



BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

NEWSLETTER

Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve

Spring/Summer 2013



Southern Desert Cottontail
(*Sylvilagus audubonii arizonae*)

Springfest 2013

April 13, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Don't Miss the Fun

by Jane Olson

Once a year the Friends and volunteers of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve hold an event to celebrate this special place. The trails explore several ecosystems, which hold a diverse selection of plants and animals. As Friends and volunteers, we are dedicated to the preservation and conservation of this natural treasure. The goal of this festival is to introduce the Preserve to the public. We hope that by sharing our enthusiasm about the many facets of the Preserve that we will raise awareness and increase appreciation of our own desert preserve and of other places like it.

There will be a variety of activities and informational displays to jumpstart your interest in BMCP. From the parking lot,

head over to the kiosk. There you will find a program schedule of planned events. As the festival starts at 10 a.m., the early morning bird walk will not be listed.

Come to the Preserve at 7 a.m. if you want to join the morning bird walk before the Springfest begins—then stay for the festival. Yes, I know 7 a.m. is early, but if you want to see the best variety of birds, you just have to get here early! It is migration season. It will be worth it. If you want to give birding a try and don't have any binoculars, we can loan you a pair.

Back to Springfest—near the kiosk there will be a sign on the boardwalk directing you to our Springfest site at our Education Center. When you arrive there, stop at the table with the free bird-friendly coffee. Take a minute to appreciate how odd it is that by drinking this coffee you are helping to protect the lifestyle of a bird far from here. Some of the birds that use the tree canopy over the coffee plants are resident to that area. Many are migrants spending the winter far from their northern nesting areas. Some of those migrants have returned from that far-off coffee plantation to nest here or farther north. A couple of those that you might see today are a Western Tanager or a Hooded Oriole.

Sipping your coffee, you can wander among the other tables. You can chat with the representatives of other groups that work to preserve other areas of our desert. You can wonder at the display of bird nests. How do birds create such intricate structures with just a beak and two funny little feet? Stroke a feather and talk to the volunteer about its amazing structure. Look at a snake and contemplate what a lifestyle with no limbs must be like. Check out the

Butterfly Garden that showcases plants that attract butterflies. Inside the Education Center you will find a nature video and a chair to rest on for a few minutes. On the walls you will see posters labeled Resident Birds and Non-Resident Birds. The posters picture our local birds. You may have thought of all birds found in the desert as shades of brown—not the case at all. If you want to see some of these “in the feather,” you can return to the parking lot and watch them at our bird feeders. The feeders are next to the trailer on the opposite end of the parking lot from the kiosk. There will be birding field guides and a volunteer (most of the time) to help identify the birds and share a little information about them. You may be surprised at how far some of these birds have come in order to join you on this Saturday. Other birds will be stay-at-homes that we see often. Relax in one of the comfy chairs. Chat with the person next to you. They may have traveled a long way to get here too.

Children are especially welcome at our Springfest, and we have arranged some activities just for them. They may create a nature craft or color a picture of a bird. Or maybe the child would like to be painted. Face paint is always fun. BLM has safety gear that kids can try on. Some tables have small souvenirs to give. Others will have small local animals that can be viewed.

At 1 p.m. join us in honoring those who have given much of themselves in service to attaining the Friends' goals. We will be unveiling new plaques on our Recognition Rock, which is by the parking lot kiosk.

The Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve look forward to seeing many of you at Springfest.

HIKES & WALKS

All hikes & walks meet at the kiosk by the parking lot; sturdy shoes a must.

What's That Plant?

April 13, 9-10:30 a.m.

Walk the Yucca Ridge Trail & learn about the blooming and not-so-blooming plants.

Moonlight Hikes

April 24, 8-10 p.m. &

May 22, 7:30-9:30 p.m.

Discover the magic as a full moon lights our way up and over a hill, down into Big Morongo Canyon, and onto the marsh deck.

FAMILY FUN FRIDAYS

All ages will enjoy these summer evening programs. Have fun learning about the natural world while munching popcorn and sipping lemonade. Meet at the Education Center (a short walk from the parking lot).

Discovering the Ancients

June 14, 7-8:30 p.m.

Do desert plants live longer than us? Learn about some of our incredibly old plants, and use innovative tools to estimate their ages.

Leap'n Lizards & Slithering Snakes

July 26, 7-8:30 p.m.

Expand your reptilian knowledge and get up close with live animals.

Who's Been Here?

August (date TBD)

Get outside to see who's been about and what's happening in nature on a summer evening.

Bird's Eye View ... and more

gleaned from

Dee Zeller

Where have all the raccoons gone . . . and the coyotes . . . and the bobcats?

No more raccoons marching past the

Zeller trailer on their way to town to scavenge, no more Preserve trash cans toppled or trash strewn about by this, up to now, common Preserve resident, none of those cute little, human-hand-like tracks in the tracking area along the boardwalk or in the bare ground around the Education Center and by the front gate, and the boardwalk is missing its usual mess of raccoon scat.

