



# BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

## NEWSLETTER

*Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve*

Winter 2012

### **OHV Ride Through Big Morongo Canyon—Driver Cited**

On November 7, an off-highway vehicle (OHV) driver illegally drove his quad for miles through Big Morongo Canyon and through the marsh area of the Preserve.

It was late afternoon when neighbors, who had been walking the trails, came to Dee to report a driver with his quad stuck in the open water of the marsh along the west section of the Mesquite Trail. Dee called BLM Dispatch, who dispatched a law enforcement ranger to the Preserve.



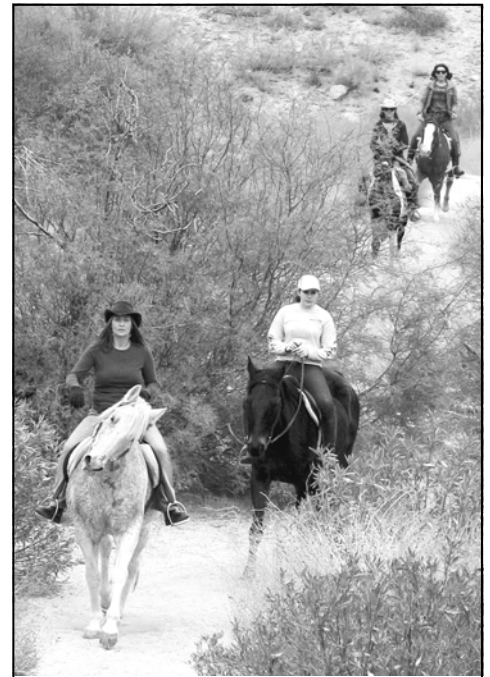
Trail sign lays flattened where OHV driver tore through the marsh

When the BLM ranger arrived at the Preserve, it was too dark to investigate the trails and canyon area where the OHV driver had driven his quad. The ranger went to see the neighbors who had reported the incident, from whom he learned about a pickup truck that had been parked alongside Covington Park. The neighbors had seen two men get out of the truck and run back towards the Preserve, and they thought perhaps the men were going to help the OHV driver extricate his quad from the mud in the marsh. The neighbors gave the ranger the truck's license number.

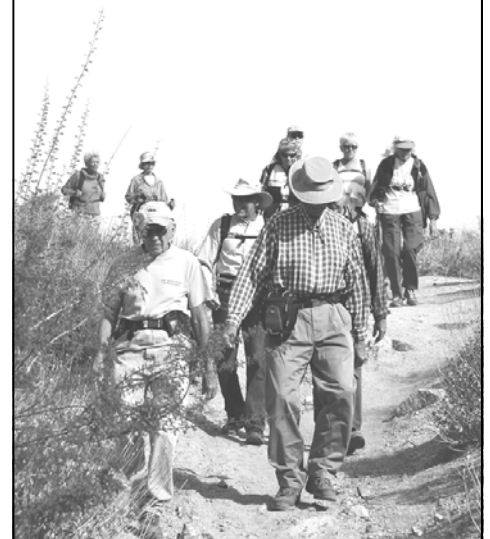
The next day the BLM ranger went to the address in Desert Hot Spring that he obtained from the pickup truck license records. There he found the truck, the quad, and the driver. The OHV driver admitted to driving his quad through the Preserve, and he was issued a citation to appear in federal court.

The driver had entered Big Morongo Canyon somewhere in the lower canyon near Desert Hot Springs, although not at the heavy metal gate entrance. The BLM ranger told Dee it was possible that the driver had traveled cross-country from the quarry in lower Little Morongo Canyon to enter Big Morongo Canyon. He had driven for miles up the canyon, with excursions up the hills on the canyon sides. He had attempted to go up out of the canyon at the West Canyon Trail, but evidently finding that too difficult, he dismantled the split-rail horse fence there and came further up the canyon and onto the Mesquite Trail. He knocked down large rocks on the cliff face along the trail attempting to get his quad past. Then, driving into the marsh, he became stuck in the mud, where his quad leaked oil into the open water. After extricating his quad, he continued through the marsh and out of the Preserve through Covington Park. During his illegal ride, he damaged three fences and part of the boardwalk, toppled a trail sign, made the Mesquite Trail unsafe due to loosening of rocks, released toxic oil into the marsh, and did untold damage to vegetation and terrain. BLM estimates that repairs will cost over \$3000.

