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Sally Hoyt Spofford

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# Roadrunners as predators on birds in banding traps

Sally Hoyt Spofford

The problem of Roadrunners (*Geococcyx californianus*) preying on small birds in banding traps may be somewhat unique and quite unknown to many banders.

In the early '70's, in correspondence with trap-builder Walter Bigger, I learned that he had custom-made a trap for a bander in southern Missouri for Roadrunners, which were harrassing birds in her banding traps. She wanted to trap them and carry them away. I was surprised—the occasional Roadrunner I saw in our area did not come close to our feeding area, and ran off when I opened the door of the house. This was my first knowledge that these birds could become a problem to a bander.

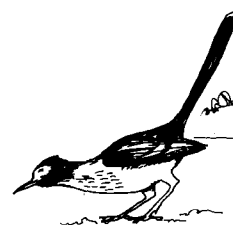
Within a year after that, a pair of Roadrunners did become regular visitors to our home—sometimes roosting on the windowsill, nesting in the horse corral, coming to the door for tidbits of raw meat.

There had been several published references to predation on small birds by Roadrunners. (See A.C. Bent, *U.S. Nat'l Mus. Bull.* 176:45, 1940, Zimmerman, *Condor* 72:475, 1970 and Binford, *Calif. Birds* 2:139, 1971.) In 1974 we discovered that they were predators on hummingbirds, even catching them in flight, (Spofford, *Condor* 78:142) but I still had not had any problem at my banding traps. However, I soon found that the Roadrunner might harass White-crowned Sparrows in a trap without harming them.

This past winter, '77—'78, I have been catching and banding a great number of Pine Siskins, and—alas—the Roadrunner has learned that this is a potential source of food. In spite of the fact that my siskin traps are right outside my office window, and my eyes are rarely off the trap for more than 2—3 minutes, I have lost several siskins to the Roadrunner, out of close to 300 banded to date. The technique used by the Roadrunner seems to be to frighten the trapped bird into random bouncing around inside the trap, reach through the wire with the bill, sometimes between the door and side, grab the prey bird by any part of the body, then drag it to the edge of the cage and finish it off. It is amazing to me that the bill can operate so efficiently through a 1/2" mesh, as to catch and kill

the bird. I rarely use nets at my home banding area, and imagine the situation could be even more serious with mist nets.

Just as banders must be on guard against other predators—cats, dogs, shrikes, and the small accipitrine hawks—at their banding traps, so it is a responsibility of those of us who band in the Southwest to guard against the more unusual predators like Roadrunners. I can propose several solutions, and am sure others will come up with better ones.



Banding traps for small birds can be enclosed in a fenced area, with small enough wire mesh to keep out a Roadrunner, with a roof over it which can be of larger mesh chicken wire. Single traps may be enclosed in a well-braced 2" mesh chicken wire shell, set at least a foot out from the trap, which permits small birds to go through to the traps but keeps out a Roadrunner. Or all traps may be made of 1/4" hardware cloth, with no opening around the edge of the trap door large enough for the predator to insert its bill.

Of course, the Roadrunner may itself be trapped, by means of a custom-made trap like Mr. Bigger's—a large trap with a small cage inside containing grasshoppers, a House Sparrow, or a mouse—and carried away. In my own case, I am keeping notes on Roadrunner behavior and do not want to remove them. It is simply essential to be very vigilant, remove birds from traps immediately, and keep the Roadrunners well-fed on meat tidbits or house mice, so that they lose their appetite for birds in banding traps.

Are there any other suggestions or solutions out there? I am sure that others have—and have solved—this problem. 🐾

Aguila-Rancho, Portal, AZ 85632