

Nature Note

Roadrunner

In the southwestern United States and in northern Mexico lives a swift-footed bird that amuses and fascinates many travelers by his comic antics.

This is the roadrunner, *Geococcyx californianus*, one of the 130 species of the Cuculidae or Cuckoo family. It is also called ground cuckoo, lizard bird or snake killer. The name roadrunner refers to its strange habit of racing down a road at full speed in front of or beside cars, long legs reaching out in great strides, neck stretched out, its long white-tipped tail streaming out behind. Some birds have been paced running as fast as 15 miles an hour.

The legs are long and muscular and the feet are well adapted for running, with two toes in front and two in back. The wings are rounded and stubby and used only for short flights. A roadrunner prefers to run. A perky ragged crest on top of its head gives the bird a clownish look, enhanced by distinctive light blue and reddish streaks extending from each bright eye toward

the back of the neck. The roadrunner is nearly two feet long, generally brownish and coarsely streaked with brown and green. Its tail is longer than its body. These birds build their nests of sticks in low trees and bushes of arid or semiarid regions. Although once quite common in southern California, roadrunners are now becoming scarce as more communities are developed, and their natural habitat is disappearing.

This cocky bird has no fear of poisonous snakes, and attacks them with little hesitation, feinting to make the snake strike, then darting in to peck its sides before the snake regains balance. With incredible speed the bird also attacks lizards, poisonous spiders and scorpions, whacking them with its beak or flailing them against a rock until they become limp, then flinging them into the air and gulping them head first. Sometimes if the victim is still struggling, the bird coughs it up, batters it some more, then swallows it again.

Letters (continued)

seems more likely to further delay consideration of Colorado River legislation pending detailed studies than to increase the chances for dams in the Grand Canyon. Only if dam proponents can make people believe that their idea is something more than what it is can it have any other effect. Unfortunately, your article appears to serve their purposes.

Your article would have been somewhat better balanced if it had mentioned some of the new evidence presented at the hearings by dam opponents. For example, I presented a 73-page statement including a detailed economic analysis of the Bureau's dam proposals showing that both dams are economically unjustified, even at the Bureau's low 3½-percent interest rate.

Alan Carlin
Santa Monica, Calif.

Electric Cars

Dear Sir:

Electric vehicles are enjoying considerable attention, largely because they are being evaluated as partial solutions to many urban traffic needs and growing air pollution.

But the image presented in the public media of these recent evaluations has all too frequently resembled a combined football game, bull fight, and christians-to-the-lions feeding session at the coliseum—complete with the win-or-loose, all-or-nothing decision making process that goes with such games. Invariably, in such articles, the electric vehicle is matched against the latest 'Thundering-8'—and is of course found wanting in most departments in which the fossil-fueled vehicle excels (none of which being particularly germane to the problem that prompted our giving the electric vehicle our attention in the first place).

The chart published in your article, "Electric Autos—Not Yet," is a case in point. In several of the events listed the ground rules totally eclipsed the abilities of one of the electrics shown, and depreciated those of the other two. One event, as an example, seems completely pointless. It calls for passing capabilities, at fifty miles an hour. When considering the electric vehicle's potential virtues as an urban runabout, such a test requirement seems patently silly (and illegal to try, I sincerely hope).

But within the win-lose framework of this reportive game, it's 'thumbs down,' and 'not yet' for the electric runabout. (I'm quite puzzled about the nature of the listed lead/acid electric:

(See p. 398)

"They laughed when I wound up my shaver..."



That's liable to happen to you when you first use the RIVIERA in front of anyone. A wind-up shaver may seem a plaything. Or at best an emergency type of shaver (because it needs no cords or batteries). After all, how can a hand-cranked shaver rotate fast enough to do a clean and close job? And how many times do you have to wind the darn thing to finish one shave?