And, as for Coyotes, Dee recalls when he would always hear their howls in accompaniment to the sirens of the local fire engines or ambulances—not in recent months.

Bobcats had been reduced in numbers, with no bobcat kittens seen last summer, but now it has been months since Dee has seen any bobcat.

Dee is still searching for an explanation to this decline in several mammal species.

One mammal bright spot is the continued sightings of a gray fox that first began to be seen at the Preserve last fall. Dee saw the fox as recently as three weeks ago at the beginning of March.

At this time nearing the end of March, bird migration is sputtering to a start, although Dee is still awaiting the return of Summer Tanagers, female orioles (the male orioles have already arrived), and Yellow-breasted Chats. Large groups of Turkey Vultures are being seen traveling north, but Dee has yet to spot any Swainson's Hawks among the vultures (although these two species are typically seen migrating together).

Finally a male Vermilion Flycatcher has



arrived at Covington Park to pair with the female already there. Usually the males arrive in February, ahead of the females, but not this year, and it looks like there will only be the one nesting pair this season.

A pair of Bewick's Wrens have already set up housekeeping in the birdhouse by the Zeller's patio—this year establishing their home early enough in the season to not be at risk of being kicked out by House Wrens.

Dee was surprised recently to see a Red-tailed Hawk snatch a quail. He has seen Red-tailed Hawks catch squirrels, snakes, and lizards, but this was a first for catching a bird. The hawk flew up to a nearby tree, where it removed the quail's feathers and ate a few bites, then flew off to Covington Park, probably to deliver the rest of the meal to its mate, who may be already sitting on eggs. In this species, the male and female alternate brooding responsibility, with the nonbrooding mate feeding the one on the nest.

The cottonwood trees have exploded with new leaves almost overnight; it seems as if one day the trees had no leaves, and the next day they were covered in bright green foliage.

Dee warns of the dangers of windows for birds. A neighbor brought Dee a badly injured Costa's Hummingbird whose beak was bloody, evidently from hitting a window. Although Dee was able to feed the injured bird a little bit, the bird died within an hour. A few days later the neighbor brought two already dead male goldfinches. Both birds were stiff except for wobbling heads, indicating broken necks as a result of collisions with windows.

Feral cats are another huge problem for wild birds, and Dee is seeing more of these cats on the Preserve grounds.

This may be a better year than last for wildflowers at the Preserve. Some wildflowers, such as lupines, are already emerging on the West Canyon Trail, and Desert Canterbury Bell (*Phacelia campanularia*) and Sand Blazing Star (*Mentzelia involucreata*) are showing their foliage on the Mesquite Trail.

Therapeutic Birding

by Alicia M. Baumann

Hail to thee, blithe spirit!
Bird thou never wert,
That from heaven, or near it,
Pourest thy full heart
In profuse strains of unpremeditated art!

(Percy Bysshe Shelley,
Ode to a Skylark, 1819)

Since I became a birder five years ago, I have learned many things about birding. It's fun. It's a discipline. It's thought provoking. But I've also come to understand that birding is good for the body and the soul.

A few years ago I went through some pretty tough personal challenges, and I felt like I had been wrung through the washer,

mentally and physically. Surprisingly, I found that bird walks helped alleviate some of that pain.

There is some sort of psychosomatic process going on when you bird. Think about it . . . the general stance of a birder is to be looking up—chin up, eyes up, neck elongated. The whole body is in balance, steadying those binoculars, waiting for that bird to peek its little body out. Just the act of bird watching changes how you feel.

As I go on birding hikes on gray days, I have seen myself change. I start my hike with feet dragging, head down, and a drifted stare into the ground. I nearly have to force myself to hold onto my binoculars. A bird appears and my eyes lift. I hear the sweet melody of a wren, and it drowns out the negative thoughts in my head. And what

joy there is in finding a new species! Is there anything more exciting? My energies are focused on finding that one little flit of wings, and my worries are gone. My body starts feeling better, and my spirit follows suit. What a gift birding can be!

So when you find yourself low, step outside, take a deep breath and say, ". . . look at the birds of the air."

Nicknamed "Swift Girl" for her bizarre ability to spot White-throated Swifts, Alicia has somehow accumulated 415 ABA birds on her Life List (but who's counting?) Alicia keeps a blog of the birds and beauty of the Morongo Valley home and garden she shares with her husband, Dan, and son, Gus, at gargoylebirdgarden.com.



