

# Truths about roadrunners

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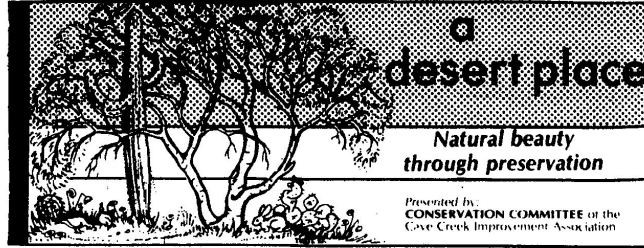
by Bert Edises

This long, slender member of the cuckoo family, measuring all of 2 feet from tip of beak to tip of its long tail, is perhaps the most celebrated feathered creature of the Southwest.

It is probable that most tourists have heard stories about the roadrunner's spectacular feats in killing and eating rattlesnakes twice its size, and have dismissed them as fiction — as the kind of cock-and-bull stories endemic to the wild, wild West.

But true they are, as Gusse Thomas Smith tells us in **Birds of the Southwestern Desert**: "It is a thrilling, three-hour show to see a roadrunner kill a big rattlesnake, literally worrying it to death, leaping and divebombing to deliver stab after stab at the base of the brain. If the victim is not too large, not much longer than the bird, it is another three-hour show to watch him swallow it head first."

But it is not only in tangling with rattlesnakes that the roadrunner shows its versatility.



The birds eat enormous quantities of the pests that man finds undesirable — crickets, caterpillars, beetles, centipedes, rodents and numerous kinds of snakes.

So fabulous are the eating capacities of the roadrunner, that one naturalist has referred to it as "a digestive tract encased in feathers"; and in proof, offered the stomach contents of a roadrunner he had collected as a museum specimen on a cool spring day. Included were: 21 snails, one cutworm, one bee, one spider, three daddy longlegs, two pods of stinging nettle, two crickets, seven unidentifiable

small beetles and two june bugs.

When you surprise the roadrunner on a road, it runs (not flies) rapidly away from you; its heavy bill and shaggy crest pointed straight ahead; its short-winged, brown-and-white streaked body skipping over the desert at amazing speed. Sometimes when flushed it will run, then hop or fly to a low perch, and stand there appraising the intruder to the accompaniment of much raising and lowering of the head crest and tail.

Some years ago, one heard many stories about the racing propensities of the roadrunner. It was said that he would challenge anything on wheels, from a dune buggy to a Mercedes. Racing stories are not so common anymore, but it is uncertain whether the explanation is a genetic charge in the birds or the overcrowded condition of modern highways.

It seems that roadrunners can have fun, too. A Carefree friend has a pair of sensitively-sprung rocking chairs on the front and rear porches of her house. Roadrunners perch regularly on the back rails of the chairs, causing them to rock to and fro, while the birds remain seated comfortably on the rails — clearly seeming to enjoy the occasion.

A final note, concerning the bathing habits of the roadrunner. Mary Austin, in **The Land of Little Rain**, prepared a waterhole in her arid valley so that it attracted many a bird and animal. Large numbers of them would troop to her little sanctuary to luxuriate in the cool, wet waters when all else was hot and stifling. Except the roadrunner. He came too, but he performed his ablutions not in the water baths along with the sparrows and other birds, but in "the clean, hopeful dust of the chaparral," distaining those creatures who required water for their baths.

Call 1-800-352-0700 to report and acquire help for injured wildlife of any kind. This number should also be called to report game law violations.

Questions or comments are invited. Please write: Conservation Committee, P.O. Box 4212, Cave Creek, AZ 85331.