

THE CUCKOO WITH MANY NICKNAMES

The sun rises on the chaparral as a big bird calls to his mate. Coo, coo, coo. Each coo is softer than the last. The skinny bird is 2 feet long: half body and half tail. He hops atop a boulder. He leans forward, lowers his head, and coos again. His mate does not answer. She stands with her back to the sun, as she does every chilly morning. She spreads her wings and ruffles her feathers. Her fluffy underfeathers and the skin on her back are black. They help her soak up the sun's heat. After one last call, the male looks around. He must find a gift for his mate. He spreads his short wings, glides off the boulder, and runs away. Who is this brown-and-white streaked bird? He is the biggest bird in the cuckoo family, the ground cuckoo. He has many other nicknames, too. His silly looks have earned him the name desert clown. He has a curved beak and spindly legs ending in four toes. Two toes point forward and two backward. He tilts his head curiously to inspect his world with yellow eyes fringed by dark eyelashes. When he's alarmed, the bare skin behind each eye flashes bluish-white and orange. He not only looks silly, he acts silly, too. Besides cooing, he makes a clacking noise with his beak that sounds like a stick being dragged along a picket fence. He stamps his feet impatiently, fans his scruffy head feathers, and pumps his tail up and down. Unlike most birds, this fellow prefers to run rather than exercise his stubby wings like a proud barnyard rooster, he struts around the rocky brushland where he lives. He's not a picky eater. He'll gobble anything he can catch and swallow, and lots of it—even cactus fruit. Today he's hunting for bumblebees in a clump of prickly pear. He dances and hops

among the thorny pads, snatching buzzing morsels off the waxy flowers and out of midair. Then he races into some tall grass, flaps his wings, and jumps around. Grasshoppers fly in all directions. He catches one, then chases another. Yesterday he carried a grasshopper to his mate. She refused to accept it. After he eats half a dozen more, he will look for a better gift.

He also likes to dine on centipedes, millipedes, spiders, scorpions, tarantulas, crickets, .. moths, beetles, and bats. Farmers like him because he's a natural exterminator, stuffing himself with many of the pests that ruin crops. Some call him paisano, Spanish for "fellow countryman." Suddenly, a whip tail lizard darts across his path. True to another of his nicknames-lizard bird-he lunges, but the lizard squeezes & beneath a fallen branch. With his beak, the bird flips the rotting wood to expose the juicy treat. With another lunge he captures the lizard, dashes it against a rock, picks up its limp body, and runs with its tail dangling from his beak. He coos to his mate. She likes this gift and carries it to their nest for their fledglings. Together the pair searches for more food. Now the sun is hot. To cool off, the birds stand with their backs to the sun, tilt, stretch their, lower wings, lower their heads, and pant like dogs. Then they start hunting again. They run swiftly for a short distance and stop. Among some rocks they spot a large snake. They circle it cautiously. The male crouches and drags his wings in the dust. His mate watches. As the snake coils, the male bird dives at its head. Again and again he stabs at the snake with his powerful beak.

The snake strikes. The bird narrowly escapes with a surprised spring backward. This snake is a big diamondback rattler, a

dangerous enemy. Tilting his head and ruffling his feathers, the bird eyes it quizzically from a safe distance. He decides it's too big to swallow. Losing interest, he stops attacking. Another day he will earn the name of snake killer. He runs off, stamping mysterious Xs in the dirt. No one will be able to tell whether he was coming or going by looking at his four-toed tracks. With wings half-spread and tail raised to balance and steer him, the feathered runner sprints down a dusty road. He's one of the fastest-running birds in the world. When he runs at top speed, 15 miles per hour, he chooses the open road. That is why his most popular nickname is correcamino, or roadrunner.