



# BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

## NEWSLETTER

Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve

Fall/Winter 2016/2017

### Volunteers Turn Out for Clean Up at New National Monument



Greg Hill welcomes volunteers to National Public Lands Day at BMCP. photo by Mariana Maguire

On Sept. 24, National Public Lands Day, over 70 volunteers of all ages gathered at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve to participate in hands-on projects to improve trails and preserve wildlife habitat. This year's 23rd annual National Public Lands Day was a nationwide event to celebrate our nation's public lands through stewardship projects that improve and restore the lands and facilities Americans use and cherish.

This year was particularly special as Big Morongo Canyon Preserve is now part of the recently designated Sand to Snow National Monument. The event included staff and volunteers from the Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve, Bureau of Land Management, Conservation Lands Foundation, California Conservation Corps, National Parks Conservation Association, and Friends of the Desert Mountains. Many participants were

recruited from our local schools. In addition, Elena Kim represented Congressman Raul Ruiz, and was greatly impressed by the event and the Preserve.

The event started with check-in, distribution of event t-shirts, introductions of volunteers and staff, a look at the new Sand to Snow National Monument sign for the Preserve, and a group photo. The participants then fanned out across the Preserve to pull invasive plants, do trail maintenance, and clean up around the Preserve hosts' trailers and the visitor parking lot. Altogether, two huge trash bins were filled with 80 cubic yards of weeds, trash, and other debris. Following the morning's work, the Friends treated the hard-working volunteers to a well-earned lunch.

This was the largest National Public Lands Day event at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve, and the success is due to all the hard work and support of our members, volunteers, and partners. We hope to repeat this event next year, along with other work projects throughout the year.



photo by Colin Barrows



photo by Mariana Maguire

**Christmas Bird Count**

**Saturday, December 17**

BMCP Parking Lot at 7:30 a.m.

**ALL ARE WELCOME**

BMCP will be participating in the 117th Annual National Audubon Society Christmas Bird Count. It's fun, it's free, and we can use your help.

Teams will be formed to bird a variety of habitats within a 7.5-mile radius of the Preserve. At 4:30 p.m. we will gather to tally the day's results and enjoy pizza.

You don't need to be an expert birder to take part in the Count. All teams will have an experienced birder leading the group. Help is needed to spot birds and record each team's data. So come join us, meet some of the local birds, and help document our winter wildlife.

There is no cost to participate, but donations to Audubon will be gratefully accepted. Count results are published online each year.

Bring binoculars, comfortable walking shoes, layers of clothing for changeable weather, lunch, and drinking water.

**If you have questions, contact Joe Zarki at 760-366-8913, or jwzarki@gmail.com.**

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NEWSLETTER**

Editor: Joe Zarki

Fall/Winter, 2016/2017

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**MUSINGS FROM DEE...**

*as gleaned by Jane Olson*

There is no better way to find out what is happening at Big Morongo than a chat with Dee on his front porch. Fair warning– the conversation may be waylaid at any time by notable birds at the feeders.



Our prolonged drought made a big impact at one spot on the Preserve this summer. The pond that has existed at the base of the weir on the Mesquite Trail, for as many years as most of us care to remember, dried up. There was no surface water at all. Just mud. Very thick, sticky mud. For decades bighorn sheep have been coming down the hill opposite the board walk to take a drink. Some hikers alerted Dee to the plight of a thirsty sheep stuck in the muck. Dee's son, Bear, went with Dee to assess the situation. Bear solved the problem for the sheep by wading in and hoisting the sheep's hind quarters to break the suction of the mud. The mud-caked sheep scrambled up the hill, and a no less muddy Bear scrambled back to a shower.

Hardly a week later, the same thing happened – a sheep stuck in the mud. This time Dee and Bear used a limb to lift its hind quarters and put a rope around the horns to help pull the poor sheep from the mud.

The following Wednesday, yet another sheep becomes stuck in the mud. Refer to previous paragraph for the solution. Dee, Dan Baumann, and Joe Zarki came to the rescue this time.



An exhausted sheep awaits rescue, August 17.

Dee said that all the rescued bighorn sheep were young males. He wondered if there were three unlucky sheep or one rather stupid one! Fortunately, the water returned to cover the mud and the sheep can, once again, safely sip from the edge of the pond.