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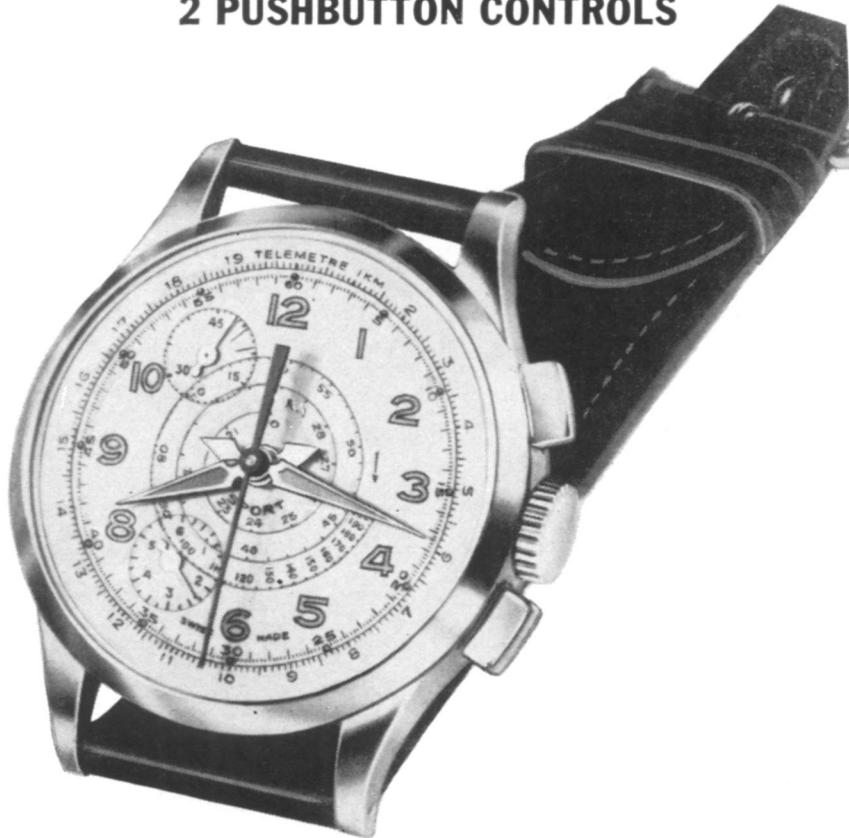
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Letters (continued)

it weighs a ton more than mine—and has only half its range.)

Surely problem-solving in the American scientific community has risen above the level of win-or-lose games. Senator Magnuson was most specific on this point when he introduced his bill. He indicated that there was no either-or question here. The internal combustion vehicles would have their place—on the open road—while the electric vehicle provides service in urban areas. On the basis of considerable data, it is evident that a low-performance vehicle—a 35 mile-per-hour, 40-plus mile range runabout that is battery operated—can provide such service adequately.

John Hoke
 Washington, D.C.

Kind Words

Dear Sir:

I wish to express my appreciation for your informative publication SCIENCE NEWS. I was introduced to Science Newsletter as a student in elementary school. I am now a sophomore in college and continue to enjoy your publication, as it is a concise and non-technical aggregation of current scientific news.

Lawrence L. Jaffe
 Harrisburg, Pa.

A Word of Praise . . .

Dear Sir:

I have just read Ann Ewing's article on MIFS and the 1000-inch telescope (SN:4/22). I think you've done a great job presenting the essential points about the advantages of the MIFS technique. Not only have you expressed them well, but you've managed, obviously, to understand Fellgett's and the Connes' articles in SCIENCE JOURNAL—a feat which I think deserves some praise, considering how short and compact these articles are. Indeed, I had some fears that only professional physical scientists would be able to understand them.

Thanks again for the coverage and for all the extra effort you've obviously put in.

Mrs. Dian R. Hitchcock
 Hamilton Standard
 Division of United Aircraft Corporation
 Windsor Locks, Conn.

. . . and Another

Thank you for the copy of SCIENCE NEWS (SN:4/8) that contained your report on the article we wrote for the Crab. I again wish to compliment you on the clarity and accuracy of your report.

Herbert Gursky
 American Science and Engineering, Inc.
 Cambridge, Mass.