Alicia Baumann

Butterflies of
Big Morongo Canyon Preserve

as observed by Bob Cullen
from 2008 through 2012



SWALLOWTAILS

Pipevine Swallowtail
Desert Black Swallowtail
Western Tiger Swallowtail

WHITES & SULPHURS

Becker's White
Spring White
Checkered White
Cabbage White
Sara Orangetip
Orange Sulphur
California Dogface
Dainty Sulphur
Sleepy Orange
Cloudless Sulphur

HAIRSTREAKS & BLUES

Great Purple Hairstreak
Silvan Hairstreak
Bramble Hairstreak
Gray Hairstreak
Leda Ministreak
Marine Blue
Rekirt's Blue
Ceraunus Blue
Western Pygmy-Blue
"Buckwheat Blue"*
Silvery Blue
Acmon Blue

METALMARKS

Wright's Metalmark
Desert Mormon Metalmark

BRUSHFOOTS

American Snout
California Patch
Sagebrush Checkerspot
Mylitta Crescent
Satyr Comma
Painted Lady
West Coast Lady
Red Admiral
Mourning Cloak
Common Buckeye
Lorquin's Admiral
Monarch
Queen

SKIPPERS

Funeral Duskywing
White Checkered-Skipper
Northern White-Skipper
Fiery Skipper
Sandhill Skipper
Yucca Giant Skipper

* "Buckwheat Blue" refers
to any of similar species
that feed on buckwheat

What's Happening in Education by Kc McKay

Hello everyone—just a brief update on the Environmental Education Program.

The school visits are going wonderful. The children are having a great time exploring the Preserve and doing hands-on experiments. We have different grades visiting throughout the spring (volunteers are always welcome, no experience necessary).

The Junior Docent Program is very proud to announce that two of the trainees have been promoted to the rank of junior docent. They have both worked very hard to achieve this honor. The junior docents have been enjoying hikes at the Preserve. In March they walked the Yucca Ridge, and the view was spectacular, while the song of the frogs floated on a soft breeze up to us at the split-rail fence. The junior docents will be hosting a table at Springfest and Earth Day, talking about the different programs and showing some of the things that they have done, so stop by and let them show you what they have done and try a science experiment. The junior docents are also getting ready to lead tables at Summer Nature Encounter.

Summer Nature Encounter is in the planning stages and will be June 24 through July 5, with no camp on the weekend and the Fourth of July. We will be exploring the exciting world of rock and water cycles, with hands on science projects, games, and lots of fun. What better way to learn about science? If you know a youngster who likes science and will be entering grades 4, 5, or 6 in the fall, sign them up.

Well, there it is—all the latest updates, except that Pat Stoner has retired as the Director of Environmental Education and has left the program in my care. I will do my best to carry on the great work that she did with the program and all of the children that have been a part of it over the years. On a sad note, our dear friend and a large part of the Education Program C.J. Miller has passed away. She was and will always be in spirit part of the program and will be greatly missed.

Severe Drought at BMCP by Ray Yeager

It appears that the Big Morongo Canyon Preserve and the surrounding Morongo Basin are currently in the middle of a severe drought. As of March 2013, the Preserve has recorded only 3.23 inches of rain with little chance of catching up, as very little precipitation falls during the months of April, May and June. Our last weather year, July 1, 2011, through June 30, 2012, totaled a meager 2.17 inches. Few annuals are showing themselves as would be expected.

Temperatures for the last few months have been three to four degrees cooler than average.

**NOTICE OF ELECTION FOR THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS
OF FRIENDS OF BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE**

May is the time to elect members to the Board of Friends of BMCP. Please consider if you or someone you know might be interested in a position on the board.

Board members must be members of the Friends and will serve a term of 2 years. The board meets once a month on the second Wednesday except during the summer months.

Please contact Jane Olson via email at janeelleno@aol.com by April 8. Jane will present the names to the Board at the April meeting . . . so now is the time to consider this.

Big Morongo Canyon Preserve

Gate open 7:30 a.m. to sunset
365 days a year

Wednesday Bird Walks

Every Wednesday at 7 a.m. beginning in April and continuing through the summer. Bring your binoculars and spend a couple of hours strolling the trails with birding experts. Beginning birders welcome.

Saturday Bird Walks

Saturdays (except the first Saturday of each month) at 7 a.m. in April and May. Same format as Wednesday Bird Walks.

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Editor: Donna Thomas

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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 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. 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

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The 2013 Spectacular Joshua Tree Bloom

by Ray Yeager

As I'm sure most of you have noticed, this year's Joshua tree bloom is spectacular.

Approximately 90% of the trees have bloomed. We have lived in Yucca Valley since 2001, and in 2003 we experienced a similar bloom. And in 2008, another large bloom.

I have kept weather records all the years we have lived here, and I noticed that the year

previous to the 2003 and 2008 bloom, the Morongo Basin had a serious drought, less than 2 inches fell in those years. I thought this could be a coincidence. But interestingly, last year's rain totaled 2.26 inches. That's three droughts followed by three large Joshua tree blooms.

I have precipitation records that go back to 1977 but need Joshua tree blooming records during that period. Joshua Tree National Park has not kept records about this. If anybody has such records, please let me know. 760-365-7897.



Joshua tree (*Yucca brevifolia*)