



BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

NEWSLETTER

Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve

Spring/Summer 2014

A Dearth of Birds *by Jane Olson*

On a recent January bird walk at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve, the most common remarks that morning were surprising. They were, “Where are all the birds?” and “Birds are a little ‘thin’ this morning, aren’t they?” It did seem that way for awhile. The walk tally ended up with around thirty-five species. There was a lot of speculation about the “why” of this, but no conclusions.

I wondered where the birds were the whole month of last October. My husband and I were on an escorted tour to most of what used to be called French Indochina. It was not a birding tour, but I am birding wherever we are. We were in cities in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and Hong Kong. Thanks to a window seat, I could start birding the minute the wheels touched the tarmac in Bangkok. I saw an egret in a ditch. I think it was a cattle egret. On the way to our temple tour the next day, I saw what you would expect to see in a large city—in this case, White-vented Mynas, Eurasian Sparrows, Rock Pigeons, and House Crows. Oh well, I thought. We are going to Luang Prabang in Laos next, and it is a smaller city and the hotel is next to a river. I will see more birds there.

The hotel in Luang Prabang had nice landscaping, and as we went to our room, I caught sight of birds fluttering around the eaves. The binoculars and my well-studied regional field guide came out of the luggage immediately. I found Eurasian Sparrows in abundance and the occasional Sooty-headed Bulbul. We had a free morning in our schedule the next day, so I approached the hotel manager to see if he could arrange a birding guide for me. He said two things. First, even in the forest I would see no birds. Second, there was no one to lead a bird walk because of the first

statement. As we chatted, he revealed that he is a runner and runs on trails in the forest. As late as the previous week, he had seen numerous nets set up to catch birds. The birds were destined for either the dinner table or for a cage. Laos had the least robust economy of the countries that we visited. The manager said that the birds were not necessarily for local consumption. They were being exported to other countries in the area. I did see a small flock of a species of egret on a short river trip. We were on our way to see a cave full of hundreds of dusty statues of Buddha. We were in Luang Prabang for three days, and that was it for birds.

Our next hotel was the Shangri-La in Chiang Mai, Thailand. I popped out the back door and entered a truly lovely, large garden. There were tall trees, short trees, hedges and ponds with lily pads. It looked like habitat to me. It did to some birds as well. I saw seven or eight species in the two early morning sessions of birding that I did. My favorite was a petite bird named Tickell’s Blue Flycatcher. The most numerous bird was again the Eurasian Sparrow. In a semi-rural area near Chiang Mai, we had a forty minute ride on the back of an elephant through grassy woods. Not a single bird flitted by us.

Saigon (Ho Chi Min City) was next on the itinerary. I will digress a moment. Not even the Communist tour guide remembered to call Saigon by its new name very often. Mekong is spelled Mek Ong and each syllable is pronounced as it looks.

There are never many birds in a large city, so on our free morning we walked from the hotel to the Saigon Zoo and Botanical Garden. It was an easy twenty-minute walk—except for crossing the streets. Scooter traffic is relentless. One street was particularly difficult to negotiate. We greatly amused a gallery of

men squatting by a fence on the opposite side. One gave a thumbs up when we finally made the crossing. The zoo and gardens were green and clean. There were a few birds to be seen. I liked the White-crested Laughing Thrush the best. I wrote in my journal that night that even my kneecaps were sweating. We had humid weather throughout the month.

We had a week’s cruise on a small ship on the Mek Ong. There were interesting visits to villages. Some were trading villages and consisted entirely of boats. Some traveled hundreds of miles to the floating market village to sell their products. Large squash the size of pumpkins were abundant. Being on the water, I thought there would be more birds. Wrong again. I saw the occasional pond heron. By this point in the trip my fellow travelers were reporting any birds they saw to me. The reports were few. I still saw Eurasian Sparrows in some numbers wherever we stopped. We covered five hundred miles on the Mek Ong and Tonle Sap rivers.

Cambodia calls itself “The Land of Temples.” Indeed, they were everywhere. Some were simple and some very elaborate. All were colorful. In addition to the predominating Buddhist temples, there were Christian churches, Muslim mosques and Hindu temples. And, there were Eurasian Sparrows.

For three days, we stayed in Siem Reap, Cambodia, which is famous for the ancient temples of Angkor Wat. I brought with me an ad that I had seen in one of my birding magazines for the Sam Veasna Center for Wildlife Conservation located in Siem Reap. The ad said that they had bird guides for hire. I don’t think I went to the room before stopping at the hotel desk to see what could be arranged. I expected to see more birds in Cambodia, because it is not

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Bird's Eye View . . . and more

gleaned from
Dee Zeller

Dee has been noting many changes to the Preserve's environment, some attributable to global warming and others perhaps related to warming conditions but not as directly connectable at this time.



