



CRITTER CONNECTIONS



The Greater Roadrunner



Cholla



Cholla (*Cylindropuntia imbricata* or *Opuntia imbricata*), pronounced choy-yah, is a type of cactus found in dry, desert-type habitats in Texas and the southwestern United States. It is also known as tree cholla because it grows like a tree with a short trunk and branches. They are usually 3-8 feet in height and can be 3-4 feet wide.

The stems of the plant are a greyish-green color and look like a braid or rope covered with spines. The second part of the scientific name, *imbricata*, means to have overlapping edges, which refers to the bumps or ridges on the branches. The spines are barbed, which means they have microscopic hooks on the tip like a fishhook. This means if you get a spine stuck in your hand it will stick just like a porcupine quill.

Their yellow fruit grows at the end of the stems and looks similar to the branches of the plant but without the large spines. The fruits are hard and most animals and humans will not eat them, with the rare exception of some larger mammals, like cows. In the spring the cactus grows dark pink, or magenta, flowers that are about 5 centimeters or 2 inches wide. These flowers provide nectar for different insects like bees.

When a stem falls onto the ground, it is able to grow roots and start a new plant. This makes it a fast spreading plant and can sometimes be considered a pest or weed. Aside from nectar drinkers, animals do not eat them, but they do provide shelter. Many birds and other small animals find protection on the thorny branches. Once the plant has died and the outside flesh has worn away, the inside is a woody skeleton. This skeleton is hollow with many holes and is often used in furniture designs and crafts.

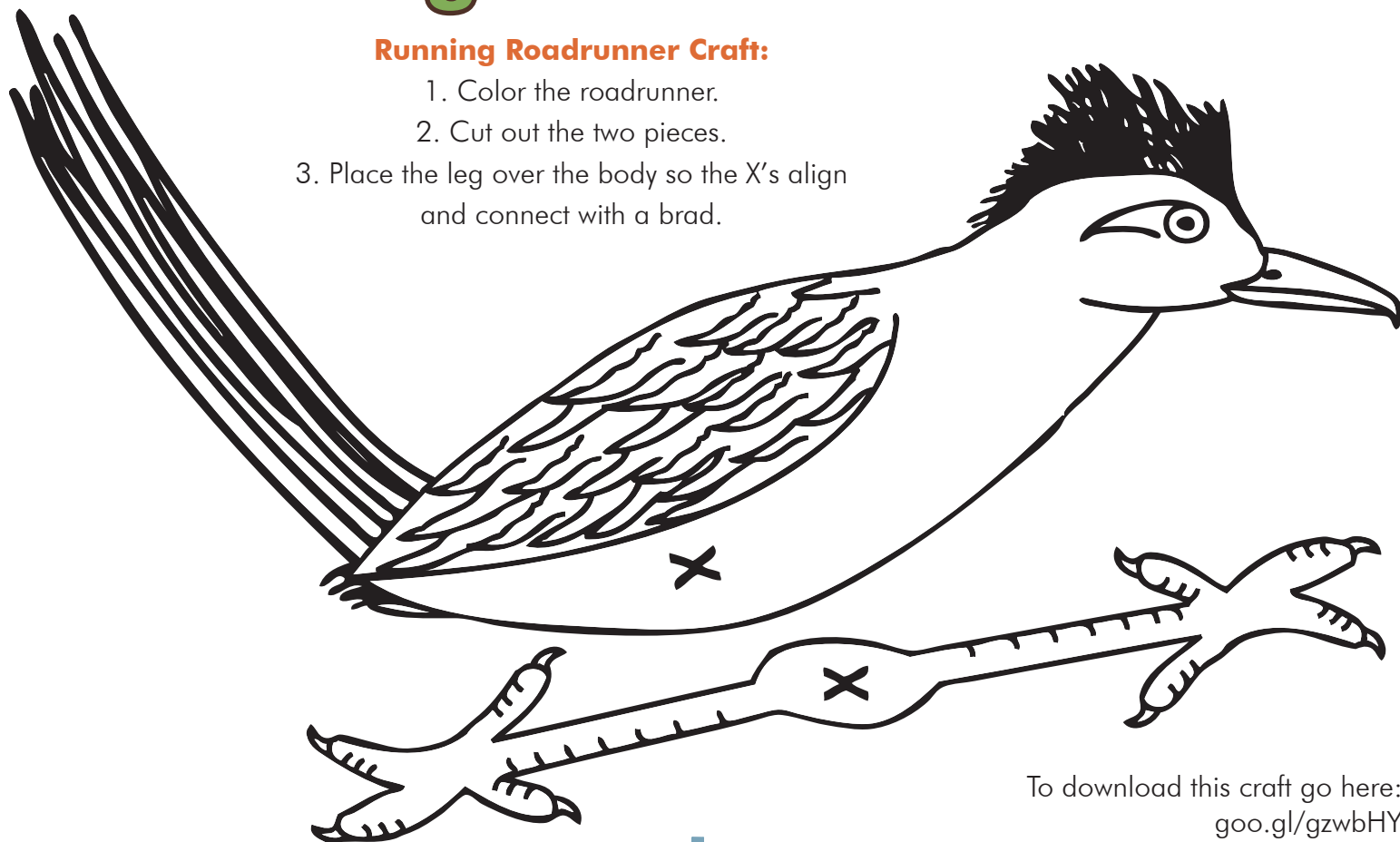
Source: Texas Native Plants Database - Texas A&M
Photo Source: Skoch3, Paul Asman and Jill Lenoble



