

Roadrunners

By Celeste Silling

One of the most famous and beloved birds of the Southwest is the Greater Roadrunner (*Geococcyx californianus*). These birds are about two feet long from the tip of their bill to the tip of their tail. They have a dark black-blue crest at the top of their head and mottled plumage to help them camouflage into the desert landscape. Their appearance is striking, but, of course, they are most easily recognized by their behavior.

The Greater Roadrunner is, predictably, is a runner. In fact, these birds can run at speeds up to 26 miles per hour, easily outpacing a human. For comparison, Usain Bolt set the world record in the 100-meter sprint at 9.58 seconds with an average speed of 23.35 miles per hour. So even he probably couldn't outrun a roadrunner at top speed! Roadrunners can be seen in the Southwest running along roads, through the desert, and over pathways. Their impressive speed can help them catch prey and escape predators.

The Greater Roadrunner's diet is quite impressive. They eat a small amount of plant material, but the vast majority of their diet is made up of other animals. Roadrunners will hunt and eat small mammals, frogs, insects, scorpions, other birds, and anything else they can catch. Even rattlesnakes! A roadrunner can kill a rattlesnake by pecking it repeatedly on the head. It can kill larger prey by hitting it against a rock. This also makes the prey easier to consume.

Roadrunners are members of the cuckoo family, and there are only two species of roadrunners in the world. There is the Lesser Roadrunner, which it isn't found in the U.S. It's range is in Mesoamerica. The Greater Roadrunner can be found in the Southwestern part of the U.S. and in Mexico. It prefers open, scrubby areas in the desert, and can also be found in forests and grasslands. They tend to avoid densely populated areas, but can still be found on the edges of cities like Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Greater Roadrunners nest in trees, on branches about 3-10 feet up off the ground. The male roadrunner will bring nesting materials to the female, including twigs, leaves, and even snake skin. She will construct the nest as a platform with a shallow bowl for the eggs, up to 17 inches in diameter. Then, she will lay her eggs inside. Each clutch contains 2 to 6 eggs, which will be incubated for about twenty days.

Fortunately, Greater Roadrunners populations are doing very well, and in fact their numbers have increased in recent years. It's encouraging to see this special species thriving! Roadrunners have been recorded throughout Texas, though it's uncommon to see them here on the Upper Texas Coast. For a better view, you can travel to the Chihuahuan Desert of West Texas or the South Texas brushlands, which have reliable roadrunner sightings. Keep an eye on the roads as you drive over, you never know what you'll see!

Photo by Lip Kee

Caption: A Greater Roadrunner spotted in Nevada, U.S.A.