



# BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

## NEWSLETTER

*Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve*

Winter 2013

### Checking Off the Birds *by Jane Olson*

There are the probabilities and then there are the possibilities. It is the latter that keeps people coming to the bird walks at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve week after week. There are a number of birds that are seen here year round and appear nearly every week. Those are the probabilities. The possibilities are much less frequently seen.

If you are a new birder, you may have difficulty knowing into which category the bird you are viewing falls. One clue is the level of excitement exhibited by the other birders around you. To check for yourself the status of the bird at issue, look at the Birds at Big Morongo Canyon checklist. Your own copy waits for you at the kiosk in the parking lot.

The Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve publish a checklist of all of the birds that have occurred at the Preserve. It says right on the front that there have been 254 different bird species spotted here. Of course, there may be others added since the publishing date. Now find the bird in question, say a Western Scrub Jay. It is to be found under the family heading of Jays & Crows. Then you notice that across from the name is printed Fy\*. What could that possibly mean? The explanation is on the inside cover. It is a Fairly common, year round resident that nests (\*) here. It is definitely a probability kind of bird.

Now the group gets really animated and is talking and pointing (poor birding etiquette, incidentally) at a bird clinging to a tree trunk. It looks like a woodpecker, but the leader is talking about a Yellow-

shafted Flicker. This bird is found on the checklist under the Woodpecker family and under Northern Flicker. The Yellow-shafted is a form of Northern Flicker. The symbols, Xt, tell you that it is very rarely (X) found here and is transient. A birding checklist can tell a lot about a bird from its name and a few symbols.

Perhaps the most puzzling category of bird on the checklist is that of "transient." Checklists from other places may use "accidental" or "vagrant." That last term is sometimes pejorative when applied to people. However, bird vagrants are very popular among bird watchers. Birders travel from great distances to see them and "tick" them off their life lists. One wonders, what made that bird a vagrant in the first place? Research comes up with several explanations. Harsh weather can literally blow the bird to a new place far from its destination. Some birds have defective genetic wiring in their inherited migration maps. These accidentals are usually juveniles on their first migration. Sometimes individuals are pushing the limits of their dispersal instincts. Recently, more and more species have records of arrivals and of departures from their breeding grounds earlier than in the past and going farther north or south as well. It is thought that this may be related to climate change. As the "vagrant" repeats visits to a site more frequently, that species' status may shift from being extremely rare to rare to uncommon. If the species colonizes in the area it may even become common. Using checklists is valuable in documenting this shift from possibility to probability.

Another reason that a bird species may be in the "transient" category is that its visits don't occur every year and are related to the availability of its favorite food. These birds are known as an "irruptive" migratory species. Cedar Waxwings are not seen at Big Morongo every year. Their annual movements are directed at finding their preferred food of berries and other fruits. Cedar Waxwings are only seen in the years that the plants that they feed on have produced a good crop in our area.

Other birds on our checklist that are listed as extremely rare at BMCP are some of the jays: Steller's and Pinyon Jays and Clark's Nutcracker. The Mountain Chickadee is considered rare to uncommon here as well. These species practice "elevational" migration. When food becomes scarce at their accustomed elevations, they simply head down the mountain on a quest for food. On the years that food in the mountains is abundant and the weather is not too harsh, we don't see these birds at the Preserve.

So, the mysteries of migration explain the intermittent presence of most of our "transients" that so enliven our bird walks. You can use Big Morongo's checklist of birds to find the birds in this category. No matter why or when the birds appear, enjoy the probabilities and celebrate the possibilities.

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

*gleaned from*  
Dee Zeller

It's as if a passing rainbow emptied its proverbial pot directly over the Preserve. Just driving down the lane into the Preserve on a late November morning is magical, with golden cottonwood leaves shimmering in the slightest breeze.



Sitting on the Zeller patio among all this splendor, Dee recounts that it has been a good morning, with Mountain Chickadee, White-breasted Nuthatch, and Oak Titmouse among the birds visiting the Preserve feeders and water dishes.

However, only 36 bird species were seen on the previous day's bird walk, and this low number has been typical lately. Fall migration was almost non-existent, with only an occasional odd warbler. Could changing climatic conditions be responsible for this drop-off in migration activity? Dee doesn't have a theory at this point.

The mid-November appearance of a Black and White Warbler was a highlight for birders in this unusually lackluster season. This striking Eastern bird is rarely seen at BMCP, plus for a migrating bird, it showed up late. Black and White Warblers have the Brown Creeper-like habit of working up and down a tree trunk rather than gleaning insects from branches as do its warbler relatives.



Black and White Warbler

A few other fall birding highlights were the White-throated Sparrow that showed up in October and the late November presence of a Red-breasted Nuthatch, a species that usually stays in the local mountains year round.

