several days, which results in staggered hatching. It’s not uncommon to see fairly large chicks and eggs in the nest at the same time. Both parents incubate the eggs, with the male taking the night shift and keeping his body temperature high. The young are born black-skinned and featherless but they develop rapidly; they can run and catch their own prey at 3 weeks. Meanwhile, the parents must bring in food items to the nest every 20 minutes. If a breeding year is favorable, the roadrunners might rear two sets of young.

Coyotes, snakes, and hawks target the nests and will prey on the eggs and young. If a predator comes too close to the nest, the male will run in a crouch until he is a short distance away from the nest. He then will call and perform a broken leg display to lure the predator away.



Photo: U.S. Army

Reflecting their cuckoo affinities, Greater Roadrunners occasionally engage in brood parasitism; their eggs have been found in the nests of ravens and mockingbirds.

CONSERVATION

Habitat loss and urban sprawl are the major threats to Greater Roadrunners. The construction of roads causes fragmentation of habitat as well as mortality from cars. Pesticides that may accumulate in their insect prey are also a threat. In southern California, roadrunners are being extirpated locally due to development reducing their habitat and to predation by domestic cats and dogs, as well as by coyotes drawn in by urban garbage.

Greater Roadrunners are beneficial in that they help balance insect and rodent populations. Since we are often captivated by their antics, they also help make New Mexico more enchanting.

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