

BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE NEWSLETTER



Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve
Fall 2014

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Everybody Invited!

by Jane Olson, Volunteer Committee Coordinator

Please join others interested in preserving our Preserve at Big Morongo Canyon. The Volunteer Committee is meeting **Tuesday, October 21, 2014, at 9 a.m. at the Education Center**. The purpose of the meeting is to define projects and programs that benefit the Preserve. How many projects and programs we can implement will depend on how many volunteers we have to accomplish our goals.

There are a variety of projects that are ongoing and a number more have been suggested. All ongoing activities need additional support. So in order to add new programs, we need to increase our volunteer base. Some ongoing activities include a hiking group, trail maintenance, bird walks, and children's classes. Additional projects that have been suggested are trail monitoring, open house for the education center, and "spontaneous" nature walks. The latter programs would be designed to raise the visiting public's awareness of the value of and the need to protect our Preserve. The time commitment varies from one activity to another. Some need a time commitment on a fairly regular basis. Others may need volunteers for an annual event. Examples of events needing single-day commitments would be our annual Nature Festival and our Christmas Bird Counts. In other words, if you have any time during the year, your help would be appreciated.

Our volunteer meetings are times to gather all of us working to maintain the Preserve so that we can celebrate successes and share concerns. It is also a time to recharge our enthusiasm on a subject relating to some aspect of the Preserve. In October, Maureen McCarty is going to talk to us about bighorn sheep. They are an animal that is often sighted at Big Morongo, so we should all be able to answer basic questions should a visitor inquire. We will know more than the basics by the time Maureen completes her presentation. She is currently the stud book keeper for the American Zoological Association. That means that she keeps the breeding history of all bighorns that are captive in zoos anywhere in the United States. She has a wealth of interesting information about this mammal. I hope you will be there to learn about our own sheep and how they are related to other populations in the Coachella Valley.

There are only three volunteer meetings planned for this year. The other two will be Tuesday, January 20, 2015, and Tuesday, March 17, 2015. I am creating an email list of all volunteers. If you have not participated before, please send your email address to janeelleno@aol.com. Throughout the year, we may have updates of programs or a call for help on specific things. A list of all email addresses for volunteers would be useful. Not to worry if you are not "wired." I am glad to make a phone call too.

I hope that many of you will respond to this invitation by appearing on **Tuesday, October 21, at 9 a.m. at the Education Center**. If you cannot make that date and want your name on the volunteer list, just email me or call 760-340-0909. If you just want to make this an exploratory visit, be assured of your welcome. Appearance need not imply immediate commitment.

Did I say there would be food and coffee and tea and food?



Bird's Eye View . . . and more

*gleaned from
Dee Zeller*



Three years into a drought and with early effects of global climate change being observed locally, Dee continues to notice changes in the Preserve's ecosystem; the Preserve is not what it was historically or even a few years back in time.

Take the Preserve's signature bird, the Vermilion Flycatcher. It used to be that more like five pairs would nest at Covington Park every year. But, last year and then again this year, only two nesting pairs were found. Fortunately, this year one pair was prolific in that it double-clutched. Dee observed the male feeding fledglings while also bringing food to the female, who was sitting on the second set of eggs.

Blue Grosbeaks were also almost non-existent at BMCP this summer. No nests were spotted, and Dee missed seeing the numbers of these birds, including their young, that he saw at the feeders in years past.

Also unusual at BMCP this summer was the presence all summer of Western Tanagers; this species usually spends the

summer at higher altitudes. They didn't nest here however.

White-winged Doves again nested at BMCP this summer, last year being the first occurrence of nesting here by this species. They are now seen year-round at the Preserve, and their numbers are increasing, with Dee seeing up to eight at a time at the feeders. They may have edged out another more recently arrived species, the Eurasian Collared Dove, who isn't being seen at the feeders now. Dee saw one instance of a White-winged chasing a Eurasian Collared from the feeders.

Another unusual change in seasonal bird activity is the early (late August) migration through the Preserve of Western Wood Pewees and Dusky Flycatchers.

Moving on from birds, Dee says (without even the hint of a smile) that no Beechey ground squirrel babies were seen by the feeders this summer. This and other rodent species have been greatly reduced in numbers the last few years.

Among the rodents not seen much lately is the desert wood rat, i.e. packrat. Many of their historical nests (the same nest is used for generations, going back even thousands of years) were washed out by the flood event at the Preserve a year ago. This followed a number of years of declining population; Dee recalls many years ago counting 57 wood rat nests along the

Marsh Trail—not any more.

