



BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

NEWSLETTER

Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve

Winter 2014

The Power of Place, One Person's Connection to Big Morongo Canyon Preserve

by Joe Zarki

Recently I started volunteering at the Preserve by taking part in the Wednesday morning bird walks. Now that I have retired from Joshua Tree National Park, I can finally get out from behind a computer to experience nature more often. Given my interest in birds, the Preserve seems like a perfect place to do this.

My connection to the Preserve dates back more than 40 years to my time as a seasonal park ranger at Death Valley. It was there I developed an interest in learning about birds, and I had the good fortune to meet many of the "big dogs" of the California birding fraternity. From them I learned that the California Desert has a number of birding hot spots, and my duty station at Furnace Creek was one of the best. While at Death Valley I first began to hear about a place called "Morongo," another well-known desert migrant trap.

Beginning in the early 1980s, I started recording bird observations while stationed at Yellowstone National Park. I collated not only my bird sightings but those of others from around the park and submitted annotated reports to *American Birds* magazine. In each quarterly issue, I avidly scanned the regional highlights to see if any of the records I submitted were worthy of mention in its pages. I also carefully perused the regional reports from around the country. In California, I became aware that the Morongo area was a place where there were always exciting reports of

rarities. I resolved that, though far from Yellowstone, the Big Morongo Canyon Preserve was a place I had to visit someday.

Years later, I finally got that chance when my family and I transferred to Joshua Tree National Park. Nature study was a family affair for us, so the Big Morongo Canyon Preserve was one of the first places we visited. While I got a stiff neck scanning the treetops for anything with feathers, my wife Marilyn avidly sought out butterflies and flowers, and our young son Tim looked for any kind of small beetle or ladybug that Mom and Dad failed to notice. All of us marveled at the trees and the lush vegetation of the area.

In 1996, the staff at Anza-Borrego Desert State Park challenged the staff at Joshua Tree National Park to a spring Big Day birding competition. Each site would assemble a team of four birders, and starting from our home parks, try to see the most birds in a 24-hour period. The rules were simple, but the losing team had to buy dinner for the winners. For the team from Joshua Tree, an early stop at Morongo was vital to our strategy. We often picked up 50 or more species in the two hours we spent there, a testament to the site's birding quality. Sadly, the Joshua Tree team always lagged behind the hotshots from Anza-Borrego, but the 146 species we recorded one year remains my best day of birding ever.

Chasing the rare good bird is always worthwhile at Morongo. I'll never forget the Dickcissel or the Worm-eating Warbler I saw here, and even the regulars, such as Summer Tanager, Vermilion Flycatcher, Phainopepla, and Yellow-breasted Chat, are always a treat.

In recent years, I've hiked down the Canyon Trail during Christmas Bird Counts, and sightings of mule deer and bighorn sheep show the Preserve is important for more than just its birdlife. Of course, the great birds along this route, such as Bald Eagle, Merlin, and Rufous-crowned Sparrow only added to the fun.

So the Big Morongo Canyon Preserve has played a significant role in my birding life. The Preserve offers endless potential for "oh wow" birding moments, and the welcome sound of leaves fluttering in the desert wind, the cool shade, and the trickle of water all create a welcome respite for even the most dedicated desert rat. There's no question that for birder and non-birder alike, the Big Morongo Canyon Preserve is a magical place, with just as many thrills as a trip to the Magic Kingdom.

BIG MORONGO BIRDERS



FIELD TRIPS

Jan. 6—Salton Sea

Feb. 3—Wild Bird Ctr., Indio

Mar. 3—Joshua Tree National Park and Luckie Park

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

**Christmas Bird Count
Saturday, December 14**

BMCP Parking Lot at 7:30 a.m.

ALL ARE WELCOME

BMCP will be participating in the 114th Annual Audubon Christmas bird count. It's fun, it's free, and we can use your help.

Teams will be formed to bird a variety of habitats within a 7.5-mile radius of the Preserve. At 4 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.

While there is no cost to participate, donations to Audubon will be gratefully accepted. Audubon will make summary results of the count available online.

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

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

Bird's Eye View ... and more

*gleaned from
Dee Zeller*

Mother Nature did a good job of "re-arranging" the Preserve by way of a late-summer flash flood. Volunteers were able to clear trails, and Frank Currie returned to BMCP to rebuild a section of the boardwalk that had washed away. But some changes were beyond human ability to restore, like the bridge across the wash on the Desert Willow Trail that was buried to the top of its handrails. (This must have been hard for Frank to see, as he was the one who engineered and built the bridge.)



