

# Greater Roadrunner

*Geococcyx californianus*

Bird

## Scientific Name

*Geococcyx californianus*

## Other Names

Chaparral Cock, Snake Killer, Ground Cuckoo

## Range

Southwestern North America

## Habitat

Scrub deserts, mesquite groves and chaparral

## Average Size

Length: 20 – 24 in.

Weight: 6 – 24 oz.

## Description

Medium sized ground bird with long legs, brown feathers streaked in white and a shaggy crest on top of the head.

## Lifespan

In the wild: 5 – 9 years

In captivity: 5 – 9 years

## Diet

In the wild: Insects, lizards, snakes, small birds, seeds and fruit

In captivity: Insects, prepared meat diet, and mice

## Incubation Period

18 – 20 days

## Fledgling period

3 weeks

## Offspring

2 – 12 eggs

## Sexual Maturity

2 – 3 years

## Predators

Bobcats, Ring-tailed Cats, birds of prey and domestic cats

## Population Status

Not Threatened



## Behavior

Although Roadrunners can fly, they prefer to run using their long legs and sleek body, more than half of which is tail feathers. They have a lot of stamina for a small bird and can maintain speeds of roughly 20 miles per hour for some distance.

Roadrunners have a wide variety in their diet; up to 10% of their winter diet may consist of plant material because of the scarcity of desert animals at that time of the year. They beat their food on the ground or on rocks to break up the bones before consumption, allowing them to eat larger prey since they do not have a tearing beak to rip off edible portions. In addition, because of their lightning quickness, the roadrunners are one of the few animals that prey upon rattlesnakes. Using their wings like a matador's cape, they snap up a coiled rattlesnake by the tail, crack it like a whip and repeatedly slam its head against the ground until dead.

Living in the desert has given this bird some unique physical adaptations: they can reabsorb water from their feces before excretion and use a nasal gland to eliminate excess salt instead of using their urinary tract like many other birds. To warm up after cold desert nights, they bask in the sun with their black feathers fluffed out to absorb the heat.

## Reproduction and Breeding

In the deserts of California, roadrunners nest in spring (after the only rainy season), when prey is abundant enough to raise a brood. In the Sonoran Desert of Arizona, they breed again in August or September after summer rains increase their food sources. Mating rituals revolve around food; the male dances around the female with choice food offerings in his beak, giving the morsel to her after mating is complete.

Both the male and female help construct the nest in a small tree or cactus clump lined with twigs, grass, feathers and leaves. Due to the harsh desert habitat, construction of the nest is of utmost importance as it must provide enough shade and air circulation for the eggs and nestlings to survive. The parents share the incubation and feeding of the young with the female sitting on the nest in the daytime and the male taking his turn at night.

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### **Conservation**

The roadrunner is not currently threatened in any part of its range and some local populations appear to be thriving. Current laws protect this species but in years past, they were considered taboo animals that should not be seen in certain circumstances and were also suspected killers of local wildlife. These beliefs led to bounties being placed on their heads. With an increase in people venturing to the deserts for recreation and open land for housing, the Roadrunner's survival will become more precarious as competition for limited resources heightens.

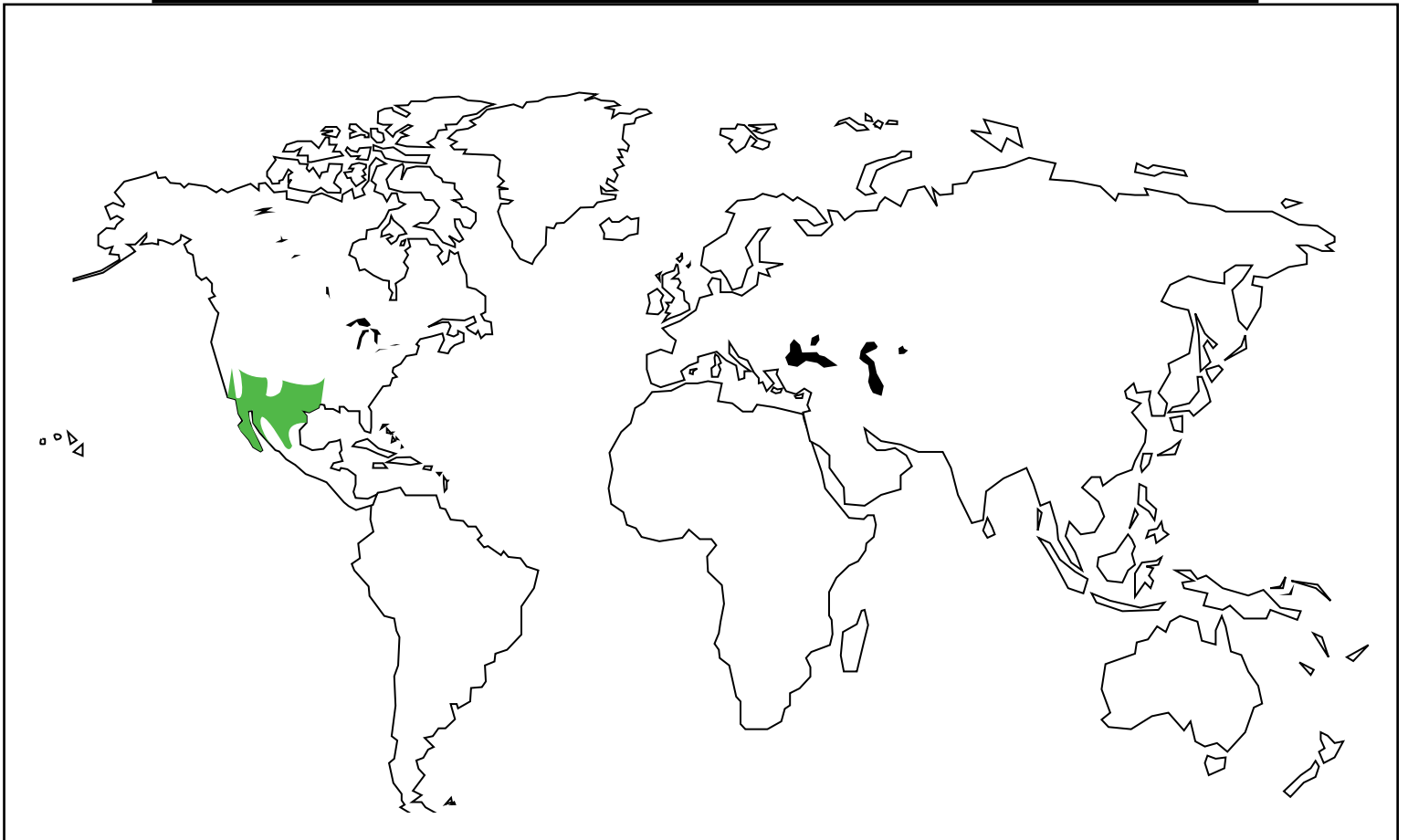
### **Amazing Facts**

As with many members of the Cuckoo family, female roadrunners have been documented practicing nest parasitism, "dumping" their eggs into the nests of surrounding birds.

The Roadrunner is the state bird of New Mexico.

This desert bird obtains enough moisture from its food that it can go long periods of time without drinking water.

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