

ROADRUNNER CAPTURES ORCHARD ORIOLE IN CALIFORNIA

Although the Roadrunner (*Geococcyx californianus*) has long been known for its bird-catching propensity, there are few well-documented accounts of such behavior under natural conditions. Bent (U.S. Natl. Mus., Bull. 176:44-45, 1940) summarizes a number of observations, mostly concerning pet Roadrunners or juvenile prey, and Zimmerman (Condor, 72:475-476, 1970) details the capture of several adult passerines near a feeding station in New Mexico.

Mesquite Spring is a desert oasis located at an elevation of about 1,800 feet in the north end of Death Valley National Monument, Inyo Co., California. Surrounding the spring, which has been impounded to form a tiny pool that provides fresh water throughout the year, are several small cottonwoods and a group of mature mesquites. A narrow paved road separates the mesquites into two strips and allows access to campsites among the trees. The adjacent desert is extremely arid and rocky, with widely scattered small shrubs and herbs.

On 24 October 1971, J. Greenberg, P. Phillips, and I discovered a female or first-year male Orchard Oriole (*Icterus spurius*), a rare vagrant in California (McCaskie, Stallcup and DeBenedictis, Condor, 68:595-597, 1966), feeding in the mesquite at the edge of the pool. After several minutes the bird flew to the ground at the edge of the desert and began feeding among the low herbaceous growth. At this time a Roadrunner appeared over the crest of a small hill, walked slowly toward the vegetation in which the oriole was concealed, and then suddenly crouched on its tarsi and froze with neck outstretched. After several seconds, it lunged forward, dashed some 10 feet, and disappeared into the vegetation. Immediately we heard a loud, passerine distress screech, and a second or two later the Roadrunner emerged with the oriole in its bill.

Wishing to examine the oriole in the hand, I gave chase. After about 30 yards and some 15 seconds of elapsed time since the capture, the Roadrunner dropped the oriole and disappeared into the desert. The Roadrunner seemed to have no difficulty in carrying its prey. When I reached the oriole, it was lying on its back and panting heavily; it made no attempt to escape. Measurements of the wing chord (72.5 mm), tail (66), and exposed culmen (15.5) confirmed our original identification (Ridgway, U. S. Natl. Mus., Bull. 50, Pt. 2:275-276, 1902). When released, the oriole flew to the nearest mesquite and rested for several minutes. Later that afternoon I relocated the oriole; although still feeding on the ground, it was considerably warier than before. It was seen the next morning by Greenberg and Phillips and thus apparently survived its harrowing experience.

Eight other bird species that represent potential prey for Roadrunners were noted at Mesquite Spring. Feeding on the ground at the edge of the desert were a Mourning Dove (*Zenaidura macroura*), two Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*), a Savannah Sparrow (*Passerculus sandwichensis*), and a Lincoln's Sparrow (*Melospiza lincolni*). On the ground under the trees were a Varied Thrush (*Ixoreus naevius*), two Hermit Thrushes (*Hylocichla guttata*), an American Redstart (*Setophaga ruticilla*), and a Fox Sparrow (*Passerella iliaca*). None of these species breeds at Mesquite Spring but are probably attracted there by the presence of fresh water, and thus constitute a source of possible prey throughout the year. The presence of several lizards and a tarantula on the same day at nearby Scotty's Castle suggests that non-avian prey was also available to the Roadrunner at Mesquite Spring. *Laurence C. Binford, California Academy of Sciences, Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, California 94118.*