

HOUSEHOLD ROAD-RUNNERS

WITH TWO ILLUSTRATIONS

By CLINTON G. ABBOTT

Although the Road-runner (*Geococcyx californianus*) ordinarily is regarded as a timid bird of wild and uninhabited country, those most familiar with it know that it does not always shun association with man and that, if taken young, is easily domesticated. In this connection, the unusually friendly attitude of two Road-runners at San Diego, California, assumed wholly on their own initiative when they had the whole world to choose from, seems worth relating.

The home of Ernest J. Boud, 4313 Ridge Way, San Diego, although in a built-up residential section, stands at the edge of a deep canyon with natural chaparral cover. About May, 1937, to the surprise of the Boud family, a Road-runner began spending the night on a bathroom window sill, which was some twelve feet from the ground. It roosted there every night until about November of the same year, when it stopped coming.

The episode might have been overlooked had it not been that at just about the same season, in the spring of 1938, what was at first believed to be the same Road-runner, but afterward proved to be another, smaller bird, appeared and started to sleep outside Mr. Boud's bedroom window. It chose the bottom of a wooden grille, which was virtually an extension of the sill. This window is on the west side of the house, whereas the bathroom window, which was the sleeping place of the previous year's bird, is on the south side. Both are about the same distance from the ground. However, the perch of the 1938 Road-runner attracted more attention, not only because it was the second successive year in which windows of the house had been patronized by Road-runners, but also on account of the more public character of the bedroom roost. The spot selected was close to the head of the bed, and only about three or four feet from a lamp on the bureau. Mr. Boud reported that when he turned on the light the bird would sometimes blink, but otherwise paid little or no attention. He used to amuse himself by carrying on a one-sided conversation with the bird, which would cock its head and seemingly listen. In the month of August the bird disappeared.

When this interesting bit of Road-runner behavior during 1937 and 1938 was first reported to me, in December, 1938, I requested that I be notified of developments during 1939. On February 15, 1939, Mr. Boud wrote: "The Household Road-runner is back, but has not started roosting as yet. He (or she) exhibits the same brazen curiosity in running around our loggia and looking in the bedroom doors." Almost immediately I was informed by telephone that the Road-runner had come to the customary bedroom window to sleep on February 17, which was a windy night. It developed that this was the smaller of the two birds, because at the end of March, or early in April, the larger bird reappeared (after an absence of a year) and reoccupied his 1937 roost on the bathroom window. The two birds now roosted regularly in the windows of their choice, coming in about 5:30 p.m. and settling down.

The family soon had them named Henry and Henrietta. Both were completely oblivious to activity in the respective rooms, and the Bouds used to invite their friends to come and see the birds, whose fame spread rapidly. In both cases it was possible for a person to approach within a few inches, with nothing but the screen intervening, and talk to the bird without its flying away. This included strangers equally with the residents of the house. The family's two bull terriers would often come into the room and

would be visible to the Road-runner. Occasionally, if the dogs were too active, the bird would fly down, but would return later, even though it had to regain its perch in complete darkness.

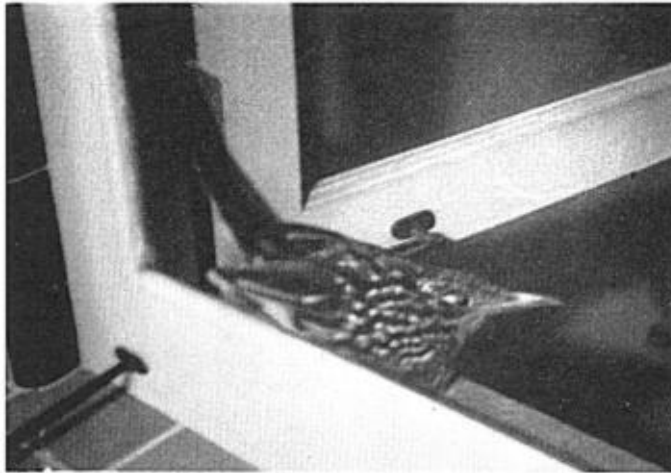


Fig. 34. The Road-runner, "Henry," roosting on window sill.