Running Roadrunner Craft

Running Roadrunner Craft:

1. Color the roadrunner.
2. Cut out the two pieces.
3. Place the leg over the body so the X's align and connect with a brad.



To download this craft go here:
goo.gl/gzwbHY

Did you know...

- ... that roadrunners can fly, but prefer to move on the ground?
- ... that roadrunners will kill their prey by holding it in their beak and smashing it against the ground?
- ... that the Greater Roadrunner is the state bird of New Mexico?
- ... that roadrunners get all the water they need from the foods they eat?
- ... that the fastest running bird in the world is the Ostrich, not the roadrunner?
- ... that roadrunners can kill and eat rattlesnakes?
- ... that roadrunners are related to cuckoos?
- ... that roadrunners like to sunbathe?
- ... that they use their long tail to help balance?



Color Me

Greater Roadrunner

Geococcyx californianus

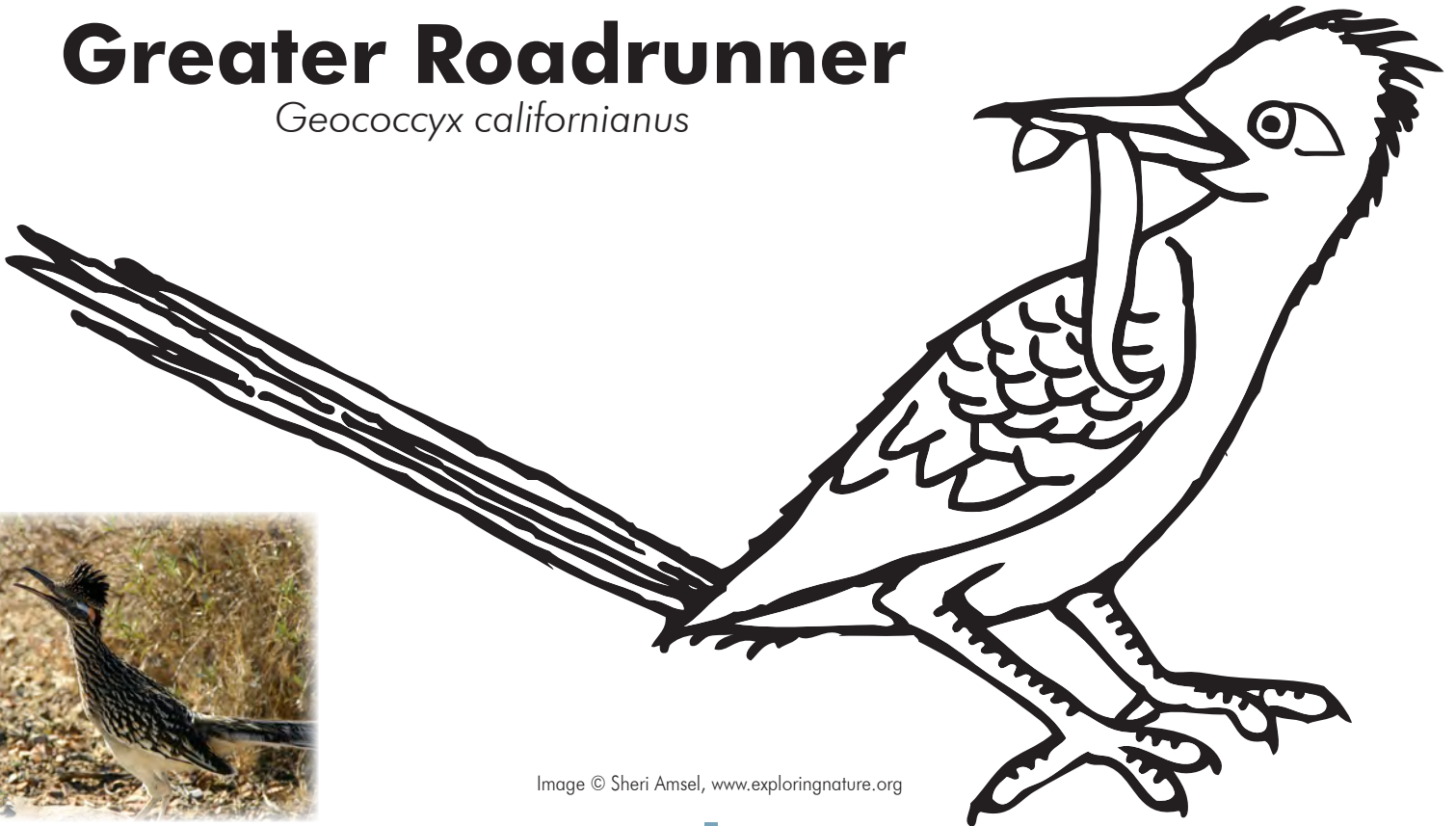


Image © Sheri Amsel, www.exploringnature.org



By Elanor Dean

The roadrunner is a bird named because of its ability to run quickly. Roadrunners are in the **cuckoo** family. In Latin, the scientific name *Geococcyx californianus* actually means Californian earth-cuckoo. In Texas we have the Greater Roadrunner, one of two species or types of roadrunners found in the world. The other type, the Lesser Roadrunner, lives in Central America and Mexico. Greater Roadrunners live year-round in the southwestern part of the United States, across Texas and Oklahoma and into Mexico.

Greater Roadrunners are 50-60 centimeters or 20-24 inches long including their long tail and weigh 220-240 grams or 8-19 ounces. They usually move around on the ground, but they can fly and have a 40-60 centimeter or 17-24 inch wingspan. How does that compare to your 'wingspan?' Their body is covered with black and tan feathers with a white belly and a crest of feathers on top of their head.

Roadrunners most commonly live in warm, dry habitats like the desert. Their habitat type is also known as **scrubby**, which means a place with sandy soils and plants that are adapted to live in a drier area. The plants in these habitats are usually bushes, short trees with small leaves and thorns and other plants with natural defenses like cacti. These plants provide shelter, nesting sites and food for roadrunners and other wildlife in the area.



