

Roadrunners

The roadrunner is a type of cuckoo – an odd bird indeed. Nicknamed the desert clown, these birds actually prefer walking or running to flying. They can often be seen race-walking across the desert. They are able to fly, but only for short distances. When roadrunners run, they lower their heads and stick their long tails straight out so they are as straight as possible. They can run up to 17 miles per hour.

Roadrunners are found throughout all of the desert areas of the American southwest. On average, roadrunners are around two feet long and weigh about a pound and a half. They are brown and white in color and have a crest (a flap of skin that resembles a crown) on their heads. Roadrunners have very large bills and strong feet with two toes in front and two in back. They eat insects, lizards and snakes and are quick enough to capture even rattle snakes. They can snatch dragonflies and hummingbirds in midair.

Roadrunners make a cooing sound, similar to the sound a dove makes. They also bark, hoot, whine, grunt and whir. Since they live in very hot areas, they are less active in the middle part of the day when the temperature is highest. In the winter, roadrunners do not migrate like other birds. However, when it gets very cold, which is rare in the desert, roadrunners do hibernate.

In the spring, male roadrunners attract females by offering them food. The male does a kind of dance around the female to get her attention. After they mate, he gives her the food. The roadrunner couple then builds a shallow nest in a bush, cactus or tree. The female lays 2-12 eggs over a span of about three days. The eggs hatch in less than three weeks, but usually only 3 to 4 babies survive. Both female and males incubate the eggs. They do this by sitting on them to keep them warm.

Roadrunners are very curious and are not very shy around people. If you happen to see one in the desert, it may pump its tail up and down or stare at you while shuffling its feet. Sometimes, people adopt roadrunners to protect their homes from bugs, mice and snakes.

For the most part, roadrunners are quick enough to escape their enemies. However, nestlings (babies) have several predators, including hawks, coyotes, skunks and house cats.

Roadrunners Questions (Cont'd)

7. Male roadrunners attract females by
 - a. offering them food.
 - b. showing their brilliant colors.
 - c. singing to them.
 - d. chasing them.

8. What is a roadrunner likely to do if it sees a person?
 - a. run away.
 - b. fly away.
 - c. pump its tail and shuffle its feet.
 - d. All of these

9. Roadrunners
 - a. sometimes live with people.
 - b. are dangerous.
 - c. are poisonous.
 - d. are almost impossible to spot in the wild because they are so fast.

10. When roadrunners mate,
 - a. The female builds the nest and the male sits on the eggs.
 - b. The male builds the nest and the female sits on the eggs.
 - c. The female builds the nest and sits on the eggs while the male hunts for food.
 - d. Both the male and female build the nest and sit on the eggs.

Name _____



Date _____

Roadrunners Answers

1. d
2. desert clown
3. Answers will vary but should refer to the idea that roadrunners are comical.
4. c
5. b
6. c
7. a
8. c
9. a
10. d