So much dirt now blocks the course of the wash that water runoff from future storms will have to carve a new path around the blockage. And, water will also have to find a new way through the marsh, where areas of open water were covered over.

What is Mother Nature going to do with BMCP next? Dee says, "If we stay out of her way, we can see what her intent is," and "Part of the beauty of the Preserve is it is always changing."

Sightings of a Harris's Sparrow and a White-throated Sparrow, extremely rare and uncommon, respectfully, have delighted bird walk participants this fall. These birds didn't show up at the Preserve feeders, but were seen while checking out neighborhood feeders. Dee conjectures that these and other sparrows are attracted to neighborhood yards because they find more low cover there than in the open area around the Preserve's feeders. Add to that the Sharp-shinned Hawk that is currently haunting the Preserve feeders, incidentally, driving Dee a little crazy.

A Golden-crowned Sparrow (uncommon), seen in the Preserve's natural area, was another highlight of the fall season.

Having trouble keeping bees out of your oriole feeder? Dee's newest trick is the application of Vaseline to the area around each access hole—far easier than applying oil, which dries out quickly and needs to be reapplied daily.

Mammal highlights this fall were a kit fox and an American badger, and up to nine deer at a time have been frequenting the dripper and water dishes outside the Zeller trailer.

Also, a bobcat is still being seen. Little does it know that it has good reason to stay within the Preserve, as bobcat hunting and trapping season began November 24.

This year California passed the Bobcat Protection Act, which protects bobcats from trapping (and hunting) in and around Joshua Tree National Park and other sensitive areas of the state. However, the new ban on trapping/hunting bobcats doesn't go in affect until January 1, 2014. The new law is a direct result of a grassroots campaign by local citizens, who became outraged when they found out that trappers were extensively trapping bobcats in the area to sell their pelts for up to \$700 each.

BMCP became a bit crowded earlier in the fall due to a huge influx of visitors, who were locked out of Joshua Tree National Park and other federally managed lands across the country as a result of the Federal government shutdown.

Crowded maybe, but what an opportunity this was for the Preserve to share its natural beauty with the many visitors. As renown herpetologist and author Robert C. Stebbins once said, he became convinced that the greatest threat facing the environment was human estrangement from nature. This sentiment is also the heart of the Preserve's Environmental Education Program, whose hard-working volunteers, through classroom visits, on-site field trips and summer camp, and the Junior Docent Program, are inspiring a love of nature in the next generation.

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NEWSLETTER
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Winter 2014
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BMCP Environmental Education Program Update

by Kc Mckay

The Summer Nature Encounter Program is still an exciting memory. Over the summer the children at Summer Nature Encounter studied the rock and water cycles, as well as other aspects of geology. They walked trails, studying the rocks and nature and learning about the Preserve and the role geology plays in nature. They excitedly did hands-on projects, such as dropping Mentos candies into soda bottles, watching the pressure build in a matter of seconds and an explosion that shot a geyser 25 to 35 feet into the air, just like a real underground geyser. They created a 4 foot by 2 foot stream table in small groups of 4 to 5 children, using their own ideas on how it should run and what would happen when water actually ran through it. The children performed the water run for their parents on the last day, explaining to everyone about their stream table and what they thought would happen. Everyone enjoyed the demonstrations. We made individual

exploding volcanoes and performed numerous other hands-on experiments. The children seemed to have a wonderful time; two of them have become junior docents.

The Junior Docent Program is growing, with 6 new trainees signing up this fall. We have gone on hikes and learned about tortoises from Beth Wood, and we will be dissecting owl pellets in December. We usually do not have a December meeting, except this year the junior docents asked if we could have one, and staring back at such enthusiastic faces, how does one say no; yes there will be a December meeting for the junior docents. They are a wonderful bunch of young people (grades 6 to 9), enthusiastic and ready for challenges. When I mentioned that we will dissect owl pellets at the December meeting, the kids were excited. (Thank you to everyone who collected and donated all of the wonderful owl pellets.)