The mention of wood rats brings up an interesting story. In 2005, a fast-moving wildfire in the Preserve burned up the brush structure of wood rat nests in its path, exposing the various chambers in the rat's home (they have separate "rooms" for nesting, trash and bathroom activities, trinket collecting, and food storage). There on the ground, untouched by the fire, seeds were found, neatly sorted by piles according to seed type.

These may be "rats," but they are certainly amazing little creatures and you might say adorable with their big round ears. They also have the curious habit of collecting small objects, often shiny ones like keys, and of trading up, discarding one object when they find another more interesting; for this they are often called trade rats. Who know how many generations of wood rats used the nests washed away or burned by fire at BMCP. Let's hope this unique little creature will make a recovery at BMCP to continue to enrich the panoply of wildlife here.

One sign of normalcy at BMCP were the summer visits of the California black bear—somewhat to Dee's dismay. The bear's sweet tooth attracted them to the hummingbird feeders, many of which they destroyed, causing Dee to have to put the feeders in the shed every evening.

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NEWSLETTER
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Editor: Donna Thomas

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P.O. Box 780
11055 East Drive
Morongo Valley, CA

Phone: 760-363-7190
Email: birddee@verizon.net
Web: www.bigmorongo.org

BMCP Weather: Drought Continues *by Ray Yeager*

Weather at the Big Morongo Canyon Preserve, at least temperature-wise, has been normal this past summer, and average summer monsoonal rainfall was spotty with 1.50 inches reported in August in some areas but little at the Preserve.

Of course the big news is the persistent drought. The last three years nearby Yucca

Valley recorded 2.79, 1.54 and 3.62 inches for a total of 7.45 inches. The historical average for this period is 19.14 inches. We have not experienced three consecutive years of drought in the 42 years of rainfall records.

Two months ago the National Weather Service predicted an above average El Nino for this coming fall/winter/spring. Now the NWS is saying that an El Nino is unlikely to occur. But we still could experience good rainfall without an El Nino.

Ground to Sky—Summer Nature Encounter

by Kc McKay, Director of Environmental Education

Summer Nature Encounter was a huge success this year. We had our largest group yet since the program began. The children explored, examined, and handled many creatures and objects while learning about the Preserve's wildlife.

We had 18 to 20 children per day. The students ranged from second grade to sixth grade, with a nice mix of all grades. The junior docents, usually 4 to 6 per day, helped a great deal, each leading a group of about six students, and some days two junior docents would lead a group together (working on their leadership skills).

This summer the program was exciting. We began by exploring and collecting data on red worms. The students each had a worm to touch and observe and from which they gathered individual and group data. The children remarked "yuck" and "cool," but in the end most said cool and no longer thought worms were yucky. We



did the same with a 40-year-old desert tortoise named Biggie. She was a hit. We made molds of tracks and then went out to find some—and did, deer and coyote. Each group of six students had an ant farm and gathered the ants for it outside around the Education Center. The students then each kept a daily log about their ants and what had changed since the day before.

The students had a very special guest, Tracy Albrecht, interpretive specialist for the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument and the Bureau of Land Management. She spent two days teaching the students about roadrunners and other birds of the Preserve, working on crafts, and playing games that related to what the students studied each day. Tracy was wonderful and the students enjoyed having her there sharing knowledge and fun.

While at the Preserve, the students managed to see snakes (gopher, king and rattlesnake) and lizards—more than they could count. After a hike on the Mesquite Trail, we viewed about six bighorn sheep on the hillside. The birds sang and appeared for the children, with the scrub jays following all of us on our walks.

On the last day of the program, we had a great barbeque with Dee Zeller manning the grill, grilling to perfection wonderful hot dogs. While he grilled, the students presented to the guests and parents of the students the habitats that each had created on an animal that the student had chosen. It was a great ending to a full two weeks of fun and learning.

I personally want to say thank you to D.J. Scammin, Tracy Albrecht, Kyler McKay, and Michelle Stroud for all of their assistance and to Dee Zeller for manning the grill.

Zellers Receive Conservation Award

On March 27, Dee and Betty Zeller received yet another prestigious award, the Minerva Hoyt California Desert Conservation Award, which recognizes individuals who have made a significant and lasting contribution to the California deserts.