Roadrunners are omnivores, which means they eat both meat and plants. While their diet is mostly meat, they will eat seeds and fruit from desert plants, like prickly pear. They will eat almost anything they can catch, from insects, to reptiles,

to small mammals. They will also eat **carrion** or animals that are already dead and prey on bird nests including both the chicks and eggs. Roadrunners can even catch and eat **venomous** animals like scorpions and rattlesnakes. Roadrunners do not have sharp talons for killing their prey or sharp beaks for tearing up meat. Instead, they kill their larger prey by either pecking it or slamming it against the ground or a nearby rock. This also helps break up their prey making it easier to swallow. While they are predators to many different animals, they are also prey to larger predators like coyotes, raccoons and hawks.

Roadrunners can run up to 20 miles per hour. While the roadrunner is not the fastest running bird in the world, (that honor goes to a much larger bird, the ostrich) it is the fastest running bird with the ability to fly. They have special adaptations that help them run quickly. They have long, thin legs and four toes in the shape of an X. This toe arrangement,



called **zygodactyl** (pronounced zi-go-dack-till), is also common in birds that climb tree trunks, like woodpeckers. Roadrunners also have a long tail, almost as long as their body, which helps them to balance.

Because they live in dry habitats, like the desert, roadrunners also have adaptations to help survive the heat and meet their basic needs. First, roadrunners are able to get most of the water they need from the foods they eat. Their body can reabsorb or reuse water during digestion so they do not lose too much. Another important adaptation is their ability to remove extra salt from their bodies. Roadrunners have a special gland near their eye that **secretes** or gets rid of extra salt from their blood. While hot during the day, desert





habitats get cold at night, so roadrunners are able to lower their body temperature to conserve or save energy. They like to sunbathe and will ruffle the feathers on their back so the sun can warm the skin underneath.