Many thanks go to the BLM for taking swift action on this OHV incursion, action which should help to dissuade further illegal activity in Big Morongo Canyon.



Horseback riders and hikers are among the many who enjoy Big Morongo Canyon



**BIG  
MORONGO  
BIRDERS**



**FIELD  
TRIPS**

**Jan. 6 — Salton Sea**

**Feb. 3 — Dos Palmas**

**Mar. 2 — Pipes Canyon,  
lunch at Pappy  
& Harriet's**

Contact the Preserve for information or to be added to email distribution for announcements about these trips.

**BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE**

**NEWSLETTER**

Editor: Donna Thomas

**Winter 2012**

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

*gleaned from  
Dee Zeller*

You've never seen it at BMCP (nor has Dee), yet it is here. You've also not seen signs of it by way of its scat, because it deposits its scat below ground in burrows. It has a flattish body, long hair, and long, shovel-like claws. When all of its five toes show, its track can resemble a small human hand, thus similar in this aspect to a common Preserve resident, the raccoon.



Have you guessed the identity of this mystery animal? Nocturnal and previously unseen at BMCP, an American badger shocked and delighted Kurt Leuschner and his College of the Desert class this fall when they came upon one standing in the middle of the boardwalk at midday. The badger took a few steps toward the group, before turning and retreating under the boardwalk.

Another fall surprise was the nesting Lesser Goldfinch seen with two young still in the nest on October 19. These young were later successful in fledging, unlike the late fall Lesser Goldfinch hatchlings that didn't survive to fledge last fall.

Dee can give first-hand testimony to the aggressiveness of some bees at the Preserve, which the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) was forced to remove this fall in order to keep the Preserve open while protecting public safety. Dee was leading a group of about 10 children along the boardwalk and had cautioned the children to walk quietly by an area where bees were present and to not stop or linger in this section. Dee went first and received four bee stings; the bees seem to have landed below his hat rim where perhaps they felt trapped and thus stung him. The children were unharmed.

The BLM hired a professional service to spray the five bee colonies that were near paths, four colonies nesting in trees and

one under the boardwalk. Cement and netting were also added in some places to keep the bees from returning to the same cavities.

Fall birding has been thin. The last Saturday bird walk of November produced under 40 species, although a soaring Golden Eagle helped to offset the paucity of birds. Warblers, in particular, were seen in reduced numbers during fall migration. The White-breasted Nuthatch, however, has been more numerous, with up to three at a time being seen. A few Mountain Chickadees have shown up, in contrast to last year when none were seen. Previous to last year, these chickadees had bred at the Preserve for a number of years.

Driving into the Preserve on the last Sunday in November, the cottonwood trees sparkle brilliantly in their fall golden color, a unique display in the Southern California desert.

While sitting on the Zeller patio on this crisp, clear Sunday, one of "our" Red-tailed Hawks sails past and heads to the tall trees across the road. This particular Red-tailed, along with its mate, has been delighting birders here for five years now. What is unique about this pair is their tameness. They were probably captives when young, thus explaining their lack of fear of humans. Birders laughed the first two years the pair were seen because they spent their time building nests at the wrong time of the year. However they eventually got it right, and for three years now, this couple has raised four young each year, alternating nesting sites between Covington Park and the large cottonwood tree by the Education Center.

Dee and Betty will be attending a session of the Western Governor's Association (WGA) 2011 Winter Meeting. This session will be held locally in the Yucca Valley Community Center on December 7 from 10:30 a.m. until noon. Several local organizations concerned about work by the WGA and federal agencies to develop utility-scale projects on public lands (BLM lands like BMCP) will also be in attendance, and this session is open to the public for registration and attendance.

## The 2010-2011 Bird Walk

**Season** *by Margaret Hoggan*

Between October 2010 and September 2011, 133 species of birds were seen on the Big Morongo Canyon Preserve bird walks. Some of the species seen were year-around residents, while others were seasonal residents here only part of the year. Some were migrants passing through on their way between winter and summer residences, and a few were vagrant species not normally found in our area.

An interesting vagrant that showed up on October 9, 2010, was a Dickcissel. This little bird with yellow breast and eyebrows does not normally venture west of the Texas-New Mexico border, so there was a lot of head scratching and hesitation when our local birders were called upon to identify it. It had not previously been recorded on the Preserve's bird list.