White-crowned Sparrows have arrived at the Preserve for the winter, but if you really want to see these birds in large numbers, stroll by the yards of a couple of the Preserve's neighbors. These neighbors spread seed on the ground, attracting this ground feeding bird.

Bird numbers may be down, but not the number of human visitors. Dee anticipates that the visitor count will easily top 65,000 this year.

Delighting visitors, often as they drive in or out of the Preserve, are the many southern (blacktail) mule deer that are frequenting the feeder area water dishes. Dee has seen as many as 7 or 8 at a time. A group of does comes to the water often, and a male with a large rack and also a young "spike" male have been seen.

This fall Dee, as well as a number of others, spotted a rarely seen common gray fox, its black tail tip distinguishing it from the red fox, which has a white tail tip (the only canine in North America with a white tail tip) and which doesn't occur at the Preserve. That being said, Dee did see a red fox here a number of years ago, and the story (not verified) he heard at the time was that red foxes had either escaped or been let loose from a research facility in the San Bernardino Mountains. Red foxes do occur elsewhere in California, having been introduced as part of the fur trade.

One visitor to spot the grey fox was James Kenna, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) California State Director. Dee was giving Kenna a tour of the Preserve when they saw the fox half way down the hill below the Yucca Ridge rail fence. When Dee and Betty first came to BMCP, Kenna was the then BLM Palm Springs Field Office Manager and proved to be a good friend of the Preserve. Kenna hadn't been to the Preserve since the 2005 fire, and while walking the Mesquite Trail below the Yucca Ridge, fondly remembered



Southern Mule Deer (Blacktail)

the mesquite "tunnel" that had been there before it was destroyed by the fire.

Another recent visitor was John Kalish, the current BLM Palm Springs Field Office Manager. Kalish and Dee discussed the Preserve's current needs, including the need to drag out the years of tree and brush trimmings that have been piled up alongside the Marsh Trail. This will be done in a manner that reduces the fire hazard created by these trimmings but without reducing habitat.

Speaking of trail maintenance, a big thanks go to all who in September participated in National Public Lands Day and cleaned up the heavily overgrown Mesquite Trail. Special thanks to Seth Shteir for obtaining a grant to support the event, to the Marines and BLM staff who contributed their time, to Ruth Nolan, who brought her Copper Mountain College poetry class students to help with the work and who conducted a poetry workshop in the afternoon for all participants, and to Meg Foley who rounded up several hard working young people to support the effort.

A Morning With a Tortoise *by Donna Thomas*

What does a desert tortoise do on a pleasant fall morning—drink water, urinate, drink more water, investigate a human, meander uphill, munching occasionally on dry invasive grasses, plow through bushes that are in its path, dig a day burrow, rest. At least that is what one tortoise, a large female I have named Old Girl, did on 9/11 of 2010, a routine this archaic creature has likely been following since long before the original “9/11.”

Old Girl is a wild tortoise that has lived her 30-or-so-year life at the fringes of human habitation and seemingly has had only safe, friendly encounters with humans—she has no fear of people. No one has ever used her for target practice, cut off her head, or removed her from her homeland, as some humans are want to do with this unique desert animal.

This tortoise is Old Girl rather than Old Boy because the gular scute under her throat does not project far as would that of a male of her age, who uses this projection to flip other males during territorial disputes. Other indications that she is a female include the lack of jowls (large glands on the side of the face of males) and a short tail that doesn't seem obvious viewing her from the side or rear. If I were to turn her over (which I would never do), I would see that her underside is flat, not like a male, who has a concave dorsum to aid in mounting a female during mating.

The first time I spotted Old Girl was when I purchased the 5 acres on which I built my house. She was in a burrow alongside the dirt driveway that led to a long-abandoned cabin. I am fortunate to spot Old Girl at least once most years, usually at one of the water dishes I provide for the wildlife. And, it is not unusual to see her urinate either while she is drinking or as she walks away from the water dish. Tortoises naturally do this to release the uric acid that has built up in the water they have retained in their bladder for months in order to not lose moisture from their body, a technique that enables them to live in a dry desert environment.

This year I watched Old Girl drink for at least ten minutes without lifting her head from the water dish. Then, still standing with forefeet in the dish, she took a momentary break from drinking and urinated what seemed to be at least a cupful of watery liquid mixed with a bit of more solid material (perhaps the uric acid crystals). Then it was back to several more shorter drinks before turning to walk off into the desert.

Camera in hand, I followed her for the next hour as she traveled uphill. She stopped a few times to nibble on some small item she found on the ground or eat a piece of dry plant. Though the dried material didn't look very appealing, tortoises get most of their nutrition in the fall when they eat dried desert plants in which the nutrition is more condensed; their spring diet of flowers and fresh plant growth provides them the moisture they need but does little to provide body bulk—they actually lose bulk in spring and depend on dried plant material in the fall to add the bulk they need to sustain them through winter hibernation.

