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Greater Roadrunner

By Bob Garrison

As the cooler weather of fall approaches, plan a trip to California's southern deserts for a look at one of our most famous and well-known birds.

Thanks to Warner Bros., anyone growing up from the 1950s on knows about the roadrunner. Despite the artistic license and adversarial relationship with Wyle E. Coyote, the cartoon does a pretty good job of depicting the roadrunner. Yes, they are fast, running at speeds of up to 15 miles per hour. Yes, they are smart, one of the desert's premier predators capturing lizards, snakes, birds, small mammals and insects. Yes, they live in the desert, although they also can be found in the drier portions of the Central Valley and along the southern California coast. Yes they do compete with coyotes for the same types of food, but they don't interact with one another, especially with dynamite, rockets or anvils!

The greater roadrunner is a member of the cuckoo family. Its only native relative is the yellow-billed cuckoo, a summer resident which breeds in riparian forests in central and southern California. Members of this bird family are generally slender, have long tails and have two toes that point forward and two that point back. Beyond these common characteristics, the roadrunner is a unique member of this bird family.

Roadrunners range in size from 20 to 25 inches long. They have a distinctive black and white feather pattern, bushy crest and white-edged long tail. Although they can fly, roadrunners prefer to run to escape predators and capture prey. Exceptional eyesight and speed combine to make the roadrunner an efficient predator. After running down its prey, the roadrunner uses its sturdy two inch beak to stab the animal to death before swallowing it whole. Almost any animal big enough to see and small enough to swallow is fair game. In the spring and summer, the birds will also eat fruits and seeds.

Roadrunners maintain the same home territory throughout the year. Because they don't migrate like many birds, roadrunners have adapted to the extreme conditions of the desert to survive. Having a broad diet ensures they won't go hungry. The birds will drink when water is available, but they can also survive from the moisture obtained from their prey. Extreme temperature changes of up to 50 degrees between night and day require other unique adaptations. During cold temperatures, the roadrunner's body temperature drops over seven degrees below their normal temperature of 101 degrees F. In the morning, the birds spend long periods sunning themselves to raise their temperatures. With their backs to the sun, they raise the feathers on their backs to reveal a patch of black skin which helps absorb heat. During the heat of the day, they rest in the shade.

Roadrunners pair for life. They build a nest in a low tree, thicket or clump of cactus and lay three to eight eggs in the early spring. Both male and female incubate the eggs during the day, but only the male sits on the nest at night. Their mottled black and white feather pattern helps them to hide in the surrounding cover. However, if the nest is threatened by predators, the adults imitate a broken leg to lead the enemy away from the nest.

On your travels in search of the greater roadrunner, start in dry shrubby areas away from human development. Although the roadrunner can be found along the southern California coast and in the Central Valley, agricultural and housing developments have driven most birds away. Your best bet is to head to the desert country of eastern San Diego, Imperial, Riverside and San Bernardino Counties. The following wildlife viewing locations should provide you with opportunities to view this unique bird:

Anza Borrego Desert State Park
Sunbeam Lake
Picacho State Recreation Area
Salton Sea
Dos Palmas Preserve
Coachella Valley Preserve
Joshua Tree National Park
Big Morongo Canyon Preserve
Afton Canyon
Providence Mountains State Recreation Area
Death Valley National Park

You can purchase a *California Wildlife Viewing Guide* which provides detailed wildlife viewing information and directions to these and over 190 other wildlife viewing sites by visiting www.CAWatchableWildlife.org.

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