

ROADRUNNERS OF THE ARIZONA DESERT

by

Mrs. William L. Finley

(Mrs. Finley and her daughter, Phoebe Katherine, are motoring through the southwest and have sent in this article from Tucson, Arizona.)

Near the register of a prominent hotel in Tucson, Arizona, hangs the card of the Southwestern Traveling Men's Association. The emblem on this poster is a bird with a high top-knot, a long tail and legs that indicate that he is traveling at full speed across the desert. Under the picture is the motto: "You can't run over us." All of which is a parable. Both the roadrunner and the traveling salesman cover the ground, and I am sure that the roadrunner at least can't be run over.

One can't get the full meaning of this until he starts hunting a roadrunner, the most unique and intriguing bird of the southern desert region. In fact, if a tourist traveling through catches a mere glimpse of this wary bird, he is lucky. His numerous names are as mystical as his shadow. He is called Ground Cuckoo, Mexican Paisano, Snake-killer, Chaparral Cock, but most typical of all, Cock o' the Desert.

As we rolled along over one of Arizona's splendid highways, the sand hissed under the wheels. Here and there thrashers, verdins, gnatcatchers and other birds were seen, but no roadrunner. Only the feeling of his presence was there as we scanned closely every clump of cactus that we passed. Then just at the side of the white road, scuttling from one gnarly cactus to another, slid a slim, dark bird with head lowered as if dodging the scrutiny of strange eyes. It surely was a roadrunner. He faded away in the silence that reached out over the endless mesa. Then his shadow came out again, skulking

from one bush to another, running easily as if he wished to keep pace with the car. At our slightest movement, he became scared and slid along low to the ground like a brown streak. His movements were cat-like. He was making toward the west end of the Catalinas, those rugged, colorful mountains that lifted directly out of the plain in front of us. Soon he disappeared into the sameness of sand and wash, palo verdes, sahuaros, ocotillos and chollas.

Frequently after that we caught fleeting glimpses of these brown shadows as we rolled along the desert. One day, something under a bunch of cactus caught my eye. A roadrunner was standing stiff and straight watching us and thinking he could not possibly be seen. I got out and making a big circle walked slowly around the bush, getting closer and closer until I could see him plainly and make out the markings of his striking coat. I was looking at a bird nearly two feet long with a tail half the length of his body. He was an indescribable grayish-brown, streaked with black, with a sheen of bronzy-green over all. The long, black tail, iridescent above, showed white thumb marks on the outer feathers. The whole dress was harsh, especially the bristle-tipped crest. When he caught my eye and knew he was discovered, his own yellow eye became excited, his crest raised and the feathers on the side of his head parted showing a bare spot just back of the eye that was a brilliant orange and blue.

We wondered if a desert diet produced this coloring. Major Charles E. Bendire in his "Life Histories of North American Birds," says, "The food of this species consists chiefly of insects, particularly grasshoppers, but embraces occasionally a lizard or a field mouse." Yes, occasionally. If Major Bendire could have watched as many roadrunners as we did, he would have doubled many times the "occasional lunch" of lizards.

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As we rolled along over one of Arizona's splendid highways, the sand hissed under the wheels. Here and there thrashers, verdins, gnatcatchers, and other birds were seen from time to time, but no roadrunner. Only the feeling of his presence was there as we scanned closely every clump of cactus that we passed. Then just at the side of the white road, scuttling from one gnarly cactus to another, slid a slim, dark bird with head lowered as if dodging the scrutiny of strange eyes. It surely was a roadrunner. He faded away in the silence that reached out over the endless mesa. Then his shadow came out again, skulking from one bush to another, running easily as if he wished to keep pace with the car. At our slightest movement, he became scared and slid along low to the ground like a brown streak. His movements were cat-like. He was making toward the west end of the Catalinas, those rugged colorful mountains that lifted directly out of the plain in front of us. Soon he disappeared into the sameness of sand and wash, palo verdes, sahuaros, ocotillos and chollas.

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