The presence of White-winged Doves at the Preserve year-round for the last two years is one part of the climate change story. Warming conditions have allowed these doves to extend their winter range north. They even nested here last year for the first time, and not just one but two pairs. BMCP's bird checklist shows the White-winged Dove to be Rs (rare summer resident), Xw (extremely rare winter resident), and a non-nester here—not any more.

Also, says Dee, when you have trees leafing out, not just budding, in early February, you wonder.

Another notable change but of indetermi-

nate cause is the shortage of rabbits and rodents at the Preserve. One example is the wood rat (pack rat), which used to be seen even in the daytime in areas near the marsh. In this case, last summer's flood, which took out some of their long-used nests, may have been a contributing factor. Dee is often seeing coyotes headed in the direction of town and thinks they may be reduced to scavenging there due to the reduced rodent/rabbit population. Which brings up the drop in the raccoon population. Dee used to see raccoons headed to town, but not lately.

Then there is the case of the Preserve's signature bird, the Vermilion Flycatcher. Last year we only had two pairs, compared to the five pairs we usually have.

Dee says he's not trying to be Chicken Little and say the sky is falling, but he thinks a few chunks have come down.

When asked about the latest recognition of his and Betty's conservation efforts, Dee modestly says, "They haven't rescinded the award yet." He is referring to the Minerva Hoyt Award, which will be awarded to the Zellers by the Joshua Tree National Park Association to recognize their "notable achievement toward conservation of the California Desert." Dee feels honored to be among the many distinguished recipients of

this award.

As we sit on the Zellers' patio on a sunny, late-February afternoon, a visitor stops by to thank Dee for the helpful signage along the Canyon Trail and to enthusiastically tell of her just-completed hike the full length of the canyon to Desert Hot Springs.

Not only were wildflowers already blooming at the lower elevations (another sign of climate change?), but surprisingly there was surface water at various places all the way down to just short of the lower gate. It has been a number of years since that much water appeared in the canyon.

Dee explained that the water being seen now came from rain and snow that fell a number of years ago high in the mountains at Big Bear. The water travels underground for much of its way and can come to or near the surface when it reaches the impenetrable fault gouge rock of Big Morongo Canyon. Last summer BMCP experienced torrential flooding when water from storms high in the mountains to the west was funneled down Big Morongo Canyon. That rain has long since dried up, but the undercutting the flood caused probably exposed the subsurface water that earlier traveled from Big Bear.

Sounds like a good year to take that long hike down Big Morongo Canyon.

A Dearth of Birds (Continued from page 1)

as densely populated as the other countries that we visited. The first day we had a fabulous day rambling around the marvelous complex of ruins. We shared the ruins with only a few thousand other people. At least, it felt like that many. The next morning we were out the door with our breakfast boxes, meeting our guide and driver at 5:00 a.m. Both men were excellent birders, but the driver didn't speak English. We had a wonderful day in the Cambodian countryside and touring a moss-covered, tumble-down temple. I think I saw about thirty-five life birds. I was beyond happy, as you can imagine. However, the guide said that the best birding in Cambodia is in January, not October. I appreciated that we did not rush from one sighting to the next. We lingered to appreciate the bird. My favorite was a sighting of about a half dozen Great Sooty

Woodpeckers, all clutching a bare snag of a tree trunk. The "Great" part of their name is deserved. They are about twenty inches long. (Our Pileated woodpeckers are about sixteen inches.) These huge woodpeckers were alternately bobbing their heads and stretching their wings on either side of the trunk. They were doing this in unison. My guides had no idea what the purpose of this mesmerizing display was. It lasted for at least five minutes. The extensive hotel gardens gave me two more life birds. Of course there were also the now ubiquitous Eurasian Sparrows.

Our last stop in Indochina was Ha Noi. Our hotel did not have a garden, but it was by a lake. Again, no birds except for Eurasian Sparrows. Our tour of the city included visits to park-like areas surrounding the major memorial area to Ho Chi Min. A major relief was that we did not have to visit

his mausoleum to view his remains. It seems the body was off display and was being refurbished. We had an overnight trip on Ha Long Bay, which is about an hour and a half from Ha Noi. Despite what appeared to be good habitat for seabirds, I only saw Black Kites. They are a scavenger species for that area of the world.

