

BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

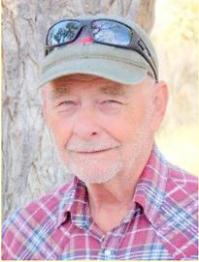
NEWSLETTER

Spring/Summer 2017



Published by Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve, P.O. Box 780, Morongo Valley, CA 92256
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Chatting with Dee...



Dee Zeller,
Preserve Host

The drought is easing. The treefrogs are singing at the Preserve once again after a long absence. The canyon has water. Dee and friends have not had to rescue a bighorn sheep stuck in the mud of a dried out watering hole since way back in August, giving him much more time to attend to the aftermath of nightly bear visits. According to the USGS, after several significant rainstorms this winter, perhaps Southern California at last may be edging out of its drought of over five, long years. What might be anticipated? Dee says... a magnificent wildflower season, and an explosion

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of invasive species growth. Dee especially begrudges the proliferation of Russian Thistle (tumbleweed, *Salsola tragus*) and Sahara Mustard (*Brassica tournefortii*). Once all of this rain-inspired greenery dries out, get ready for a higher-risk fire season. Just to be safe, back your car into its parking space to be ready for a quick getaway if needed.



Baja California Treefrog (*Pseudacris hypochondriaca*). Photo credit: Gary Nafis, CaliforniaHerps.com.

BMCP Rattlesnake Wows Wildflower Festival Crowds



George Cunning (left) with "Red" at the Coachella Valley Wildflower Festival.

This past March 4 on a delightful Saturday, Friends of BMCP set up an information table at the annual Coachella Valley Wildflower Festival at the Santa Rosa & San Jacinto Mountains National Monument Visitor Center. The mission of Leslie Burkhardt and BMCP Assistant Preserve Hosts George and Kathy Cunning was to provide public information about BMCP and the new Sand to Snow National Monument. "Red" a coiled, long-ago preserved and somewhat faded Red Diamond Rattlesnake accompanied us, to the endless fascination of Please see *Wildflower Festival* on page 4

The Prairie Falcon and Its Kin

By Margaret Hoggan, Docent Bird Walk Leader

A large bird flies into view behind the cottonwoods in Big Morongo Canyon Preserve. It turns to reveal a brown back -- no reddish tail, so not our most common raptor, the Red-Tailed Hawk. We see that it has pointed wings, a feature of falcons. And it has a very pale underside. As it approaches, the view from below reveals black axillaries, or "wingpits". A Prairie Falcon!

Big Morongo Canyon Preserve and Joshua Tree National Park have the same four falcons on their bird lists. Both have recorded the American Kestrel, Merlin, Peregrine Falcon and Prairie Falcon. Most common at both locations is the kestrel, a colorful small falcon (average length 9 inches, weight 4.1 ounces). A bird walk or two at BMCP is very likely to net you a view of a Kestrel. Merlins, as well as Peregrine Falcons, are very rare locally. However, you just might spot an occasional Prairie Falcon, especially at JTNP.

In the state of California, a fifth falcon is found extremely rarely, but usually in Northern California and not in the south. Typically found in or near the arctic regions, this largest falcon is the Gyrfalcon (22", 3.1 lbs.) Recently, to the delight of area birders, one lone Gyrfalcon found its way south to Riverside County's San Jacinto Wildlife Refuge.

The Prairie Falcon is a relatively large bird (16", 1.6 lbs.). Much larger than the Merlin (10", 6.5 oz.) or Kestrel, and about the same size as a Peregrine Falcon (16", 1.6 lbs.). However, it is only half the weight of the Gyrfalcon. As usual with falcons, the female falcon is considerably larger than the male.

"The Prairie Falcon can outfly most other birds in direct flight, or can dive from above at very high speed, and usually takes birds on the wing."

The diet of a Prairie Falcon consists mainly of birds. It can outfly most other birds in direct flight, or can dive from above at very high speed, and usually takes birds on the wing. Falcons do not kill with their talons like other predatory birds. Instead, they kill or quickly disable with a bite to the neck, using their distinctive notched beaks to sever the spinal cord of their prey. Prairie Falcons will also hunt ground squirrels. Occasionally, it may also hop after lizards or grasshoppers on the ground.

