



# BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

## NEWSLETTER

*Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve*

Fall 2012

### Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan

The Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan (DRECP) is being developed to determine the most appropriate locations for utility-scale renewable energy projects in the California Desert while providing effective protection and conservation of desert ecosystems.

What the California Desert will look like in the next half century will to a great extent be the result of the current planning process for the DRECP, and the plan has the potential to dramatically affect Big Morongo Canyon Preserve.

Development of the DRECP was mandated by California Executive Order S-14-08 as a way to quicken the permitting process for renewable energy projects in order to meet the state-mandated 33 percent renewable energy portfolio standard by 2020.

The Renewable Energy Action Team (REAT), a collaboration of the California Energy Commission, the California Department of Fish and Game, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, is responsible for preparing the DRECP.

The REAT has developed five preliminary alternative scenarios for discussion by the Stakeholder Committee, which includes representatives from counties in the desert region, renewable energy developers, environmental organizations, electric utilities, recreation groups, and Native Americans.

These alternatives identify possible renewable energy development focus areas (DFAs). DFAs are areas where utility-scale solar or wind energy developers would be provided with permit timing and cost certainty under the Federal and California Endangered Species Acts.

Alternative 1 would not establish a DFA anywhere near BMCP, but it does identify

“variance” lands in this region. Variance lands are areas outside of a DFA where a developer could still apply to build a project by requesting a variance.

Alternatives 3, 4, and 5 propose establishing DFAs in the Morongo Basin, and these alternatives would adversely affect BMCP. Alternatives 3 and 5 would even establish DFAs that border the northern section of BMCP.

Renewable energy in itself is a valuable component in the effort to reduce greenhouse gases. However, utility-scale energy projects are not appropriate adjacent to and in the vicinity of BMCP, which is designated as an area of critical environmental concern (ACEC).

Development in the DFAs and variance lands under consideration for this area would destroy habitat in several landscape linkages through which wildlife and even plants migrate. That these linkage areas remain undisturbed is essential to ensure genetic diversity and population viability of BMCP's flora and fauna.

Wind turbines, known for killing birds and bats, are inappropriate near BMCP, which is designated as one of the United States' Important Bird Areas and which lies along the Pacific Flyway, a major migratory route.

Transmission is the somewhat hidden threat that underlies any proposal for utility-scale energy development in the vicinity of BMCP. Many of our readers will recall the serious threat a few years ago when the Los Angeles Department of Water & Power applied to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) for a right of way to build a high tension transmission line through BMCP and across 85 miles of desert. A concerted citizen effort caused LADWP to withdraw its application. However the route through BMCP remains as a contingent

utility corridor in the California Desert Conservation Area Plan (CDCAP). Any large-scale energy development in this area would need long distance transmission to transport electricity to urban areas, and once again the Preserve would be faced with the threat of transmission lines as LADWP or another power supplier attempted to have the CDCAP amended to make the route through BMCP a designated utility corridor—two to five miles wide.

The DRECP Independent Science Advisors have issued a report that recommends a "no regrets" policy whereby near-term siting of renewable energy projects could move forward in areas, such as disturbed lands, that are unlikely to contribute to conservation, while time is allowed to develop a comprehensive reserve system that would protect native species and wildlife movement.

Hopefully, the REAT developing the DRECP will listen to its science advisors and take the time to study consequences before acting. However citizens getting involved in the DRECP planning process will likely be necessary if we are to have "no regrets" as to how we leave the desert for future generations.

The REAT is currently preparing a draft environmental impact report (EIR)/environmental impact statement (EIS) for the DRECP. When the draft EIR/EIS is issued, the public will have the chance to comment on the proposed alternatives.

More information is available at [DRECP.org](http://DRECP.org) or through the California Desert Coalition (CDC) at [cadesertco.org](http://cadesertco.org). If you register your email address on the CDC website, you will be notified when the draft EIR/EIS is available for public comment and of further actions you can take to ensure BMCP is protected in the DRECP.

## CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

DECEMBER 15, Saturday  
7:30 a.m. to late afternoon

*Come join a team to help us  
count the birds*

Bring binoculars; meet at Preserve kiosk

FUN FOR BEGINNING BIRDERS  
AND EXPERTS ALIKE

## BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

### NEWSLETTER

Editor: Donna Thomas

Fall 2012

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## Bird's Eye View ... and more

*gleaned from  
Dee Zeller*

"It's been a long, hot summer" Dee says with a hint of disdain for climatological conditions on this day late in August. Dee also

describes this time of the birding year as the "dead" period—summer young have long fledged and for the most part fall migration hasn't started.

While the summer and the heat aren't over yet, the activities of a few bird species give a glimmer of hope that fall is not too far away. Male orioles, both Hooded and Bullock's, as is their annual predisposition, have an early jump start on fall migration and have all but disappeared from the Preserve. As with many bird species, males leave their breeding territory first, to be followed later by females and young.

Another hopeful sign is the abundance of female Rufous Hummingbirds among the mob of hummingbirds currently draining the sugar-water feeders. Male Rufous, well talk about a migratory jump start, these males barely stay north long enough to do their progenitor thing before returning south starting in early July. It is typical for female Rufous to move through this area in late August.

It wasn't a good summer on a number of levels, a large part due to the lack of rain last winter, which limited food sources, beginning at the plant level and traveling up the food chain.

Butterflies were uncommon with the exception of a few Lorquin's admirals and the more abundant Queen butterflies, a species that feeds on Indian hemp in the marsh area.

Some animals didn't produce young, or not in the usual numbers. Not a single hummingbird nest was spotted alongside the Preserve's trails. No young bobcats were seen, and small mammals, such as



rabbits and even those pesky Beechey ground squirrels, which drive Dee to distraction with all their burrows around the Zeller's trailer, were seen in few numbers.

Dee attributes the death of a young Red-tailed Hawk to the scarcity of small mammals. The dead bird appeared emaciated and Dee recalls how it had hung around calling sadly long after its parents had left, evidently not having success hunting enough of its own food.

Some of the regions' large mammals have been making appearances at the Preserve this summer, including three different occurrences of a California black bear. The most recent bear sighting was in the last week of August, when a man and his wife saw a bear ahead of them on the Marsh Trail. The bear ambled off the boardwalk and out of sight. In midsummer, a bear broke into Dee's bird seed cans, leaving its scat and tracks as evidence. And in June, a bear dug under the boardwalk to reach a bee hive with its honey, leaving a print of its hind foot as it stood up on the dirt it had kicked up on the boardwalk.

Bighorn sheep were also seen throughout the summer, and deer, as many as five at a time, have been coming to the bird feeder area, where Dee has put out additional dishes of water for them.

A tree of heaven might sound like a wonderful gift, that is until Dee researched this fast-growing shade tree. Originating in China, the tree of heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*) has become invasive across the U.S. This tree grows so fast, local lore has it that Chinese railroad workers introduced it into treeless areas of the Southwest so they would have something to hang their laundry on. In actuality, Chinese workers, on railroads and in mines, did introduce the tree in the Southwest, but more likely because of its medicinal uses—the reason for its name. A single tree of heaven can produce up to 350,000 seeds a year and additionally spreads itself with root suckers. Needless to say, Dee had to pass on planting this particular gift tree.

**Summer Encounter: A Whooping Good Time** by Kc McKay

Summer Encounter was a whooping great time this summer. The participants studied Native Americans, mainly the Serrano Indians, who made their home where the Preserve is now located. The students learned the importance of why the Serrano Indians chose this area. The children also made craft projects that related to Native American ceremonies, life style, and beliefs. It was also another first for our junior docents this summer.

The participants enjoyed their walks on the Marsh Trail and the Mesquite Trail this summer; Pat Stoner led a walk on the Marsh Trail, explaining the importance of the water, how it came to be there, and its effects on the plants and animals that drew the Serranos. On another walk led by Kc McKay, the participants learned about the native plant life and the important role that plants played in the survival of the Serrano Indians. On this walk, the students tasted the ground honey mesquite bean and learned about the yerba mansa and its many uses, as well as the uses of many of the other trees and plants in the Preserve. On the Mesquite Trail, the students learned about some geology and observed a different water area of the Preserve.