It was good to get home and hear all the bird sounds in my front yard. Landscapes without birds seem impoverished. So, even if we don't come up with as long a list at Morongo as we have in the past, other areas of the world truly have a dearth of birds.

PS: On my trip, I came to the conclusion that Eurasian Sparrows are either the most prolific birds on the planet or they taste terrible!

Appreciating the Common

by Alicia M. Baumann

I'm a fan of Facebook, I'll admit it. It has connected me with many persons I might not have encountered without it. Recently, I've joined a Facebook group called Facebook Birders. It is an open international group of Facebook users who enjoy birding. In my NewsFeed, I receive amazingly vivid photographs of birds from around the world. Long-billed Hermits from Costa Rica, Superb Fairy Wrens from Australia, Bar-headed Geese from India, and even our own lovely Vermillion Flycatchers grace my Feed, and I can't get enough of it.

And then one day someone posts a photo of a House Sparrow. My face crinkled up, and the thought, Why would someone post this bird? blasted in my mind. A week later, again, someone posts a well-structured photo of a House Sparrow. Disgusted, I searched for the offender of this post. Of all the birds you could share, why this bird? I mean, haven't we been taught as birders to *not* like the House Sparrow? It's too aggressive. It multiplies too quickly. It takes over the nests of other birds. And did I mention IT DOESN'T BELONG HERE?

After I finally exhaled, I found that the gentleman who posted the photo was from India, and I made peace with the posting because House Sparrows are native to Eurasia. But I was still bothered that I was bothered by it. What was I missing about this bird? It was at that moment I decided to start a journey to not only accept the House Sparrow but to appreciate it.

Right off the bat I learned of some shocking news that had somehow alluded me. The House Sparrow is more closely related to the finch than our New World sparrows (like the White-crowned)! Don't believe me? Do a quick check in the back of your Sibley's (a guide to birds). House Sparrows are of the family *Passeridae*, which we often refer to as Old World sparrows. *National Geographic Complete Birds of North America* states, "Old World sparrows are not closely related to New World sparrows in the family *Emberizidae*. Instead, their closest alliance is with the family *Ploceidae*,

in which they were formerly placed." Family members of *Ploceidae* include the Weaver Finches of Sub-Saharan Africa. Wow! Did not know this! Now I am hooked. What other interesting things can I learn about the House Sparrow?

House sparrows are infamously known as being aggressive, and in truth, they are--loud and feisty! Did you know that when defending their nest male House Sparrows will only take up a fight with another male, but if the offender is a female, the female House Sparrow will take on the job? Interesting! I have observed them tussling about in the parking lots of grocery stores and restaurants, but I can't say I've ever been accosted by one. Maybe a dropped French fry or two might have been lost, but I wasn't going to pick it up anyway. Now a mockingbird, I have been physically attacked by a mockingbird defending its nest--literally grabbed the top of my head in anger. A House Sparrow is like a pea compared to the watermelon-size ego of a mockingbird! I think I can let it get away with that attribute.

As for its over-zealous breeding habits? Well, let's just say, The early bird gets the worm. Or in the case of the House Sparrow, The early bird gets to have lots of broods. I learned that the breeding season for the House Sparrow begins in February, nearly two months before most other species start nesting. When other species struggle to produce two broods, the House Sparrow is on its fourth. Mix this with the fact that it doesn't have an annual migration, and you've got yourself a whole lot of happy. Interestingly, though, the worldwide population of House Sparrows has been in steep decline for the last 30 years. In some parts of England, they have seen a 70 percent drop in population. That's significant! The tough part is scientists are without answers on why this is happening. Reasons range from pollutant-riddled cities to more efficient farming methods to the effect of increased cellular wave activity on House Sparrow eggs. I even read an article that speculated that within the next 100 years, the House Sparrow could end up on the protected species list in its native areas! This fact has sobered me up a bit in regards

to its mating habits. Of course, I don't want to encourage its growth, but it does make me appreciate its existence.

Now, of all of the behaviors that irritate birders the most about the House Sparrow, the most irritating is this: they meticulously destroy the cavity nests of native species, particularly the bluebirds and Purple Martins. Whole populations of bluebirds have moved out of areas because of the influx of House Sparrows. You can find hundreds of articles on how to discourage House Sparrows from invading bluebird boxes. But the one thing that sticks out in my mind is that researchers have found that doing so doesn't really decline the House Sparrow population, it just makes them go find another cavity in which to nest. They are resilient little buggers!