Even though they spend most of their time on the ground, roadrunners build their nests three or more feet off the ground in a nearby plant like a cactus. The male roadrunner will defend his territory by sitting on a high plant and making "coo" sounds. Roadrunners will pair for life and will sometimes reuse their nest from the past year. They build their nests using sticks and line the nest with soft grasses, feathers and even animal manure. Once the nest is ready, the female will lay 3-6 eggs, which they take turns incubating until the chicks hatch after about 20 days. Both parents care for the chicks and will feed them until they are able to catch their own food after about 17 days. Roadrunners live about seven years on average.



One of the most well known roadrunners is from the Looney Tunes show. In the cartoon, Wile E. Coyote is never able to catch the speedy Roadrunner, but in real life, coyotes are a serious predator. Coyotes can run up to speeds of 43 miles per hour, which is double the speed of a roadrunner. Another difference from the show is the "beep beep" sound that the roadrunner makes. In real life, roadrunners do not "beep," but make "coo" sounds instead.



Another roadrunner you can find outside of the wild is Paisano Pete, a 22-foot long and 11-foot tall roadrunner statue in Fort Stockton, Texas. This is the second largest roadrunner statue in the world and is Fort Stockton's town mascot.



Roadrunners are also very important to the Native American culture. They are honored for their courage, speed and endurance. Some tribes believe that they protect against evil, and their X-shaped footprint is used as a sacred symbol. Other tribes believe seeing a wild roadrunner will bring good luck.

Lastly, the Greater Roadrunner is the state bird of New Mexico, just how Texas' state bird is the Northern Mockingbird.

They are very interesting birds and are important to different cultures and the habitat in which they live. Next time you are in a place with a dry, desert-type habitat, keep your eyes peeled and ears open for the soft "coo" sound, and you might be lucky enough to see one.

WORD BANK

- Carriion** – a dead animal that other animals will eat
Cuckoo – a type of bird, and the family of birds roadrunners belong
Venomous – when an animal creates a poisonous substance called venom that it transfers to another animal by biting or stinging it
Scrubby – a desert-like habitat type with sandy soil and plants that are adapted to heat and little water
Secrete – to release or get rid of something from the body
Zygodactyl (pronounced zi-go-dack-till) – a foot with two toes facing forward and two toes facing backward

Sources: The Cornell Lab of Ornithology National Wildlife Federation
 Photos by Wikimedia Commons: Rolf Dietrich Brecher, Robb Hannawacker,
 Dominic Sherony, Lip Kee, Alan Schmierer, Alan Vernon, Zombiete

Roadrunner Scramble

Part 1: Unscramble the Clues

Use the clues to unscramble each word or phrase and enter your answer in the boxes.

- The Greater Roadrunner is an _____ which means it eats meat and plants. VNOEMIOR

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

1
- Roadrunners can run up to _____ per hour. WTETYN SLIME

--	--	--	--	--	--	--

--	--	--	--	--	--	--

13 6 11
- Roadrunners live in the _____ habitat. RESDTE

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

4
- The type of roadrunner that lives in Texas is the _____ Roadrunner. GTEARER

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

3
- Roadrunner feet have _____ which form an X shape. OURF TOSE

--	--	--	--	--

--	--	--	--	--

2 7
- Because they live in the desert, roadrunners sometimes build their nests in a _____. TUCCAS

--	--	--	--	--	--	--

5
- Birds, like the roadrunner are covered with _____. THEARFSE

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

12 8
- Roadrunners are in the _____ family. UOOCCK

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

14
- The Greater Roadrunner is the state bird of _____. WNE MEIXOC

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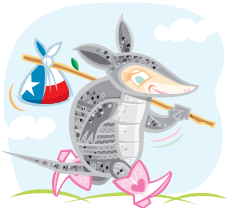
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9 10

Part 2: Fun Fact Puzzle

To learn a fun fact about roadrunners, copy the letters from the numbered boxes above into the boxes below with the same number.

1	2	3	4	1	5	6	6	7	1	8	9	10	11	11	12	5	6	13
3	6	4	7	3	13	1	3	13	13	4	7	8	6	3	14	7	8	



Nancy's Corner



Draw the roadrunner's prey:

List one way to conserve water to help desert animals:



What is something else you learned about roadrunners?

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