Our chief, Pat Stoner, led everyone fearlessly through the craft projects with a lot of patience. The participants made gourd rattles or “halmas,” which are used throughout Native American culture in a

variety of ceremonies. The participants used symbols and colorful designs to decorate their rattles. The participants planted sunflower seeds the second day of Summer Encounter and cared for them daily, waiting for them to poke their heads up out of the soil. During the second week, the seedlings did just that, and the participants were able to watch them grow before taking them home on the last day of Summer Encounter. They studied pictographs and created rock art on palm-sized rocks using Indian symbols that represented something special to them. The participants also made their own dream catchers and learned that the dream catcher is one of the most fascinating traditions of the Native Americans. The dream catcher allows positive dreams to flow through its center of webbing and slide down the feathers to pass to a sleeping individual, while capturing negative dreams in the webbing of the dream catcher and melting them with the first rays of the morning sun. The participants made other projects and played games outdoors during the two weeks of Summer Encounter.

Summer Encounter would not be the success it is without our junior docent trainees Rylan, Jordan, Tim, Lindsey, Emma, and Kaitlin, who volunteered to each lead a group of students for one week and helped with all set up and clean up. Samantha, a junior docent who has been with the program for five years, guided the trainees in

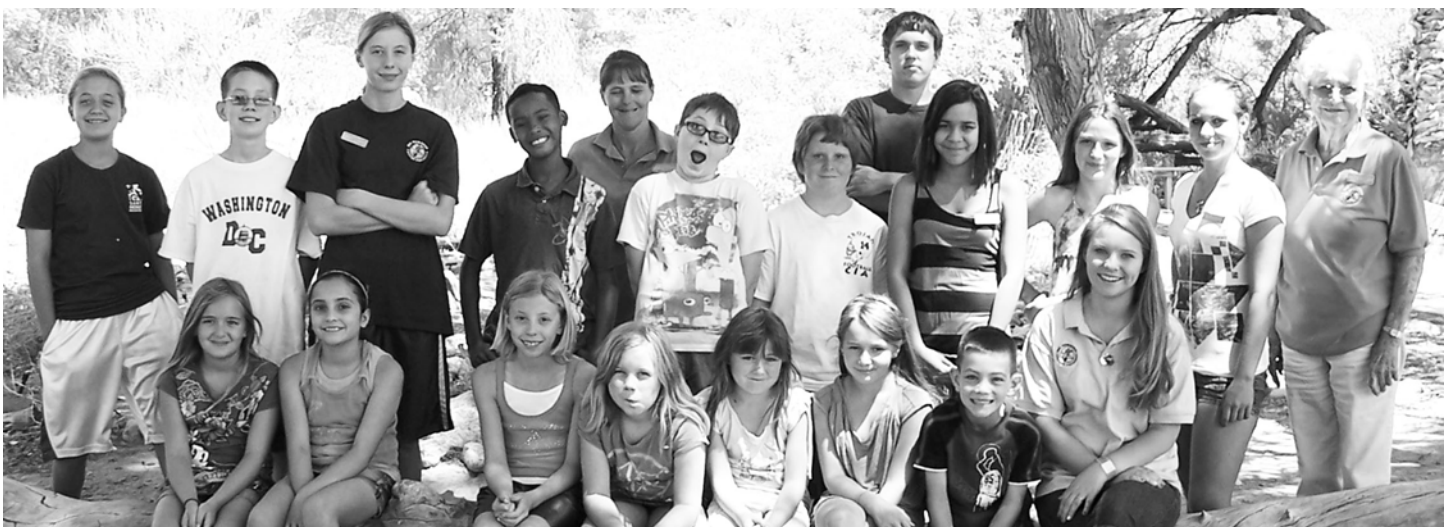


Students with their dream catchers

their leadership role. Joining her were Britney and Kyler, who both have been with the program since they were participants in Summer Encounter and are now docent/volunteers, our first two graduates of the Junior Docent Program.

