

# In My Backyard Roadrunner Not a Cartoon



*Greater Roadrunner with his prey*

*Photo: Public Domain*

As I sat in my car waiting on a hot summer afternoon in Van Horn for a friend to return to his home, I kept hearing a twittering sound, as small sparrows played in a large mesquite tree by the side of the car. Fascinated with their antics as they cavorted through the limbs, I detected slight movement in the branches. It was another bird, but much larger, moving ever so slowly towards the playful and inattentive sparrows. His movements were infinitesimal and calculated, tiny step at a time, totally concentrated on his prey. In a flash he fell on the little troop and caught one bird in his big, slightly-curved beak, and the hunt was over. The others fled for their lives, but he had his prize. It was the first time I ever got to watch a roadrunner stalk his

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***Roadrunner showing the colorful eyepatch. Public Domain***

prey and capture it.

But, that wasn't all. He flew down to the ground beside my car, in the shadow of the mesquite, to a large stone. As he stood by the stone, he flailed the tiny sparrow again and again against it. For fifteen minutes, he slapped the poor beast until it was thoroughly dead, and then he began to pull out the feathers in quick motions. When the carcass was denuded from the head down, he began to roll its body in the dust, like a woman breaching chicken in the flour pan for a meal. When it was done to his satisfaction, he tore into it and consumed it very quickly. Then, he was on the hunt again.

It was like coming up on a car wreck and being unable to look away. The process was grim and calculated, but it was spellbinding to me. It was Mother Nature at her wildest, and that mental picture has stuck with me for fifty years.

I have been watching roadrunners since childhood. I learned early on to identify their two vocalizations: an infrequent cooing sound and a more common clattering, piping noise, like a bundle of sticks being rattled together. Researchers say the clattering is produced by their beaks.

Actually, there are two types of roadrunners in the US and Mexico: the Greater Roadrunner (*Geococcyx californianus*) and the Lesser Roadrunner (*Geococcyx velox*.) The Greater is found in the US and Mexico and the Lesser is found in Mexico and Central America. The Lesser is slightly smaller than the Greater, hence the distinction, and has a smaller bill and is not as streaky in appearance as the Greater.



***Roadrunner with his crown reduced.***

*Photo: Jessie Eastland, Wikipedia*

The Greater is generally found on a line from middle California across the US to central Missouri, south to Arkansas and western Louisiana, and all points between. The range extends down into Central Mexico, avoiding the coastal regions but covering all of Baja California.

Because we watched roadrunner cartoons as kids, that cartoon caricature hardly resembles the actual bird. They usually range from 22 to 24 inches in length from beak to tail and weigh less than a pound. One of the more interesting things about the roadrunner is the whitish patch of skin behind each eye with blue and red highlights...an unexpected flash of color from a drab bird. The body is black or brown with white streaking and the head is topped by a feathery crest. The dark beak is long and slightly curved, typical of the cuckoo family, of which the roadrunner is a member. The tail feathers are almost as long as the body with white tips on the three outermost feathers. The toes are arranged in an X-pattern, making the bird hard to track because you are not sure which direction he is moving.

One thing the cartoons have correct is the speed of the roadrunner. It can trot along at 20 miles per hour, and would rather run than fly. It can fly very well, and does so to escape predators when necessary.

Roadrunners will eat anything that is available. They eat insects,



***Resting in the shade.***

*Photo: Bob DuHamel, Wikipedia*

reptiles, small mammals, spiders and other arthropods and birds, but will also eat eggs, prickly pear and sumac fruits and seeds. They are one of the few predators of rattlesnakes and the only predator for tarantula hawks.

Roadrunners live a solitary existence for the most part, but they will pair up with females for a monogamous relationship, staying together for life. The males perform a courtship ritual and sometimes offer food as a gift to woo the female. Once mated, they build a nest from three to twelve feet off the ground, made up of sticks, feathers, animal droppings or leaves. Both parents take turns incubating the two to six eggs. The eggs hatch at various times, not all at the same time. The babies are fed by both parents and a parent stays with the babies at all times for the first couple of weeks. When they are two or three weeks old they begin to hunt with the parents but soon leave on their own.

Being a denison of the Southwestern deserts, the roadrunner figures greatly in Native American folklore. The Pueblo and Hopis thought of the roadrunner as having great medicine that could protect them from evil spirits. The Pueblos decorated their cradleboards with roadrunner feathers to protect the baby. The ancient Anasazi and Mogollon cultures used the roadrunner tracks in their artwork. The Pimas saw them as a sign of good luck, but many Mexican Indian cultures used roadrunner meat as a folk remedy to cure disease or increase strength or stamina.

But we West Texans don't eat them or use them for good medicine. We just watch them and enjoy the antics of our favorite little neighbor. Oh...and no flying anvils or Acme Rockets are needed.

**And, what is in your backyard?**