The day was heating up, so after traveling no more than a few hundred yards, she in short order dug a day burrow under a small shrub where she could while away the day in the cool earth, perhaps enjoying dreams of her recent ingestion of cool, refreshing water.

The year 2010 was a good year for the tortoises in my area, with a neighbor even spotting tiny, about 1-1/2 inch, first-year juveniles. Must be Old Girl's progeny, as she is the only female tortoise in the area.

Last year, 2011, Old Girl was out and about enjoying the spring, but I didn't see her this spring or fall. Not to worry, this is probably not the first drought year in her long life that she has opted to stay in her burrow. With wildflower and perennial growth scarce this last spring and with no significant summer rains in this area, she, as all tortoises, can be perfectly fine putting off activity for a year.



Ancient beauty—Old Girl the desert tortoise



Old Girl out for a stroll



Old Girl the rock climber—no problem



Oh no Old Girl! Those are nonnative grasses—not much nutrition there.

## Fall & Winter Birding in Big Morongo Canyon Preserve

by Margaret Hoggan

As fall progresses, our summer resident birds leave us, and we begin to see the arrival of our winter residents. One is the White-crowned Sparrow. The first few usually arrive within a few days of the fall equinox. In a few weeks, they have become our most numerous species of bird, generally leading all others at the time of our Christmas Bird Count.

These little (7 inches) gray-brown birds with white-and-black-striped heads and yellow-orange beaks sing cheerfully throughout the drab days of winter, when many birds go silent. The White-crowned is found throughout a large part of North America, and there are several subspecies with minor differences in appearance.

The related White-throated Sparrow looks very similar to our White-crowned Sparrow and is common in the eastern United States in winter, but rare here. If you see a bird that looks like a White-

crowned but has a dark bill (the White-crowned's is yellow-orange), a yellow spot before the eye, and a really white (not just pale) throat, you are seeing a White-throated Sparrow. One was seen on a recent Preserve bird walk at Fisher Point, across from Covington Park.

Another relative is the Golden-crowned Sparrow. It has gold and black on the head, rather than black and white, and a dark bill. It prefers a wetter climate and is much more common along the Southern California coast, but occasionally appears at Morongo, usually with a flock of White-crowned relatives.

The Harris's Sparrow winters in a small area in the central United States and is rare here, but occasionally one winters with us. It has no head stripes, a black crown, face and throat, and a pink bill. So when you see a flock of birds that appear to be all White-crowns, take a closer look. These rare White-crowned relatives tend to hang out with their cousins when visiting our area.

Another wintering bird in our area is the Red-breasted Sapsucker. Unlike the White-

crowned Sparrow, this black and white woodpecker with a bright red head and breast is present only in small numbers. One has been seen on recent Preserve bird walks, visiting a favorite tree in Covington Park. You can see lines of holes on the tree trunk that this bird has bored to collect sap to eat.

One bird you are unlikely to see at the Preserve's bird walks is the Scott's Oriole. Most orioles have left the area to winter south of the United States. However in the slightly higher areas of Morongo Valley, a few miles east of our Preserve, some will usually be found wintering during our Christmas Bird Count (CBC). Last year we recorded 22 Scott's Orioles, the highest number recorded on a California CBC in some twenty years, and the highest number wintering anywhere in the United States last year.

This year's Christmas Bird Count at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve will be held on Saturday, December 15, 2012. Eight teams of birders will count all birds within a 15-mile diameter, circular area centering on the Preserve. Meet us at the Preserve parking lot at 7:30 a.m. if you want to participate, and see what birds have chosen to winter with us this year.



White-crowned Sparrow

**BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE**

NEWSLETTER

Editor: Donna Thomas

Winter 2013

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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 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. 15, Sat. (7:30 a.m.-late afternoon) - **Christmas Bird Count**. See page 6.
- Jan 15, Tues. (9:00 a.m.-noon) - **Docent/Volunteer Meeting**. Call for information.
- Jan. 19, Sat. (10:00 a.m.-noon) - **Junior Docent Training**.
- Feb. 16, Sat. (10:00 a.m.-noon) - **Junior Docent Training**.
- Feb. 19, Tues. (9:00 a.m.-noon) - **Docent/Volunteer Meeting**. Call for information.
- Mar. 16, Sat. (10:00 a.m.-noon) - **Junior Docent Training**.
- Mar. 19, Tues. (9:00 a.m.-noon) - **Docent/Volunteer Meeting**. Call for information.
- Mar. 23, Sat. (9:00 a.m.-4 p.m.) - **Native American Plant Uses Class**.\*
- Mar. 30, Sat. - **Spring Festival**. There will be something to interest everyone at this annual event: family fun activities, entertainment, bird walks, hikes, exhibitor tables, and more.