On the last day of Summer Encounter, the participants gave an informative short speech to their parents about their projects and what they learned about the Native Americans. This was followed by a traditional hot dog barbeque—the perfect way to end the camp.

The program is a definite success. Thanks to Pat Stoner, Director of Environmental Education, and her assistant, Kc McKay, for the work that goes into all of the preparation, creating projects, menus, and meals. Thank you to Docent DJ Garrett for all of her help and to Dee Zeller for being our grill master for the last day ceremony.



Summer Nature Encounter 2012 students and instructors

**Volunteerism at BMCP** *by Jennifer Taylor (BLM Volunteer Coordinator)*

Big Morongo Canyon Preserve (BMCP), designated as one of the United States' Important Bird Areas by the American Bird Conservancy, the American Birding Association, and the Federal Watchable Wildlife Program, is also featured in the National Geographic Guide to Bird Watching Sites. The popularity of BMCP has increased steadily over the past several years, with over 62,000 visitors already logged for Fiscal Year 2012 (FY12). While bird watching remains one of the main reasons for folks visiting the site, many people simply enjoy taking in the scenery while traveling along the numerous walking/hiking trails—trails that have been kept clear from overgrown brush and invasive plant species through the help of volunteers.

The importance of BMCP is not limited to bird watching and hiking experiences, however. Each year, BMCP volunteer docents provide environmental education to local elementary school districts, both in the classroom and on the Preserve. This program has brought hundreds of students to the Preserve for participation in a three-hour study for a “hands on” approach that supplements the schools’ required curriculum. This program has been very successful in supporting BLM’s Take It Outside and Youth in Outdoors initiatives. For example, in FY11 alone, the program accomplished 5,088 educational hours, addressing 1,583 students and 338 adults. Volunteer hours for this program were 754.

One of the reasons why BMCP remains as one of the most visited sites within the Palm Springs-South Coast (PSSC) BLM Field Office has to do with the quantity and quality of work produced by the many people who volunteer their time. According to



IndependentSector.org, an organization providing support for nonprofits, foundations, and corporate giving programs, the estimated value of volunteer time for 2011 is \$21.79 per hour. With thousands of volunteer hours completed over the course of a year, volunteers have contributed over \$90,000 worth of work! In this day and age of compressed budgets and staff shortages, Federal agencies rely more than ever on the services provided by local volunteers. PSSC is fortunate to have a dedicated base of volunteers such as those found at BMCP. Year after year, our volunteers provide the much needed support to help maintain BMCP as one of the “crown jewels” of the field office.

For this upcoming year, let’s all help spread the message about volunteerism. Even if you have only one hour, that one hour could really make the difference! If you or someone you know is interested in volunteering for BMCP, the annual volunteer sign-up meeting will be held on Tuesday, September 18, at 9 a.m. at the BMCP Education Center. For more information, please contact Betty Zeller at 760-363-7190 or Jennifer Taylor, Volunteer Coordinator (BLM), at 760-833-7117 or by email at [j5taylor@blm.gov](mailto:j5taylor@blm.gov).

**NATIONAL PUBLIC LANDS DAY  
BIG MORONGO CYN PRESERVE  
SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 29  
8 A.M. TO NOON  
VOLUNTEER!**

National Public Lands Day is the nation's largest single-day volunteer event for public lands in the United States. NPLD was started in 1994 with three sites and 700 volunteers. Last year, approximately 170,000 volunteers at over 2,080 sites took part across the country, with events in every state and the District of Columbia and even in several U.S. territories! Projects included trash cleanups, invasive plant removal, trail construction and rehabilitation, and tree planting. Volunteers contributed an estimated \$17 million through volunteer services to improve public lands across the country.

Last year, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA), and Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve teamed up to host a NPLD event at BMCP. Volunteers from the Twentynine Palms Marine base, Friends of BMCP, and Friends of Giant Rock helped BLM staff remove several invasive plant species surrounding the Mesquite Trail. BLM firefighters from Black Rock were also there to provide extra help and emergency medical support, if needed. A total of 35 people were in attendance to remove the over 30 cubic yards of compressed vegetation, accounting for roughly 140 volunteer work hours.