Lastly, the loudest argument against the House Sparrow is that it is not native to the U.S. It was introduced. It shouldn't count. IT DOESN'T BELONG HERE! But I'm like, so what? The Ring-necked Pheasant isn't native either, but somehow it has ended up as the state bird of South Dakota. We all LOVE the Ring-necked Pheasant, but for some reason the House Sparrow is marginalized. First introduced from England into the United States during the 1850s, the House Sparrow had a real theoretical purpose, eating insects that destroyed crops. But when this sparrow's population blazed across our country like wildfire, it lost its purpose and became our first *junk bird*. I'm being bold when I say this, but it's not a junk bird. It has been a part of this country much longer than most of our families have been. My family from the Netherlands didn't set foot in the United States until the turn of the Twentieth Century, and I'm pretty sure I consider myself an American. So how about we start letting this LBBWGJ (Little Brown, Black, White and Gray Job) off the hook?

I am glad for my little journey to understand and appreciate the House Sparrow. Now when I see them hopping around the base of my feeder, mixed in with the House Finches and White-crowned Sparrows, I can smile a bit . . . and then go shoo them away.

Student Conservation Association Cleans up the Preserve *by Donna Thomas*

A crew of enthusiastic, hard-working, energetic young people from the Student Conservation Association (SCA) were at the Preserve for a week at the end of January. The difference they made is amazing.

They focused their efforts on the .65-mile-loop Marsh Trail, cutting out vegetation three feet or shoulder-width on both sides of the boardwalk, thus clearing overgrowth and making the boardwalk a pleasant path for visitors. The SCA crew also rebuilt deteriorated seats along the boardwalk and made the boardwalk much safer by checking all and resealing loosened siderails.

They thinned vegetation in an area alongside the boardwalk where treefrogs breed, exposing once again the glimmering, slow-moving water and providing an opportunity, if you're lucky, to actually spot one of the small (3/4- to 1-inch) frogs.

The next challenge was the Kobaly Deck, which had lost its view to the overgrowth of surrounding vegetation. The pictures below tell it all—a day of hard work and visitors can now see beyond the edge of the deck to the trees and the many birds they harbor.

Greg Hill of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) says that the BLM has taken on this SCA crew for a six-month program to work mostly in wilderness areas and on conservation lands throughout California.

The SCA youth receive a small stipend for their work. For this they work in often remote areas, camping under primitive condi-



SCA crew members Jennifer, Leslie, Leah, and Matt and BLM intern Julie wrap up a day of work at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve

tions, and may go for weeks without even a shower! Crew member Jennifer, when asked how they deal with this shower issue, responds with good humor, "We are all very comfortable with each other."

SCA crew supervisor Leah is enthusiastic about the SCA and tells the wonderful story of its founding. In 1957, 24-year-old Liz Putnam was writing her senior thesis at Vassar College, and in it she put forth her vision for an organization that would enlist student volunteers to assist with the upkeep of U.S. national parks and public spaces. Putnam went on to fulfill this vision.

More than 57 years and 70,000 participants later, an SCA crew shows up at BMCP and makes a difference in our world here at the Preserve. We are so grateful.



PROBLEM: Narrowleaf willow has engulfed the Kobaly Deck, blocking the view of birds and other wildlife



SOLUTION: SCA workers make quick work of opening up the Kobaly Deck view.

Big Morongo Canyon Preserve

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

Wednesday Bird Walks

Every Wednesday at 8 a.m. in March and 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

Same format as Wednesday Bird Walks.

March 15 at 8 a.m.

April 19 at 7 a.m.

May 17 at 7 a.m.

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NEWSLETTER

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Spring/Summer 2014

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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 \$ 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, 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



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BMCP 3-Year Drought

by Ray Yeager

Continued severe drought is the major story at the Big Morongo Canyon Preserve. Total rainfall from July 2013 through February 2014 is 1.24 inches. The historical average through the same time period is 7.02 inches. And this is the third year of below average rainfall, which has never happened in seventy years of Morongo Valley rainfall records.

Lack of snowfall in the nearby San Bernardino Mountains that feeds the Preserves's ground-water is also a big concern.

Big Morongo Canyon Preserve Spring Festival

Conservation-Education-Recreation-Fun

Saturday, March 22

9 a.m. - 2 p.m.

- Great fun & tips for a green lifestyle
- Come and enjoy the day with nature
- See some live animals that live in our desert
- Kids' activities
- Many interesting, informative & fun booths

Guided Walks

8:00 a.m. — Bird Walk

9:15 a.m. — Plant & Nature Walk