The accompanying photograph, taken by Mark Hanna, a friend of the family and amateur photographer, shows Henry as he roosted on the bathroom window sill in September, 1939. It was taken about 10 p.m. through the flyscreen, with only the aid of the regular artificial lighting of the room. It will be noted that the position selected by the bird was at the end of the window sill, between the hinged window, which was kept open, and the screen. The window was operated by a crank from inside the room and, even when moved, failed to disturb Henry, who simply shifted himself a little to accommodate his body to the gradually narrowing space. At all times he pressed himself back against the side window frame, with his tail pointing well upward.

Henrietta, who had more room than Henry on account of the grille extension of her window sill, did not have to sit sideways, but backed directly against the window, until her tail was almost perpendicular against the glass. According to Mr. Boud, this seemed to be very important to her comfort, and she would shift her position until her tail was at just the right angle before she seemed to feel satisfied. We are reminded of Mrs. Elizabeth Grinnell's experience with a pet Road-runner which had the freedom of her Pasadena house, as reported by Dawson in the "Birds of California" (p. 1147): "Most curious was its custom of backing closely into a corner for the night, with its tail held bolt upright along the wall."

Henrietta went away in August, 1939, Henry in mid-October, having occupied their respective window sills practically every night since their arrival. A question that naturally arises is why, if Henrietta was in fact a female, she was not busied with the duties of incubation during any part of the spring or summer of either 1938 or 1939.

Based on previous experience, no Road-runners were expected at window roosts until 1940. But, after being absent since August, Henrietta suddenly reappeared on November 24, 1939, and slept again on the bedroom grille as though there had been no interim whatsoever. At the present writing (December 15), she is still coming regularly. She is quite the lady of luxury, retiring about four, while it is still broad daylight, and not leaving until after seven in the morning.

Many another episode in the life of these household Road-runners, in addition to their peculiar roosting preference, was recounted to me by Mr. Boud. For example, he said that every night, before Henrietta flew to her window, she would take a dust bath on the ground below. The appearance of her perch gave ample evidence of this.

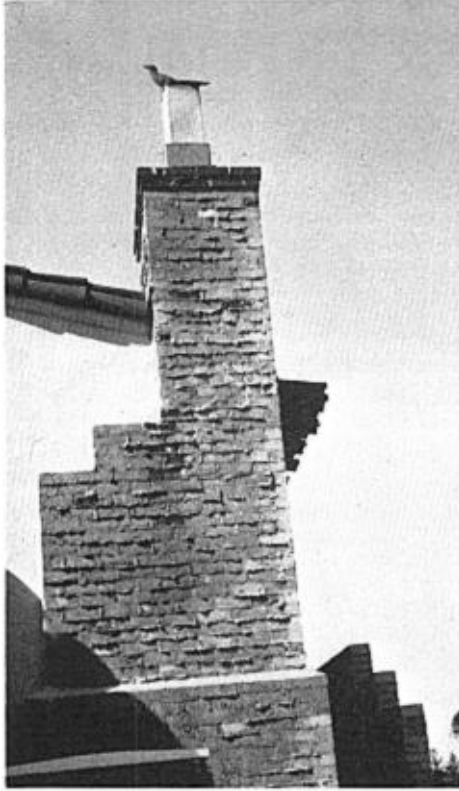


Fig. 35. Road-runner on chimney top.

One side of the Boud patio is formed by a seven-foot stucco wall, along the narrow top of which jagged pieces of broken glass have been set. The Road-runners used to stand on this formidable edge without the slightest hesitancy. Perhaps the sharp points of the glass were no more a deterrent than the cactus spines of their native domain. From the top of the wall a Road-runner would sometimes hop to a neighboring tiled roof, run along its ridge, jump to a higher roof, and finally gain the summit of the chimney, as shown in the accompanying photograph, which was taken by Mr. Boud.

Some actions almost indicated that a Road-runner has a sense of humor. Henrietta, particularly, loved to fool the bull terriers. If from her perch on the wall she saw them in the patio, she would purposely volplane down toward them, instead of going in the opposite direction. After dodging and playing with them for a minute or so, she always made her escape on foot, by scooting between the iron bars of the closed gate and leaving the dogs helpless on the other side.

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