

# Greater Roadrunner: Charismatic Bird of the Southwest

An Introduction to the Behaviors and Ecology of the Greater Roadrunner



# Identifying a Roadrunner



## By Sight

- ▶ Long legs have blueish hue and scale like appearance
- ▶ Long-tail used as a rudder (braking, steering)
  - ▶ Prefer running, can only fly in short bursts
- ▶ Long necked, medium sized birds
- ▶ Heavy cream streaking on dark body with light wash on underbelly
- ▶ Crest that raises or lowers at will- Orange bold supercilium during breeding season
- ▶ Long, heavy, slightly decurved bill

## By Sound

- Female Vocalizations: call resembles "sharp bark of coyote"
- Male Vocalizations: soft cooing, heard in morning
- Both genders have alert bill rattle clicking mandibles together rapidly

## What Birds are Roadrunners Related to?

- Roadrunners belong to the Cuckoo family, Cuculidae.
- Yep, their closest relatives are cuckoos.
- Another member of this family found in North America is the Groove-billed Ani



## What is the Distribution of Roadrunners Across America?

- ▶ Primarily found in the Southwestern part of the country
  - ▶ Including California, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Texas, New Mexico, Kansas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, and Arkansas
  - ▶ Range extends into southern Mexico where Lesser Roadrunner is also found
  - ▶ Non-migratory, defend their territories year round



# Where Might I Find a Roadrunner?

- ▶ Found in arid chapparal-like environments consisting of a mixed brush species used for cover and open grassy areas for foraging
- ▶ Utilizes Huisache, Mesquite, and many other mixed woody trees for nesting
- ▶ Forage along roadsides and driveways with grass and return to brushy areas for protection and breeding purposes
  - ▶ Roads easy to hunt alongside and tree line usually nearby



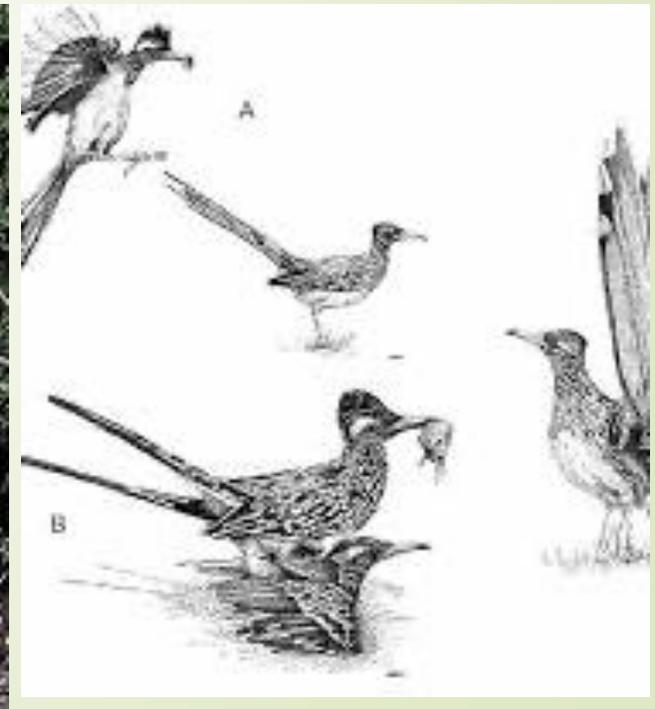
## What Does a Roadrunner Eat?

- ▶ Hunting involves scanning grassy areas for prey, dashing forward when they see something of interest
- ▶ -Very opportunistic = eat whatever is available at that time
- ▶ Most often seen eating large insects like grasshoppers, large portion of diets consists of lizards, small snakes, and rodents.
- ▶ Quail/Quail eggs do not make up any significant portion
- ▶ To kill small rodents and snakes roadrunners repeatedly bash the head of prey into a rock



# Reproductive Behavior and Nesting Information

- Monogamous: they mate for life, averaging a 2-3-year lifespan
- Lengthy Courtship Display
  - Starts with male bringing female a juicy food morsel and chases her to present it, if she accepts, copulation usually follows
  - Males can also approach female, bow, and wag his tail while cooing to entice a potential mate
- Brood Sizes range from 2-8 eggs, usually predated upon to some level
  - Fathers help with the young: nest building, incubation, chick feeding
- Nests usually found in brush species 3-5 feet off the ground, or in cacti thickets due to high predation rates





## Physical and Behavioral Adaptations for Heat

- Sunbathing
  - - Early morning they will warm themselves and spread wings to expose feathers and skin
- Reduced Activity
  - During peak hours of the day
  - Often seen with beak open sitting under shade near nest
- Nasal Salt Glands
  - Nasal gland at base of beak secretes excess salts from food
  - Receive enough water from food, not limiting resource in environment



# Quirky Birds



- ▶ Known to become tame to humans, even coming up to your window/driveway/getting comfy on patio furniture etc.
- ▶ Known for being brave enough and fast enough to prey on a rattlesnake, a great feat for a small bird
- ▶ Instinctively curious
- ▶ Dust bathe for fun- throwing themselves on the ground and stirring up dirt



## Graduate Research Assistant

- ▶ Trapped birds using Bal-Chatri trap= noosed mat with mouse suspended in protected tower
- ▶ Put backpack transmitters on birds
  - ▶ No effect on their health
- ▶ Tracked via telemetry = three-point triangulation to find home range size



# More Information About Roadrunners

➤ All About Birds- Greater Roadrunner

[https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Greater\\_Roadrunner/id](https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Greater_Roadrunner/id)

➤ Animal Diversity Web Educational Resource

[https://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Geococcyx\\_californianus/#lifespan\\_longevity](https://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Geococcyx_californianus/#lifespan_longevity)

➤ Audubon Field Guide

<https://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/greater-roadrunner>

➤ All pictures used credited to Google Images and the resources above



**Questions/Comments?**