Some birds that are resident in Southern California are still not often seen at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve, because it is not their preferred habitat. Water birds, for

example, are not keen on the desert. However they are still seen occasionally traveling through. This past season, birders on the Preserve's bird walks spotted a Wilson's Snipe in March 2011 and a Common Loon in April 2011. (Neither is on our bird list.)

Eleven different species of flycatchers showed up on the bird walks—2 year-around residents, 5 seasonal residents, and 4 migrants. Among the seasonal residents was the perennial favorite, our brilliantly beautiful Vermilion Flycatcher, who probably attracts more visitors to Morongo Valley than any other resident. They were seen on walks during 9 months of the 12-month season.

Warblers are a personal favorite of mine among the bird families. These small, hyperactive, colorful birds are in large part just migrants here—6 of the 12 species ordinarily seen. This year seemed to be rather slow, warbler wise, and their numbers appeared to be low. Nevertheless 10 of our usual warbler species did show up on Preserve bird walks, and an additional species normally not found in

our area, the Northern Waterthrush, also turned up in November 2010.

The annual Christmas Bird Count (CBC) (this year's is coming soon, on December 17) sometimes turns up birds not seen the rest of the season, since our relatively short bird walks (2 to 3 hours) do not take us into the more distant areas of the Preserve. On the December 2010 CBC, the only black-tailed gnatcatcher of the season was found in an area not normally reached on regular bird walks. The 2010 CBC also turned up the Preserve's only Golden-crowned Sparrow of the year due to more intensive coverage in areas normally part of the bird walks.

If you are interested in seeing what birds have been found at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve over the years, take a look at our bird checklist. It shows what species have been recorded, whether they are common or rare here, whether each bird is a resident or migrant, and when you are likely to see it. And if you want to see them in person, come join our bird walks and CBC.

## BMCP's Fall Weather *by Ray Yeager*

September, October, and November at the Big Morongo Canyon Preserve have been relatively normal in regards to temperature. November is a transition month, as daytime highs are now generally in the 60s with a few 50s thrown in, and morning temperatures in the 30s are now more common.

As for rainfall, September recorded only 0.03 inch, October had no rain, and three weeks into November, 0.36 inch has been recorded for that month—all a bit under the normal. The National Weather Service's early prediction for Southern California is for a below normal wet season (La Nina), as the waters of the Pacific are at this time colder than normal. Interestingly, they predicted the same conditions last year, and the Preserve recorded 10.41 inches, well above the average of 8.64 inches. Stay tuned.

## Christmas Bird Count Saturday, December 17

BMCP Parking Lot at 7:30 a.m.

**ALL ARE WELCOME**

Teams will be formed to bird a variety of habitats within a 15-mile radius of the Preserve. At 4 p.m. we will gather to tally data and enjoy refreshments.

It isn't necessary to be an expert birder. Each team will have an experienced birder leading, and help is needed to spot birds and record data. So come join us, see some interesting birds, and help find out what is what with our feathered friends.

Bring binoculars, good walking shoes, layers of clothing suitable for changeable weather, and a sack lunch and water.

A \$5.00 fee enables Audubon to process the data.

**Call BMCP at (760) 363-7190 if you have questions.**

## Nature's Noise *by Jane Olson*

One of the pleasant aspects of a walk at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve is the variety of sounds that accompany your walk. There may be the sound of air passing through the cottonwoods. A lizard may rustle the leaves on the ground. Bees buzz past. Upon occasion, in a few places there is the sound of water passing over obstacles in the stream bed. Almost always we hear the sound of birds singing or calling. Of all of nature's noise, the bird sounds fascinate us the most.

Birdwatchers are particularly aware of bird songs and calls. Bird sounds can be appreciated for their beauty and complexity without having to attach any significance to that sound, but those sounds can be very helpful in identifying species. Sometimes the bird's calls are the best way to distinguish one bird from another one of a similar species. Birders get clues to the state of the bird from its vocalizations. Is it in a mating mode or a defensive mode? Is it alarmed? Or is it just keeping in touch with other members of its flock? Well, anyway, that is what humans think we know about what birds are saying to each other.