The owl pellets made their debut for the fourth grade classes at Onaga Elementary School, where the students dissected the pellets on October 30 and 31, a really neat

way—building a real skeleton—to spend Halloween at school. The many students who have visited the Preserve this year have had a great time learning about pack rat habitats, animal homes, faux stomachs, and how to always protect, care for, and enjoy nature.

These programs are wonderful for today's youth—opening their eyes to see that there is more than video games and cement sidewalks in the world. I hope that all of the children that visit the Preserve take home happy memories and some knowledge that they can share with friends and family; one never knows when a future birder, hiker, or plant and animal lover may find their way into our midst.

THANK YOU to all who make the Environmental Education Program possible—the wonderful people who volunteer to help with classes, those who collect owl pellets, and others who give in various ways. It is you who make it possible for these programs to succeed. I would never be able to do this without all of you and your support.



Students investigate faux stomachs (surgical gloves filled with a gelatinous substance and containing plastic plant and animal parts) and match their faux stomach contents with one of eight animals that would have eaten these contents

The Trickster by Pat Flanagan



The trickster. He is a cunning, sly, rule breaker, a teacher of lessons. He is a jokester, a prankster, a shape changer and sometimes the creator of the universe. He is also a varmint, a pet eater, and a chicken stealer. He is coyote—any coyote whether male, female, or pup. Native American and First Nation cultures cherish him and his many roles. He is God’s dog. For many of us, it’s more hate and fear than love—he’s not our dog.

In the early hours you might hear the frantic yipping of a family group as they meet up after a night of hunting. When pups are still young and in training, their excited, higher register begging says “feed me, feed me.” Year-long investigations of coyote scat show they are omnivores, eating both meat and plants, whatever is easily available. They are fond of carrion, rodents, rabbits, insects, cactus fruit, mesquite pods, juniper berries, fan palm dates, and unconfined domestic pets.

Coyotes (*Canis latrans*) are found living in just about every habitat, from deserts to dense forests to arctic tundra—and, not surprisingly, cities and suburbs. Prior to the arrival of Europeans, they were most commonly found in the Great Plains of North America. Now, after being hunted and trapped for over 200 years, their range extends from Central America to the Arctic including all of the United States, Canada, and Mexico. This is one smart, tricky dog. Not only did they take advantage of the new habitats provided by settlers, there are more of them now than when the United States Constitution was signed.¹

One reason coyotes could expand into new habitats was the fear settlers had of wolves, to the extent of eliminating them entirely from the lower 48 states.

What the loss of wolves meant for coyotes is demonstrated in Yellowstone National Park today. With the reintroduction of wolves into the park in 1995, coyotes lost their status as top predator to the wolf.² Researchers have documented that wolves do not like coyote competition and will attack and kill coyotes. As wolf numbers increased, coyote numbers have decreased, although they are still found throughout the park.³ Scientists believe that this jockeying for position will result in what was once the natural equilibrium for these two competing canids. One of the unexpected trickle down effects of this interaction is that foxes, previously preyed on by coyotes, are increasing in numbers.

In the California Deserts, coyotes are common although not often seen. Unexpectedly, they are active during daylight hours but when seen silently dissolve into the landscape. Coyotes are wary of humans, unless injured or trained to handouts. Residents and visitors occasionally fall victim to the “poor cute thing” impulse and offer food to wild animals. Coyotes, drawing on their heritage as scavengers, quickly learn to become expert beggars. However, what may feel like an exciting interaction with a wild animal is likely to lead to an untimely and lingering death for the coyote from starvation or from unwary behavior around varmint hunters.



I grew up with the sound of coyotes—it was the night music that put me to sleep. To see one while I was walking alone down the road or hiking in the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains gave me—how to say this—substance. Once we saw each other, our eyes met but didn’t make contact, not really. I was a part of the landscape, checked off as present but not important. This *laissez-faire* acceptance pleased me enormously, and I have never forgotten it. I knew nothing about tricksters then, but I appreciated rule breakers and had instigated a few pranks. I recognized him even if he didn’t recognize me.

¹Our predator control learning curve is non-existent. The California general season for coyotes is all year with no bag or possession limit.

²On June 10, 2013, The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service published new rules in the Federal Register to delist the gray wolf from the endangered species list. For a report on this issue visit <http://earthfix.opb.org/flora-and-fauna/article/report-obama-to-drop-most-wolf-protections/>.

