

Look out for the roadrunner



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

The grand kids were actively rotting their collective brains in front of the television, watching that roadrunner vs. coyote cartoon many of us grew up watching. I made a comment to them about how, in real life, the coyote would capture the roadrunner without even breaking a sweat, and to the coyote, a roadrunner is nothing more than a blue plate special.

One of the kids went and tattled to Grannie that I was spreading nonsense. Shortly thereafter, Grannie and the little informant went on about how I have no imagination and destroy all of their imagination with my "wisdom." She cited the "Easter Bunny" incident as further evidence.

Once again, I was remanded to the custody of the doghouse, where I was incarcerated with my laptop and a cup of coffee. Grannie and the informant, who stuck her tongue out at me, headed to the kitchen for cookies and a consolatory glass of chocolate milk. I decided to write this piece about the roadrunner while I was in custody.

Last spring, a hunting buddy and I took a trip to Arizona to scout for Coues deer and javelina. We stopped to stretch our legs, fairly close to the Four Corners region, and we saw a roadrunner, scurrying along a dusty game trail just off the parking area.

Greater roadrunners are ground-dwelling members of the cuckoo family. The range of these intriguing birds extends across the southwestern United States, including



The roadrunner really looks nothing like the roadrunner of cartoon fame. (Courtesy photo/ US Fish and Wildlife Service.)

Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, New Mexico, southeastern Colorado, and into central Mexico.

While they do exist in Colorado, they are not the most common bird to see. They have been reported as far north as Idaho Springs but are mostly found in the southeast corner of the state. They prefer arid climates with light foliage, such as deserts, dry grasslands, and on the edge of forests.

The greater roadrunner, who is the one we have living here, goes by the street name *Geococcyx californianus*, which means Californian earth-cuckoo. There are only two species of roadrunners, the other being the lesser roadrunner who only resides in Mexico and Central America.

The roadrunner does not share many traits with the cuckoo, but they are both zygodactyl birds. They have four toes, two pointing forward, and two pointing to their ear. They leave a track that looks like an X.

Almost 2 feet long, the roadrunner has

black, brown, and white speckled feathers, with a shaggy crest. He is easily recognized by the long tail feathers which serve to help him keep his balance while standing still and running.

Roadrunners tend not to fly, and don't really have much reason to. They can hit a top speed near 20 mph when they need to chase down a meal, since most of their quarry is on the ground. On those occasions when they need to escape a predator, reach a tree branch, or to catch an insect in the air, roadrunners will fly for short distances, lasting only a few seconds. They are not into really very impressive fliers.

The comment that resulted in my conviction, was that the roadrunner may be a fast runner, the coyote is much faster. Coyotes can run up to 40 mph for short distances, and a coyote can quickly overtake the slower moving roadrunner. Roadrunners are usually found ambling along, in a semi-comical way, looking for prey, but

when they spot a lizard or insect, they burst into action.

Roadrunners are omnivores and will eat just about anything they find on the ground. Their primary diet includes scorpions, reptiles, small mammals, birds, eggs, and frogs. A pair of roadrunners can, and sometimes do, join forces, and attack a rattlesnake, pecking it snake's head until it dies. They have a similar technique for rodents and lizards, wherein they snatch the prey and crush it against a rock before swallowing it.

In the desert, there is not a lot of water around, and in order to survive, the roadrunner gets most of its water from the food it eats. They absorb the water found in their prey through a very efficient digestive system. The bird will rid themselves of the excess salt found in their diet through active salt glands located near their eyes. They also pick up some additional water by occasionally eating fruits, seeds, and some plants.

Roadrunners mate for life and have an elabo-

rate mating ritual. The courtship begins with the boy chasing the girl on foot. He will try and woo her with food, such as a lizard. She may woo him back with a gift of sticks or grass. The male will often jump in the air and wag his tail, in an attempt to garner attention from the female.

Once they mate, they stay together to defend the home territory all year. A nest will be built in a low bush or tree, lined with grass, leaves, and sometimes cow dung. Up to eight eggs will be produced each breeding season, and the hatchlings will be raised by both parents, taking turns protecting and gathering food.

In the wild, a roadrunner can live for around eight years. Overall, they are doing pretty well in the wild. Conservationists estimate there is a breeding population of 1.1 million roadrunners, and overall, the species is stable. The birds do face some threats, especially in California, where the ever-swelling human population is crowding

them out of their habitat. Seems to be the problem wildlife everywhere is facing, too many people.

Roadrunners, being very quick on their feet, feel confident and curious around people. One may approach you and cock its head to look you over sideways. They are very entertaining to watch.

I better wrap this up because I hear grannie and the informant coming. I think I am about to be paroled because lunch is probably ready.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press, Delta County Independent, and several other newspapers, as well as a feature writer for the Nautical Mile, and various saltwater fishing magazines. He is an avid hunter and world class saltwater angler, who travels around the world in search of adventure and serves as a director and public information officer for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. Personal email is elkhunter77@icloud.com For information about the posse, call 970-765-7033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org

TYLER

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"It was extremely difficult," Tyler said of the route, later adding "It felt like an absolute rodeo from start to finish".

The competition called for mixed climbing, meaning the athletes had to be proficient with dry-tooling on rock as well as climbing ice. Tyler said while the tower always wows the crowd, "The

real competition, in my mind, is on the rock."

Mixed climbing, he explained, "is more of a patience game" and usually requires climbers to slow down and make careful decisions. When put under the pressure of a competition time limit, climbers were forced to quickly make judgements more quickly and take calculated risks.

"Mixed climbing in under eight minutes

seemed nearly impossible," Tyler said.

With years of experience under his belt, he said he definitely had to use technique rather than trying to muscle his way up the wall.

"The route was just as physically challenging as it was mentally," he said.

But, finally reaching that massive structure at the end of the route is a feeling all its own.

"It kind of feels like you're on the edge of a space station," Tyler said.

Another Basecamp guide, Mallorie Estenson, also made the finals of the women's competition. However, she was unavailable for a call due to travelling right after the festival.

For Garcia, watching the locals climb from the base of the competition route is extra special. He's mentored

climbers throughout the Western Slope, and remembers that Tyler grew up watching him climb. Now, the roles are reversed, and he's proud to see Tyler succeeding.

"It was emotional to watch him climb and do so well," Garcia said. "He put so much heart into it."

While ice fest is over, Basecamp will be offering Ice Park and backcountry ice guiding

services all winter long.

Tyler said he's also particularly excited for the summer season, as he's working to develop new programs for families and corporate teams on the Gold Mountain Via Ferrata.

And, when it gets cold again, he'll likely be back on the walls at the ice competition.

"I'll continue to do Ice Fest until I can't move," he said.



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