

Making Ripples

Our Resident Roadrunners

by Amanda Bancroft

With a nickname like “snake killer” and a running appearance similar to a Velociraptor, the Greater Roadrunner (*Geococcyx californianus*) is an attention-grabbing bird we're lucky enough to glimpse occasionally in Northwest Arkansas. They're tricky, predatory, and star in plenty of legends, businesses, and cartoons – even being called Mexico's stork, since in local lore, roadrunners are said to bring babies much like the white storks of Europe. Over recent decades, roadrunners have become more common in Arkansas, along with other desert species predominantly found in the southwest, such as armadillos.

The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds notes that this member of the cuckoo family got its common name from its habit of running down roads ahead of horse-drawn vehicles. Nowadays, they can still be seen dashing across roads ahead of vehicles, or racing through roadside ditches. One of its many striking features is a bare patch of orange and blue skin near each eye like an eyebrow streak below its brown feathery crest.

Roadrunners are fast predators, consuming insects, fruit, bats, scorpions, rattlesnakes, frogs, rodents, small mammals, lizards, tarantulas, snails, even other birds and their nestlings. They're fast enough to snap up hummingbirds in flight! They can jet past at over 20mph, making them the fastest flight-capable birds in North America (although they aren't good fliers) but much slower than the flightless ostrich that can sprint at speeds over 40mph.

Preferring grassy, open farmland and shrubby habitat, they usually nest in bushes, with a clutch of three to six eggs that hatch in twenty days. Nestlings are cared for by both parents, and fledge at eighteen days old on average. Roadrunners are romantic, forming lifelong pair bonds with both mates building the nest together and defending a small territory. They renew their partnership with elaborate courtship and mating rituals (copulation involves both birds grasping food the male brings, usually a mouse or small prey animal, perhaps proving that he can provide for a family). The Cornell Lab of Ornithology banding records indicate that these birds can live at least seven years in the wild.

You might be able to spot one on walks down quiet country roads teeming with prey in the summertime, and they may even coo from a high perch such as a telephone wire. It can be difficult to spot one, harder to see one for longer than a second, and even harder to tell which direction it's going if you're lucky enough to find tracks: they have two toes facing forward and two back, making their x-shaped prints tricky to follow. Roadrunners may be fast, but outside of the Looney Tunes world, Wile E. Coyote would've had his bird: coyotes are twice as fast as roadrunners. Meep meep!

Amanda Bancroft is a writer, artist, and naturalist building an off-grid cottage for land conservation on Mt. Kessler. She and her husband Ryan blog about their adventures and offer a solar-hosted online educational center on how to make a difference with everyday choices at: www.RipplesBlog.org.