



A greater roadrunner's plume

Photo courtesy of Trudy Walden, the Audubon Society



The colorful wings of a greater roadrunner

Photo courtesy of Lillian Beasley, the Audubon Society

Front Cover:
A roadrunner preparing to run.

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FORT SELDEN

HISTORIC SITE

ROADRUNNER



At about 250,000 square miles, the Chihuahuan Desert covers a large portion of North America from Northern Mexico through the Southwestern United States. It is home to around 1,000 different species of animals. Each of these animals have specific characteristics that help them survive in the desert environment.

In this brochure, learn about the roadrunner, one species found in the Chihuahuan Desert.

Keep your eyes and ears open while out at Fort Selden Historic Site. You might just see and/or hear a roadrunner or two out in the bushes or on top of the ruins. But you'll have to look quick! They move fast!

Physical Characteristics

Its distinctive appearance includes a large head crest, long legs, and long tail that sticks upward. Its eyes are generally streaked with blue and orange feather patches. Their long tail comes in handy when traveling as such high speeds as it is used for steering, balancing, and breaking.

Diet

The roadrunner is primarily carnivorous and also feeds on frogs, scorpions, mice, lizards, and tarantulas. However they do also eat seeds and fruit.

Habitat

Roadrunners prefer open desert spaces but can also be found in grasslands, woodlands, agricultural areas, and have even gotten used to living in cities.

Senses

Roadrunners have adapted so well to the harsh desert environment that they have little need to drink water. They are able to get all the water they need from the food they eat. A special gland above their eyes helps this process by removing all the salt from their body to keep them from getting dehydrated.

Roadrunner skin is heavily pigmented. On cool mornings, the bird positions itself with its back toward the sun and erects its feathers, thus allowing the sun to strike directly on the black skin which quickly absorbs heat energy. This

makes it possible for the bird to achieve body heating without expending any unnecessary metabolic energy.

Predators

The bird is occasionally preyed upon by hawks, housecats, raccoons, skunks, and coyotes. Cold weather can also be a danger to the bird as during the winter months many succumb to freezing temperatures.

Interesting Facts

- A roadrunner can run at speeds of more than 15 miles per hour, making it the fastest bird that can also fly.

- A roadrunner is able to snatch a hummingbird or dragonfly out of midair.

- Because of a roadrunner's high speeds, it is one of only a few animals that can catch and eat a rattlesnake. The battle between the roadrunner and rattlesnake is not a pretty sight. The roadrunner flaps its wings and snaps up a coiled rattlesnake by the head and repeatedly slams the rattlesnake's head against the ground.

- The roadrunner possesses such incredible qualities that it was honored by the Indigenous people of this region. The bird is considered to be good luck as well as a symbol of strength, courage, speed, and endurance. Their feathers were also used to ward off evil.

- Not only is the roadrunner a common animal that can be found in the Chihuahuan Desert, it is also the state bird of New Mexico!

- Roadrunners are members of the cuckoo family. And just like all cuckoo birds, they are zygodactyl. This means they have 2 toes pointing forward and 2 toes pointing backward!

- Roadrunners have yellow eyes.

- Considered monogamous, roadrunners sometimes pair for life. To help maintain the relationship, males periodically dance for their partners. They'll also offer food and materials that can be used during nest construction. Both parents take turns incubating their eggs, which are laid in clutches of two to six, and they share chick-raising duties later on. Defending the home turf is another task they perform together. A single pair of roadrunners may occupy a huge territory encompassing up to 250 acres.