Nests are usually located on cliffs, and are typically just scrapes on the ground. The Prairie Falcon will also sometimes use the more elaborate nests built on cliffs by other raptors or ravens. With their superior flying skills, Prairie Falcons can chase off larger predatory birds who foolishly approach their nests. Even their small relative the Kestrel can send a much larger Red-tailed Hawk packing.

Those of you living in dry open desert country may see a Prairie Falcon closer to home. If you have birds visiting feeders in your yard, you may spot a large bird diving toward them, sending them into a panicked flight. If it seems different from the usual Cooper's Hawk in flight or appearance, compare it to the Prairie Falcon shown in a field guide.

Throughout many years of bird walks in areas of BMCP that are more sheltered and riparian Please see *Prairie Falcon* on page 5



*Prairie Falcon on Prey in Landers, CA.
Photo credit: Margaret Hoggan, Dec. 2016*

BMCP History Project

Docent Larry Rosen is diligently collecting and archiving history related to BMCP, some of which you will be reading about in coming issues of this newsletter. In February with Steve Hanson of Morongo Basin Historical Society, and Leslie Burkhardt, Friends of BMCP Volunteer Coordinator, he led a historical information raiding party to the 29 Palms Historical Society. He unearthed a wealth of information and photos. Many thanks to the dedicated, helpful and friendly 29 Palms volunteers who assisted us on a visit that was both productive and lots of fun!

So what was unearthed on the expedition? Among other items, a book titled: *Early History of Morongo Valley* by Grace Munson PhD, Director, Morongo Valley Community Services District (August 1967).

Meanwhile, Back at the Preserve...

THE HERBARIUM ARRIVES.

On the occasion of the delivery of the long-awaited herbarium this past February 21 to the BMCP Education Center, **Docent Ann Garry** wrote the following about the herbarium project:

What is a herbarium? And why do we have a new one at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve?

A herbarium is a collection of preserved plants stored, catalogued, and arranged systematically for study by professionals and amateurs from many walks of life. A collection like this is a vital reference when you need to identify a plant and also serves to fix forever the identity of thousands of plant names.



Sleuths Steve Hanson and Larry Rosen hard at work at 29 Palms Historical Society.

Here are some excerpts:

“...earliest authentic history goes back only to 1840. The Clan was established by the parents of John Morongo. The father belonged to the Cahuilla Tribe and the mother to the Serrano Tribe. They were known as the Cio Morongo Clan. This Clan was of sufficient importance to give the name Morongo to Morongo Valley, to the Morongo Canyons, to a mission group southeast of Indio, to the Morongo

Please see *BMCP History* on page 4

George Helmkamp began collecting plant specimens at BMCP in the early 1980s when he retired from UC Riverside after he and his wife Libby moved to Morongo Valley. His collection grew over the years as he added specimens from California, the Desert Southwest, and other Western states. It included over 13,000 specimens, making it the second largest in California, next to UCR.

Years later, George donated the entire plant collection to SummerTree Institute, a non-profit, environmental organization, started by Robin Kobaly, a former student and fellow botanist of George Helmkamp. Robin was thrilled to receive this donation, but overwhelmed with the task of housing the collection.

Please see *At the Preserve* on page 4

Wildflower Festival from page 1

festival visitors: "Is he alive?" His mission was to promote rattlesnake awareness.

When asked, "If this rattlesnake could talk, what do you think he might say if he met you in the desert?" answers ranged from "You go your way, and I'll go mine" to "Die! Die! Die!" creating many opportunities for discussion and engagement. Of the more than 75 entries, Eden, Cody and Bayley received BMCP arm patches as prizes in a random

drawing at the end of the day. Many thanks to all who participated. Everyone received information that provided tips to safely co-exist with rattlesnakes from wildlife.ca.gov/News/Snake.

"Answers ranged from 'You go your way, and I'll go mine' to 'Die! Die! Die!' creating many opportunities for discussion and engagement."

At the Preserve from page 3

She thought BMCP was the perfect place for the herbarium to reside. In 2005 Alan Cooper, a BMCP docent, built an extension of the original cabinets to house the collection.

This year it was decided to relocate the collection. We sought help from University of California at Riverside. Thanks to Bill LaHaye, a Friends' board member, and Andy Sanders, a botanist from UCR, a large portion of the collection was transferred to UCR. The portion that was collected at BMCP is well-preserved after all these years, and will remain at BMCP.

Because of the significant value of the specimens, a steel herbarium case was required. The new case is air-tight, dust-tight, and gives light-proof protection. The purchase was made possible by the generous donations of two Friends' board members.

