

Animals of the Chihuahuan Desert



Roadrunner

Physical Characteristics

Its distinctive appearance includes a large head crest, long legs, and long tail that sticks upward. Its eyes are generally streaked with blue and orange feather patches. Their long tail comes in handy when traveling at such high speeds as it is used for steering, balancing, and braking.

Diet

The roadrunner is primarily carnivorous, feeding on frogs, scorpions, mice, lizards, and tarantulas. They do also eat seeds and fruit.

Habitat

Roadrunners prefer open desert spaces but can also be found in grasslands, woodlands, agricultural areas and have even gotten used to living in cities.

Senses

Roadrunners have adapted so well to the harsh desert environment that they have little need to sip water. They can get all the water they need from the food they eat. A special gland above their eyes helps this process by removing all the salt from their body to keep them from getting dehydrated. Roadrunner skin is heavily pigmented. On cool mornings, the bird positions itself with its back toward the sun and erects its feathers, thus allowing the sun to strike directly on the black skin which quickly absorbs heat energy. This makes it possible for the bird to achieve body heating without unnecessary expenditure of metabolic energy.

Predators

The bird is occasionally preyed upon by hawks, housecats, raccoons, skunks, and coyotes. Cold weather can also be a danger to the bird as during the winter months many succumb to freezing temperatures.

Interesting Facts

- They can run at speeds of more than 15 miles per hour, making it the fastest sprinting of any bird that can also fly.
- A roadrunner can snatch a hummingbird or dragonfly out of midair.
- Because of a roadrunner's high speeds, it is one of only a few animals that can catch and eat a rattlesnake. The battle between the roadrunner and rattlesnake is not a pretty sight. The roadrunner flaps its wings and snaps up a coiled rattlesnake by the head and repeatedly slams the rattlesnake's head against the ground.
- The roadrunner possesses such incredible qualities that it was honored by the Indigenous people of this region. The bird is considered good luck as well as a symbol of strength, courage, speed, and endurance. Their feathers were also used to ward off evil.
- The roadrunner is the state bird for New Mexico!
- Roadrunners are members of the cuckoo family. And just like all cuckoo birds, they are zygodactyl. This means they have 2 toes pointing forward and 2 toes pointing backward!