Mule deer sightings have taken place all over the Preserve this summer. They are frequently seen at drippers at the bird feeders and the butterfly garden. Dee particularly enjoyed watching the fawns grow. At first, they could only scrunch under the fence, yet soon they would be able to hop over it, just like their moms.



A wary deer eyes a group of birders, October 19.

Bobcat sightings are occurring two or three times a week. Someone reported seeing kittens. Dee noted the male bobcat ignores people as if not looking at them makes the people not there. He appears to be in good shape. The mom cat, not so much. She looks like she's suffered wear and tear caring for her litter. The rabbit population has dwindled as the drought has dragged on, so it must be hard keeping the kittens fed.

Our new assistant hosts, the Cunnings, reported to Dee that they saw a mountain lion near Helmkamp Deck.

Birds were present in normal numbers. An Acorn Woodpecker and a Lewis's Woodpecker were noteworthy. Some thought these birds may have come from burn areas in higher elevations. After one summer rain, birders encountered a termite boil. It filled the air with insects and hungry birds– a treat for the summer birders to see so many bird species at the same time and so close.

Our list of animal sightings shows just how important the Preserve is to local wildlife.



# BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

## EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT by Greg Hill

The last few months have brought significant changes to Big Morongo Canyon Preserve. After a long history as an all-volunteer organization, the Friends Board of Directors created three new paid, part-time positions to help grow and direct the volunteer programs at the Preserve. Ann Garry, Dave Miller, Meg Foley, and others, secured a grant from the BLM to fund an Executive Director, an Education Coordinator, and a Volunteer Coordinator.

As the new Executive Director, I've been working to fill the new positions, set up office space, start our new grants, and develop recruitment and fund raising strategies for the Friends and the Preserve. I've been fortunate to know most of you through my past experience serving in the BLM Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office, which oversees the Preserve. Since retiring in 2015, I've been active volunteering with the BLM and our conservation partners such as the Mojave Desert Land Trust and the Joshua Tree National Park Association. In October, we hired Patricia Mencarelli as our Education Coordinator and Leslie Burkhardt as our Volunteer Coordinator. Patricia is a local Joshua Tree educator, and some of you may know Leslie, whose stepmother, Margaret Hoggan, leads the Preserve's

birding programs. We are fortunate to have Patricia and Leslie on board.

Last February, President Obama designated the Sand to Snow National Monument, which is made up of the San Geronio Wilderness and Big Morongo Canyon Preserve. The National Monument will be managed jointly by the BLM and US Forest Service, and also becomes an addition to the BLM's system of National Conservation Lands. To support the BLM's mission for these lands, the Conservation Lands Foundation was created as a non-profit organization to assist the BLM, its partners, and volunteer groups in managing this vast system.

Last month the Conservation Lands Foundation (CLF) held the 8th annual Friends Rendezvous in Las Vegas. The Rendezvous was attended by Board member Bill LaHaye and myself, along with dozens of other Friends and volunteer groups, over 200 participants in all. The conference offered talks and workshops on all aspects of fundraising, volunteer recruitment, working with the BLM, and networking with other groups. In addition, the CLF has opened a Joshua Tree office, staffed by Mariana Maguire, who is focused on helping our organization build on our successes.

The CLF offers grants and other support to Friends groups. We look to take full advantage of CLF's services.

Many changes have also taken place in our local BLM offices. The California Desert District, which oversees five BLM Field Offices, has a new District Manager. Beth Ransel began her new position on October 13. Recently the Moab Utah Field Office Manager, Beth has wide experience working with diverse groups. The Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office has a new Field Manager, Doug Herrema. Doug comes from the BLM Washington Office where he was on the staff overseeing the National Conservation Lands, including the BLM's National Monuments. Doug started as a Presidential Management Fellow in the Palm Springs office and is very familiar with Big Morongo Canyon Preserve. You will also meet Joel Miner, BLM Natural Resource Specialist, who will be overseeing the special areas under the Palm Springs office, including the Dos Palmas and Big Morongo Canyon Preserves. Joel will be the BLM's liaison with the Friends.