The Joshua Tree National Park Association presented the annual award to the Zellers, long-time hosts of the Big Morongo Canyon Preserve, in recognition of their notable achievements in public stewardship.

Bureau of Land Management (BLM) California State Director Jim Kenna spoke at the award ceremony about his longtime association with the Zellers and their extensive contribution. Kenna said he was at the ceremony because "for me this is personal," and he spoke of his "deep affection for Dee and Betty because they're really good human beings."

Former BLM BMCP Manager Robin Kobaly also lauded the Zeller's conservation efforts, saying, "Dee and Betty have supported every effort to help increase the protection, the conservation, and the wildlife viewing in the Morongo Basin."



Dee and Betty Zeller with their award, center, with Jim Kenna, BLM California State Director, left, and Robin Kobaly, former BLM Big Morongo Canyon Preserve Manager, right

Don't Get Whiplash

by Jane Olson

Bird watchers often complain of “warbler’s neck.” It is acquired while craning your neck staring into the tops of trees looking for those elusive migrant warblers. But, if you aren’t careful, another of our local birds will give you whiplash. Trying to get a glimpse of the Cliff Swallow colonies on the underpasses on Interstate 10 at seventy miles an hour will do that. There is so much activity at these aggregations of nests that it is hard to take it in all at once. Colonies may host a thousand nests. Each pair of birds builds a gourd-shaped nest that is formed from as many as 1,200 individual pellets of mud of just the right consistency. Mud is delivered one little beakful at a time. The birds complete the chore in a week or two. Once the nest has a sparse lining of grass and feathers, four to five eggs are laid and the two weeks or so of incubation begins. Sounds pretty much like the typical cycle for most songbirds. Researchers tell us that there is more going on there than meets our eyes. That is true for the bird’s eyes too. Some lay eggs in nests that are not theirs. The females are very sneaky and fast about this ultimate trespass. One female entered the nest and left in fifteen seconds! Another was observed carrying an egg into another’s nest. The researchers found that parents that parasitized the neighbors’ nests were not necessarily being lazy. They raised a typical size brood of their own. What they accomplished was to increase the amount of their DNA that survived in this annual crop of new birds.

The swallow family uses a larger variety of nest construction than other songbird families. They nest in burrows in river banks and cavities in trees, and they construct nests of mud. The Cliff Swallows are the only U.S. swallows to nest in large colonies. There are advantages to doing this. The colony acts as an information center for a food source. Blooms of insects occur in different places at different times. Successful foragers are followed by birds that had not found an abundant food source. Large colonies discourage predators. Not

many predators can successfully raid a Cliff Swallow colony. It would seem that the most common predators are the lice and mites that infest the nests—a disadvantage of close proximity. Often the swallows will spend the energy to build a new nest rather than inhabit an infested one. So, we shouldn’t assume that every nest in the colonies under our bridges is occupied this year.

You may see birds other than swallows in these bird condos. At least one species of bird will usurp nests in Cliff Swallow colonies. The House Sparrow, another cavity nester, will take advantage of a pre-constructed nest. Before moving in, they redecorate the interior. You can see the nest linings protruding from the entrance. Both the Cliff Swallow and the House Sparrow are more numerous than they might be if it were not for manmade structures. The Cliff Swallows require a vertical surface with an overhang with a nearby source of mud of the right consistency and an open area that has a supply of insects. Locally that translates to highway overpasses near the Whitewater Wash and agricultural fields. The House Sparrows view the many crevices in the eave of a building or roof tiles as cavities. They eat insects, seeds and fruit. No doubt many of you have observed the House Sparrows gleaning insects from car bumpers. Both species are examples of survival of the fittest.

Cliff Swallows are one of those bird species wherein the fledgling may outweigh the adult. Baby swallows have the ability to pack on the fat very rapidly when the insects are abundant. Insect supply can be erratic, so this adaptation helps them through a temporary lack of insects. Researchers found that parents did not distinguish their chicks from those of other parents until it was almost time for the chicks to fledge. Then the parents and chicks recognized each other by sound. When you look at the colonies above the freeways and think of fledging—you just hope that they get it right the first time!

And you should pull over and park safely to study the Cliff Swallows. This precaution will avoid whiplash.

Thank You!

Invasive Weed Pullers

On August 15 and August 22, teams of BMCP volunteers attacked an abundance of invasive weeds in the Preserve’s marsh areas. Their hard work had a tremendous impact in controlling these unwanted plants.