In this era of climate change, as plants and their seed become less sustainable, we know that the collection will become more valuable to science. The new herbarium will assist in its protection.

AND THE PORTA-POTTY SCREEN IS REPAIRED...

After fierce winter winds blew down the porta-potty privacy screen, Lead Volunteer Doug "Buck" Buckley (left) took time off from his passion for developing sustainable environmental systems to offer carpentry skills. Assisting him were Troy Conway (right), Jonathan Buckley and Tim DeLorey. Thank you all for your tremendous volunteer efforts.

BMCP History from page 3

School District, to the Morongo Basin and to the Morongo Indian Reservation."

"In 1864 the Morongo Clan moved from Morongo Valley after a severe Smallpox epidemic and a severe drought made living here difficult. They were moved to Portero near Banning. This place eventually was named The Morongo Indian Reservation."

"Most of the data on Captain John Morongo were supplied by his daughter Mrs. Sarah Morongo Martin, in letters to and conversations with Mrs. Mary Millington."

A copy of Dr. M's book is also in the California State Library: catalog.library.ca.gov, call #: F868.S14 M9

Prairie Falcon from page 2

than the Prairie Falcon's preferred open desert environment, this falcon was seen, regularly though infrequently. Nevertheless, they were usually spotted at least once or twice each year. Keep watching and good luck!

Sand to Snow National Monument 1st Anniversary Open House at BMCP

On Saturday, February 11, Friends and Preserve volunteers hosted an open house and interpretive walks in recognition of the first anniversary of the Sand to Snow National Monument. As a gateway to the national monument, BMCP assumes a critical role in providing information about the monument to the public. Included in the activities were the

new monument manager, Jihadda Govan, staff from the Bureau of Land Management, and our partners from the Mojave Desert Land Trust. In addition to providing maps and information about the monument and the Preserve, volunteers led bird walks and a geology hike. Thanks to all the volunteers who weeded, hammered, directed traffic, and led hikes to make sure that all visitors had a memorable and informative day.



Docent Jane Olson (left) answers questions about BMCP birdlife at the open house.



Friends of 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

Name(s): _____
Mailing Address: _____
City: _____ State: _____
Zip: _____ Phone: _____
Email: _____

ENCLOSED MEMBERSHIP DUES

- \$ 25.00 Individual Annual Membership
- \$ 35.00 Family Annual Membership
- \$ 250.00 Lifetime Membership

ADDITIONAL CONTRIBUTIONS

- \$ 10.00
- \$ 20.00
- \$ 50.00
- Other _____

NEWSLETTER (Winter, Spring/Summer, Fall Issues)

- Email
- Mail (US only)
- Neither

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 materials are also provided to visitors from these funds. Donations to the Friends also support education and environmental programs and are fully tax-deductible in accordance with IRS and state laws.

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.

Big Morongo Canyon Preserve
NEWSLETTER

Editor: Leslie Burkhardt

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Spring/Summer 2017

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Calendar of Events, April – August 2017
Gate open 7:30 a.m. to Sunset 365 days a year

WEDNESDAY BIRD WALKS

Spring/Summer Schedule: Every Wednesday at 7:00 a.m.
(Gate opens at 6:30 a.m.) Bring your binoculars and spend a couple of hours strolling the trails with birding experts. Beginning birders welcome.

SATURDAY BIRD WALKS

At 7:00 a.m. on the third Saturday in April and May (April 15 and May 20). Same format as Wednesday Bird Walks. (Gate opens at 6:30 a.m.)

VOLUNTEER APPRECIATION POTLUCK

BMCP Education Center, Tuesday, April 18, 10 a.m. (Lunch, 11:30 a.m.). Contact Leslie Burkhardt, Phone: (425) 608-0709 or leslieburkhardt@gmail.com.

NEW* FRIDAY BUTTERFLY WALKS *NEW

- ✓ When: Friday, April 14 & May 12, 9:00 -11:00 a.m.
- ✓ Where: BMCP, main parking lot
- ✓ What to bring: Close-focusing binoculars, a camera, sunscreen, and water. Sturdy walking shoes are advised as the trails may be rocky or muddy with moderate changes in elevation. For more information, contact Joe Zarki at 760-366-8913, or by email: jwzarki@gmail.com



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GO GREEN... to choose the digital option for receiving your newsletter, please contact us!



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