I look forward to working with all of you and hope to continue all the good work that we have accomplished together at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve.



photo by Greg Hill

## BMCP Welcomes New Preserve Hosts

Welcome our new BLM Volunteer Preserve Hosts, George and Kathy Cunnings. The Cunnings will help the Preserve's on-site manager Dee Zeller with visitor contacts, opening and closing the Preserve, and light maintenance. They will live in their RV next to the Education Center.

Currently "professional volunteers" and campground hosts, the Cunnings have diverse backgrounds and experiences. Kathy, originally from Boston, has had careers as a registered nurse, in health administration, teaching, and insurance sales. George grew up in Pasadena, earned a degree in Geology from UC Santa Barbara, worked in the oil and gas

industry, then moved on to film and TV production as a camera technician in Hollywood. After these occupations, they decided to retire to the road and work as volunteers at our parks and public lands. Their travels have taken them to Yosemite, Olympic, and Yellowstone National Parks, White Mountain National Forest in New Hampshire, Red Rock State Park in Arizona, and Anastasia State Park in Florida. Most recently, they have worked at Joshua Tree National Park, where they discovered Big Morongo Canyon Preserve and jumped at the chance to work here. They will be here through the winter, and look forward to becoming expert birders. Please give them a warm welcome!

**OH, THE TIMES...UH BIRDS, THEY ARE A'CHANGING!** by Joe Zarki

Natural history writer Harry Zirlin has a regular column for the journal *American Butterflies* called "Taxonomists Just Want to Have Fun." This year the American Ornithologists Union (AOU), the group that establishes the 'official' scientific and common names for Northern American birds, issued its annual supplement to the Northern American checklist, and boy, was it ever a doozy. Many birders have been left shaking their heads at the scope and breadth of the changes, and are feeling that, if this is a taxonomist's idea of fun, then they surely have a twisted sense of humor.



Vultures, hawks eagles, and most other raptors have been moved far deeper into the taxonomic order, after ibises and just before owls. Falcons are still considered a distinct group. Photo by Joe Zarki

Longtime birders have grown accustomed to the occasional splits and lumps of well-known bird species. Red-shafted and yellow-shafted flickers became the northern flicker whereas the solitary vireo was split into Cassin's and plumbeous vireos. When I first developed a serious interest in birds in the 1970s, bird taxonomy was in a prolonged era of lumping where formerly separate, but similar, species were sometimes combined into single species, occasionally with distinct geographic forms. In recent years, however, with revolutionary advances in the field of genetics driven by the ability to perform highly detailed DNA analysis of entire groups of birds, the 'splitters' have assumed ascendancy in taxonomic circles, and many newly minted species have emerged.

This situation has at once pleased and confounded birders as they now have more new species to look for, and ultimately add, to their expanding life lists. However, it also means learning how to make new and often difficult identifications in the field.

Here at Morongo, we can see numerous examples of how these trends affect our birding experience. In the last couple of years, we have seen splits of the former sage sparrow into Bell's and sagebrush sparrows. Both are present in our area, but differences between the two are subtle and require careful study. This year, the familiar western scrub-jay was split into three species, two of which are found in California. BMCP bird leaders are now getting used to calling out "California scrub-jay!" whenever our common blue corvid flies by. The Woodhouse's scrub-jay, an interior species, occurs northeast of the Morongo area and can be seen at Mojave National Preserve.

Most discomfiting to the birding community is the wholesale and rapid rearranging of bird orders and families that have upset the once familiar sequence of birds in popular field guides. With their new analytical toys, taxonomists may seem to have gone berserk. The biggest changes in this year's AOU supplement are in the groupings of avian orders and families. For many years, loons led the parade of birds in the AOU list, and the lowly house sparrow came dead last. No longer. Flamingos now come first, and icterids are the last group with the striking Scott's oriole bringing up the rear. Some changes make sense as hawks, eagles, and other birds of prey are now moved closer to owls— the mostly nocturnal birds of prey. Others are real head-scratchers. Loons nest on freshwater northern lakes but have been sandwiched between tropicbirds and albatrosses— pelagic birds most common on warmer oceans.

These are just a few examples of the wholesale reshuffling in the AOU supplement. The radical realignment has led some to cry, "Whoa Nelly!" A number of field guide authors, led by Steven Howell, have urged that more stability is needed in the publishing of

bird guides and that for birders, similarity of appearance is more important than evolutionary relationships. The frequent, and sometimes wholesale, changes emerging from the science community make it increasingly difficult for authors and publishers to stay current with the latest research.