A big thanks to:

Dan Baumann
Gus Baumann
Bob Cullen
Patty Domay
Margaret Hoggan
Jim Sayer
Richard Schwartz
Donna Thomas
Dee Zeller

NATIONAL PUBLIC LANDS DAY

September 27
8 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Volunteers are needed at BMCP to help with invasive weed eradication and trail maintenance.

Lunch will be provided.

For information contact the Bureau of Land Management as follows:

Holly L. Roberts
h1robert@blm.gov
(760) 833-7100

CALENDAR
at BMCP
SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER
Gate open 7:30 a.m. to sunset

Wednesday Bird Walks

Every Wednesday at 7 a.m. in September and at 8 a.m. beginning in October, except there will be no walk on holiday eves, i.e., November 26 and December 24 and 31. Bring your binoculars and spend a couple of hours strolling the trails with birding experts. Beginning birders welcome.

Saturday Bird Walks

Same format as Wednesday Bird Walks

October 18 at 8 a.m.

November 15 at 8 a.m.

December 20 at 8 a.m.

Upcoming Events

Sep. 20, Sat. (10:00 a.m.-noon) - **Junior Docent Meeting.**

Sep. 27, Sat. (8:00 a.m.-1 p.m.) - **National Public Lands Day.** See page 4 for details.

Oct. 18, Sat. (10:00 a.m.-noon) - **Junior Docent Meeting.**

Oct. 21, Tues. (9:00-11:30 a.m.) - **Volunteer Meeting.**
Topic: Bighorn Sheep. Speaker: Maureen McCarty, stud book keeper for the American Zoological Association. See page 1 article "Everybody Welcome."

Nov. 22, Sat. (10:00 a.m.-noon) - **Junior Docent Meeting.**

Dec. 14, Sun. (7:30 a.m.-late afternoon) - **Christmas Bird Count.** Join with birders from across North America in participating in Audubon's annual event. Bring binoculars and meet at the Preserve kiosk. Teams will be formed to bird a variety of habitats within a 7.5-mile radius of the Preserve. Late in the afternoon we will gather to tally data and enjoy some refreshments.



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BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

Yes, I Want to Help

PLEASE RETURN YOUR TAX-DEDUCTIBLE DONATION TO:

**FRIENDS OF BMCP
P.O. BOX 780
MORONGO VALLEY, CA 92256**

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ENCLOSED MEMBERSHIP DUES:

- \$ 25.00 INDIVIDUAL ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP
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- \$ 250.00 LIFETIME MEMBERSHIP

ADDITIONAL CONTRIBUTIONS:

- \$ 10.00
- \$ 20.00
- \$ 50.00
- OTHER

**BECOME A MEMBER OF
FRIENDS OF
BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE**

Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) association organized solely for the advancement of programs at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve/Area of Critical Environmental Concern. The primary purpose of the Friends is to enhance wildlife viewing, wildlife protection, educational programs, and recreational opportunities provided by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) within the Preserve. The Friends provide ongoing support of the Bureau's conservation, education, and recreation programs within Big Morongo Canyon Preserve. The Friends achieve these goals by raising funds, accepting donations, recruiting volunteers, and assisting the BLM in the planning, creation, and maintenance of programs and facilities at the Preserve.

All donations received from visitors are used by the Friends to purchase materials for trail construction, benches, signs, and displays. Maps, trail guides, brochures, and educational and informative printed material are also provided to visitors from these funds.

Donations to the Friends are tax-deductible and are not used to cover overhead or operational expenses.

As a Friend, you will receive an annual summary of accomplishments and, if requested, new environmental education materials and programs made possible through the donation fund. Friends of BMCP are invited to attend the annual fall general membership meeting. As a special thank you, new Friends receive a unique BMCP embroidered color patch. Lifetime members also receive a canvas Preserve tote bag in addition to two BMCP color patches.

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Friends of BMCP
P.O. Box 780
Morongo Valley, CA 92256

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Friends of BMCP Board of Directors, BMCP On-site Manager Dee Zeller, and Junior Docent Representative Katelyn Cowlin

Front row l to r: Ann Garry, President David Miller, Jane Olson

Rear row l to r: Thomas Haworth, Dee Zeller, Laura Sherrod, Meg Foley, Patrick Casey, Jane Mootz, Kc Robin McKay, Katelyn Cowlin