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



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.

# BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE



## NEWSLETTER

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

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### **Fall Weather** *by Ray Yeager*

Fall temperatures at the Big Morongo Canyon Preserve have been relatively mild. The October average high was 84°F and the average low was 44°F. By comparison, historical averages were 82 and 43 degrees, respectively. The first half of November average high was 73°F and the average low was 39°F. By comparison, historical averages were 72 and 39 degrees, respectively. These historical records were established using data from our own station, which was installed in 2006. The official climatological record, which was established from three different locations in Morongo Valley and which goes back to 1949 with a few years missing, shows average temperatures a few degrees warmer than those recorded at our station at the Preserve.

We did record 0.40 inch of rain in September, but October was dry and so far in November only 0.09 inch has been recorded. NOAA is currently predicting a neutral to weak El Nino condition for the Pacific Coast, meaning average rainfall conditions could prevail, which would be acceptable since last year's total was only 2.21 inches.

Here is an interesting weather statistic. Precipitation monitoring satellites have now established that the average rainfall for the earth is about 29 inches a year. That seems like a lot of rain, but living here in a Mediterranean climate where Los Angeles averages 15 inches and our deserts less than 7 to 4 inches can be deceptive. The tropics average around 80 inches of rainfall each year.

### **Christmas Bird Count Saturday, December 15**

BMCP Parking Lot at 7:30 a.m.

#### **ALL ARE WELCOME**

Teams will be formed to bird a variety of habitats within a 7.5-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.

Audubon has announced that this year participation is free—no \$5 fee as in previous years. Also new this year, Audubon will move to an online delivery of the summary results of the count.

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

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

# Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve

## 2011/2012 Annual Report

### ***National Monument Proposal Update***

Renewed interest and efforts are developing in support of the **Sand to Snow National Monument Proposal**. Your Board of Directors met with Western leadership representatives of the **Conservation Lands Foundation** to discuss how we can all work together to promote the creation of the **Sand to Snow National Monument**. I am pleased to report that we share many common interests and goals with this growing foundation and that they have been working at the State and Federal levels to accelerate the creation of this new national monument. The creation of this monument would be a big plus for our Preserve. With this new designation we would become part of the NLCS (National Lands Conservation System), greatly increasing the level of protection and allowing us a voice in the management plan for the monument. Please watch this development closely over the next couple of years; your support and participation in this effort will ensure the best outcome for our Preserve.

### ***Community Participation***

The second National Public Lands Day “cleanup” event in cooperation with NPCA (National Parks Conservation Association) once again gave us a big helping hand with trail maintenance this year. While we get great cooperation from Cal Fire crews for our heavy trail work, we still rely on our volunteers for the lighter, monthly work. This ongoing trail maintenance is a developing challenge as our volunteer base ages with the rest of the baby boomers. We have gotten assistance from the Marines, Boy Scouts, riding and hiking clubs, and others, who regularly enjoy the Preserve, but we are always looking for new ways to attract younger volunteers to help out.

### ***The Next Generation***

The Friends Board has created a new “apprentice” position inspired by our first junior docent graduate expressing an interest in continuing his contribution. While the position is not

a voting seat, he will be attending all our meetings and participating in all discussions and events. We are very encouraged by his enthusiasm and willingness to assist. This is yet another measure of how successful our Junior Docent Program has been. We are comforted seeing the next generation of “stewards” coming along to keep our Preserve the magic oasis it is today.

### ***Happy Endings***

Many of you might remember the proposed huge development along the southern boundary of our Preserve: the Palmwood Development. Thankfully it failed, leaving the land in a precarious limbo and for sale. That property is now owned by the **Coachella Valley Conservation Commission**. They are planning a new parking lot and trail system at the mouth of Big Morongo Canyon. This marks the southern border of our Preserve. The proposed trail will follow our own Canyon Trail, connecting our current trail system to the lower canyon, all the way to Indian Canyon Road. This has always been an area in need of more oversight. It has been misused as a dump, a shooting range, and a dangerous gathering spot for irresponsible loitering and open fires. The increased “proper use” and stewardship of this area will open the area to more public access and cut down on the abuses of the past. What presented a terrible threat a few years ago has now developed into an asset for our Preserve and for the public—a happy ending indeed.

### ***Support***

I can report this has been a year of more wins than losses for our efforts, efforts aimed at keeping our Preserve and wildlife safe from abuse and outside threats and educating our community and youth to appreciate and enjoy this very special place. All this can only continue with the ongoing support from our members, our community, the BLM, and local organizations and businesses. Thank you!



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



# BMCP 2011/2012