Bird sounds and how birds create those sounds have produced whole books. Believe it or not, how birds vocalize can be compelling reading. Birds have an organ unique to their class, Aves, called a syrinx. Syrinxes are as unique to birds as their feathers are. The most complex kind of voice box belongs to the group of birds commonly referred to as songbirds. This category includes about half of the world's species. Exactly how the syrinx functions is hard to study since the organ is more or less buried in the middle of the tiny bird. Dissection has revealed a lot. The organ is at the end of the trachea just before it attaches to the bronchial tubes that attach to the lungs. Birds with the most muscles on the syrinx produce the most complex

songs. Flexible membranes inside the organ allow the muscles to change the shape of the syrinx, which allows the production of some pretty awesome notes. Some birds have such a fancy voice box that they can sing a duet with themselves!

Researchers say that bird song helps a bird manage its social environment. Through song, birds interact with and influence other birds. Song is defined as a loud vocalization delivered from an exposed perch. Even stealthy birds that are



usually buried in the brush can be observed in this unusual location. Birds will tend to change their posture to upright even if that is not usual for them. Tail bobbing and wing flicking behaviors are abandoned when a bird is singing from a perch. This form of bird noise is part of the domino effect of the flush of spring hormones that propel a bird into the reproductive mode. Song control centers in the brain swell to their breeding season proportions. Singing rate increases in tempo with the increase in hormones. The pre-nesting singing seems to be about establishing a territory and attracting a mate. It is thought that a male that sings loudly and persistently advertises that he can hold a quality territory, that he is in good health, and that he belongs to a specific species. Some species add a few fancy seasonal feathers or offer a tasty morsel or a useful nest twig, and the lady birds just line up!

The repertoire of songs varies greatly among songbird species. Some, like the chickadee are simple. They have one song in their play book. A mockingbird may learn a couple of hundred songs. Birds that do not hold territories for nesting season, like Cedar Waxwings and crows, don't sing at all. That is not to say that they do not have other categories of vocalization. The duration of singing can be astounding. A study of Song Sparrows counted an average of 1,500 songs sung a day. Songs last between four and ten seconds for this species. A large collection of songs implies an intense learning process that involves listening, memorizing, and practicing. Young birds in the nest learn from their fathers and, sometime later, from their male neighbors. A fledgling bird like a mocking bird may be heard to whisper-practice. If you are standing practically in the bush with the bird, you can barely hear him practicing. He may take a lifetime to learn his two hundred songs. A Marsh Wren learns one hundred and fifty. An American Robin learns seventy.

Songbirds have many more vocalizations than just their songs. There is a whole catalog of sounds that serve to communicate with others of their species. The other calls may be used even during the reproductive season. Females use these calls also. We can never be certain what birds hear and to what they are responding. When attempting to interpret the meaning of bird sounds, it is important to try to judge them in the context of place and behavior.

We know that the sounds that surround us while we walk at Big Morongo are as much a part of the landscape as the geology of the rocks, the diversity of the plants, or the assortment of animals. We don't really need to interpret any of it. Just enjoy and appreciate it.

## 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 birding experts. Beginning birders welcome.

### Saturday Bird Walks

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

## Upcoming Events

- Dec. 17, Sat. (7:30 a.m.-late afternoon) - Christmas Bird Count. See page 3.
- Jan. 6, Fri. - Big Morongo Birders Field Trip. To Salton Sea. Call Preserve for details.
- Jan 17, Tues. (9:00 a.m.-noon) - Docent/Volunteer Meeting. Topic: Busy Bees About; speaker Stephanie Ritter.
- Jan. 21, Sat. (10:00 a.m.-noon) - Junior Docent Training.
- Feb. 3, Fri. - Big Morongo Birders Field Trip. To Dos Palmas. Call Preserve for details.
- Feb. 18, Sat. (10:00 a.m.-noon) - Junior Docent Training.
- Feb. 21, Tues. (9:00 a.m.-noon) - Docent/Volunteer Meeting. Topic: New Information on Earthquakes; speaker Ray Yeager.
- Mar. 2, Fri. - Big Morongo Birders Field Trip. To Pipes Canyon, followed by lunch at Pappy & Harriet's. Call Preserve for details.
- Mar. 17, Sat. (10:00 a.m.-noon) - Junior Docent Training.
- Mar. 20, Tues. (9:00 a.m.-noon) - Docent/Volunteer Meeting. Topic: Plants; speaker Ann Garry
- Mar. 31, Sat. - Morongo Valley Spring Festival. BMCP and the Morongo Valley Chamber of Commerce present a spring festival/Earth Day event. With multiple events located at both Covington Park and the Preserve, there will be something to interest everyone: family fun activities, children's games, food, entertainment, workshops, bird walks, hikes, speakers, exhibitor tables, and more.