A common resident at BMCP, the California scrub-jay was recently part of a three-way species split. Photo by Joe Zarki.

So what's a poor birder to do? In one sense, we are lucky. Even with all these changes, birders can be thankful that the avian community has a group like the AOU that rules on taxonomic changes and maintains a nomenclature that everyone uses. Such standardization of names is a rarity in science. Advances in gene sequencing are causing similar upheavals in other disciplines, but the chaos is compounded by the presence of divergent species lists put forth by competing scientists.

Science will continue to move forward, and it's certain that more changes in bird nomenclature are coming. This is how science works. New discoveries lead to ongoing reassessments of what we thought we knew. On the bright side, the Holiday Season is almost upon us, so perhaps it's time to put a new bird guide (or app) on your gift list...or at least a new set of pencils.

# BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

## BMCP WELCOMES A NEW EDUCATION DIRECTOR by Jane Olson

Last spring, the Friend's Board of Directors decided that if our programs were going to be maintained and expanded, that we could no longer rely exclusively on volunteers. The Education Committee was particularly caught short when Kc McKay needed to resign. Her departure left a hole that none of our present volunteers could fill. So, in early November the Board hired Patricia Mencarelli as Education Director.

Patricia has a background in childhood education. Her college degree was earned in her native Guatemala where she taught in grade school for several years. Patricia and her twin sister moved to Montana for a new life experience. She had lots of experience with children's arts and crafts programs when she worked at the Bozeman Children's Museum while living with her sister. In addition to being fluent in Spanish, she also speaks Italian.

Her Italian mother took the family to Italy for a time while she was growing up where Patricia acquired the language of DaVinci and Galileo.

Five years ago, Patricia moved to Joshua Tree and fell in love with the desert. She enjoys hiking with friends when she has the time. She teaches a couple of classes at an alternative school but still has plenty of time for her part-time position at BMCP. Patricia says that she learned to love art through her mother's paintings and the crafts she was taught by her extended family. She is very excited to see all the craft materials in our Education Shed!

With Patricia's natural enthusiasm, her love for children and her connections to the local community we can look forward to expanding our education program with new volunteers, training programs and more school tours.

## NOTICE TO VOLUNTEERS

BMCP also has a new Volunteer Coordinator, Leslie Burkhardt. Leslie comes from the Seattle area, has a Master's degree in Low Vision Rehabilitation, and has developed volunteer programs for people with vision impairments. She'll be contacting volunteers and holding a volunteer meeting within a short time.

In the meantime, I want to thank the many volunteers who slaved getting the Education Center and the small trailer in the parking lot in shape to use. With our new staff, we needed office space. We needed to get rid of redundant items. We needed to sort and rearrange everything. We needed to CLEAN. I truly appreciate the efforts of everyone who helped.

There are still a few corners left to reorganize, but it is manageable. Our work days proved to be very effective and we accomplished a lot. Thanks again.

Jane Olson



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
- \$ 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 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.



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## 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.*



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## CALENDAR

**AT BMCP**

**DECEMBER – MARCH**

**Gate open 7:30 a.m. to Sunset**

**365 days a year**

### WEDNESDAY BIRD WALKS

Every Wednesday at 8:00 a.m. (Start time will change to 7:00 a.m. in April.) Bring your binoculars and spend a couple of hours strolling the trails with knowledgeable local bird leaders. Beginning birders welcome.

### SATURDAY BIRD WALKS

On the third Saturday of each month at 8:00 a.m. (Start time will change to 7:00 a.m. in April.) Same format as Wednesday Bird Walks

### UPCOMING EVENTS

December 17, Saturday, 7:30 a.m. to late afternoon – See p. 2 for details.

January 17, Tuesday, 9:00 a.m. Volunteer Meeting at the Preserve Education Building. Meet new BMCP Volunteer Coordinator Leslie Burkhardt and learn about current and future volunteer opportunities at the Preserve.

February – Sand to Snow National Monument Anniversary Event. Check BMCP website for details.

*Check the BMCP website for information and updates on future events.*