On Saturday, September 29, 2012, from 8 a.m. to noon, BMCP will again play host for NPLD. Another trail maintenance project is scheduled along the Mesquite Trail, and folks are invited to participate. Volunteers will receive a NPLD t-shirt and a one-day, fee-free pass good at any federally managed location that charges an entrance fee. Lunch will be provided, and special guest Professor Ruth Nolan of the College of the Desert will conduct a poetry workshop in the afternoon. Because space is limited, interested parties need to RSVP no later than September 21 to Jennifer Taylor, BLM Volunteer Coordinator, at 760-833-7117 or by email at [j5taylor@blm.gov](mailto:j5taylor@blm.gov).

## CALENDAR

at BMCP

SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER

Gate open 7:30 a.m. to sunset

365 days a year

### Wednesday Bird Walks

Every Wed. at 7:00 a.m. in Sep. and at 8:00 a.m. beginning in Oct. Bring your binoculars and spend a couple of hours strolling the trails with birding experts. Beginning birders welcome.

### Saturday Bird Walks

Beginning Oct. 13, at 8:00 a.m. on all but the first Sat. of each month. Same format as Wednesday Bird Walks.

## Upcoming Events

Sep. 15, Sat. (10:00 a.m.-noon) - Junior Docent Meeting.

Sep. 18, Tues. (9:00 a.m.-noon) - Docent/Volunteer Meeting. BLM volunteer contract renewal.

Sep. 21-23 - Insects and Arthropods of the Morongo Basin Class.\*

Sep. 29, Sat. (8:00 a.m.-noon) - National Public Lands Day: Work at BMCP. See page 4 for details.

Oct. 16, Tues. (9:00 a.m.-noon) - Docent/Volunteer Meeting. Topic: Fun With Education Activities.

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

Oct. 27/28, Sat./Sun. - Native American Basket Weaving Class.\*

Nov. 13, Tues. (10:00 a.m.-noon) - Docent/Volunteer Potluck.

Nov. 17, Sat. (10:00 a.m.-noon) - Junior Docent Meeting.

Dec. 15, Sat. (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 15-mile radius of the Preserve. Late in the afternoon we will gather to tally data and enjoy some refreshments.

\*Contact the Desert Institute at (760) 367-5535 or [www.joshuatree.org](http://www.joshuatree.org) for information and



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 \_\_\_\_\_  
EMAIL \_\_\_\_\_

#### ENCLOSED MEMBERSHIP DUES:

- \$ 25.00 INDIVIDUAL ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP  
 \$ 35.00 FAMILY ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP  
 \$ 250.00 LIFETIME MEMBERSHIP

#### ADDITIONAL CONTRIBUTIONS:

- \$ 10.00                       \$ 50.00  
 \$ 20.00                       OTHER

### BECOME A MEMBER OF THE FRIENDS OF BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

The 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 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 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

*is published by*  
Friends of BMCP  
P.O. Box 780  
Morongo Valley, CA 92256

**GO GREEN** . . . to choose the digital option  
for receiving your newsletter, call the Preserve



### **The Weather Year** *by Ray Yeager*

With the end of the 2011/2012 weather year on June 30, BMCP recorded a measly 2.21 inches of precipitation, well below the historical average of 8.64. We can expect wetter times, as the National Weather Service is predicting an El Nino for the upcoming winter.

We are all aware of the very high temperatures and dry conditions the Midwest and Eastern U.S. have been experiencing, which are caused by a persistent high-pressure condition caused by the jet stream oscillating further north than normal. With high pressure over the Midwest, we should have cooler than normal temperatures, which we have had. July was 5°F cooler than the historical average of 100°F, with only four days of 100°F or above. Already in the first three weeks of August, the Preserve has had nine days of 100°F or more, with a high of 105°F. Why? That bothersome high-pressure system is now over the Southwest.

We are also experiencing an above normal monsoonal season, with seven days of rain during July and August totaling 0.74 inches. This is very helpful after a below average winter.



**BMCP CELEBRATES ITS DOCENTS & VOLUNTEERS, MAY 15, 2012**