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



*Please share your newsletter with friends.*

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## **BMCP Newsletter: Snail Mail or Email?**

This coming March, readers of the BMCP Newsletter will have the option to read their newsletter digitally on the Internet rather than receive a printed copy in the mail.

Choosing a digital newsletter is one way you can go green by reducing paper waste. This option also saves printing and mailing costs, money the Friends of BMCP can well use for advancing BMCP programs and educational opportunities.

It's your choice. If you enjoy receiving a newsletter you can read while scrunched up or stretched out in your favorite relaxing position and can take along as reading material wherever you go, just do nothing and you will continue to receive your copy in the mail.

However, if you would like to read the newsletter only digitally on the Internet, please contact the Preserve to confirm this choice. We will need your email address or verification that the email address we already have is current. With each issue of the newsletter, we will send you an email notification with a link to the newsletter on the BMCP website, [bigmorongo.org](http://bigmorongo.org), where you can read it and print a copy if desired.

This Winter 2012 issue of the newsletter is already available on the BMCP website, so you can try out how comfortable you may be with choosing the digital option.

Our dedicated volunteers shown in the photo get together for a newsletter mailing party with every issue. Thanks to their efforts



BMCP volunteers Richard and Phyllis Schwartz and Shirley and Ray Yeager enjoy a newsletter mailing "party"

folding and adding mail seals, labels, and stamps, close to 400 Friends members and Preserve enthusiasts have been receiving mailed newsletters triannually. They are happy to continue mailing your newsletter if you so choose, but if you decide to go digital, not to worry, they will still, even with a reduced workload, celebrate completion of their mailing task with a delicious desert.

By the way, if you are receiving the BMCP Newsletter and are not yet a Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve member or have let your annual membership lapse, we hope you will use the membership form on page 5 to join the Friends and support our very special Preserve.

# Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve

# 2010/2011 Annual Report

It has been another year of economic stresses for most of us. However, through your generosity and grants from the BLM and others, the Friends' activities and responsibilities remain healthy and funded.

Over the past decade, our preserve's popularity and notoriety have grown. This last year, our own Dee and Betty Zeller were honored in Washington as winners of the 2011 BLM "Making a Difference" National Volunteer Award.



Dee and Betty Zeller (center) with BLM Deputy Director Mike Pool and California BLM Deputy State Director Jim Scrivner

To all of us who know and work with Dee and Betty, this comes as no surprise. We are so fortunate to have their knowledge, skills, and tireless passions to guide us and remind us all of the importance of volunteering when it comes to "making a difference." Thank you Dee and Betty!

David S. Miller  
President, Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve

Our community has embraced BMCP as its own, and we all need to watch over our preserve. This last year we had several damaging off-highway-vehicle (OHV) intrusions. One case is currently being prosecuted. The law will help as much as possible, but it's all of us that make the difference. Not everyone can appreciate the delicate balance and fragile nature of this special preserve; if they did, we would not have issues like these. Keep watching, and report any thoughtless and irresponsible behaviors to Dee or Betty at the Preserve.

For the first time in the history of our preserve, we have had to manage wildlife. Bees swarming and building hives too close to our boardwalk and trails have presented a problem for hikers. As a result, the BLM experts have identified and removed those hives too close to our hikers. I want you all to know what a disturbing and serious decision this was for the Friends Board of Directors. One of our prime objectives here is to protect the wildlife and their habitat; that means all the wildlife—even bees. While this was a necessary action, the BLM specialists were able to remove the threat without lasting damage to the environment, and the bees are welcome to the rest of the 30,000 acres without disturbance.

We are a bit closer to our national monument status. Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar endorsed the BLM's recommendations for public lands protection. Among those recommendations is the proposal for our Sand to Snow National Monument, which will include our preserve. This proposal will be in the news now, so your voices of support will be more important than ever.

Thank you all for another year of safe wildlife habitat, rich bird watching, strong youth education, and countless hours of enjoyment for us all.



*Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve — Board of Directors*  
Patricia Stoner • Michael Smiley • David Miller • Patrick Casey • CJ Miller • Jane Olson  
Jane Mootz • Thomas Haworth • David Novick

# BMCP 2010/2011