³There is a wealth of information about coyotes on the internet. Especially interesting is the first-hand description of a summer’s research project in Yellowstone National park by field biologist Lincoln Larson: <http://www.fieldtripearth.org/article.xml?id=1024>.

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

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

Upcoming Events

- Dec. 14, Sat. (7:30 a.m.-late afternoon) - **Christmas Bird Count**. See page 2.
- Dec. 14, Sat. (10:00 a.m.-noon) - **Junior Docent Training**.
- Jan. 6, Mon. - **Birding Field Trip to Salton Sea**. See page 1.
- Jan. 18, Sat. (10:00 a.m.-noon) - **Junior Docent Training**.
- Jan. 21, Tues. (9:00 a.m.-noon) - **Volunteer Meeting**. Beth Wood will give a PowerPoint slide presentation on the desert tortoise.
- Feb. 3, Mon. - **Birding Field Trip to the Wild Bird Center in Indio**. See page 1.
- Feb. 15, Sat. (10:00 a.m.-noon) - **Junior Docent Training**.
- Mar. 3, Mon. - **Birding Field Trip to Joshua Tree National Park and Luckie Park**. See page 1.
- Mar. 15, Sat. (10:00 a.m.-noon) - **Junior Docent Training**.
- Mar. 18, Tues. (9:00 a.m.-noon) - **Volunteer Meeting**. Liz Hile, Curator of Mammals at The Living Desert, will give a PowerPoint slide presentation on mammals..
- Mar. 23, Sun. (9:00 a.m.-4 p.m.) - **Native American Plant Uses Class**.*

*Contact the Desert Institute at (760) 367-5535 or visit www.joshuatree.org for information



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, 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



NEWSLETTER

is published by
Friends of BMCP

P.O. Box 780
Morongo Valley, CA 92256

GO GREEN . . . to choose the digital option for receiving your newsletter, call the Preserve



Big Morongo Canyon Preserve is Looking for Volunteers

by Pat Stoner

I am Pat Stoner, Volunteer Management Coordinator for BMCP. As most of you already know, we have a Volunteer Program and are looking for new volunteers. Many of our current volunteers refer to the Preserve as “our beautiful oasis in the desert.” Mother Nature has certainly done a wonderful job taking care of the Preserve all these years, even after the fires and floods that have occurred over time. However, even Mother Nature could use a little help once in a while.

We do not ask that you give us a specific amount of time as a volunteer. Whatever time you feel you have available would be appreciated. We have a meeting every other month from September through May each year on the third Tuesday of the month. There is always business to take care of at the meetings, but we also try to have an interesting

speaker give a short program that is relevant to the Preserve. For March, we are fortunate to have booked Liz Hile, Curator of Mammals at The Living Desert, who will be giving a 45-minute PowerPoint presentation on mammals.

A variety of assignments are available, such as trail trimming; assisting with school field studies, which are part of our Environmental Education Program; general repairs and maintenance of facilities; and assisting with the library in the Education Center—just to name a few. Everything needed in the way of tools or materials is supplied by the Preserve.

Interested parties can obtain a Volunteer Service Agreement or additional information from Dee Zeller, Preserve on-site manager, at 11055 East Drive, Morongo Valley, CA 92256, 760-363-7190.

Please feel free to contact me at 951-672-2674 if you have questions or would like further information. BMCP offers so much to local communities that through volunteer service you have the opportunity to give back to your community.

Summer Monsoons; Winter Rain

by Ray Yeager

This past summer we had an exceptional monsoonal season, with seven days of thunderstorms totaling 0.74 inches in Morongo Valley. One particular event was a flash flood that swept through the Big Morongo Canyon Preserve, taking out an eight-foot section of boardwalk and damaging many trails. The odd thing was at the time it wasn’t even raining at the Preserve. The flood waters came from the mountains to the North.

The first winter storm arrived on November 22, dropping 0.16 inches of rain at the Preserve. This brings our total to 1.14 inches since July 1, the beginning of the 2013/14 weather year. This will be a very important year because we have experienced two straight years of well below normal precipitation. The National Weather Service is predicting a mild winter, but forecasting winter storms is tricky at best.

Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve

2012/2013 Annual Report

A year of deep loss and new beginnings

The Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve and our entire community have had a great loss this year. **Mike Smiley**, a long-term board member and a big supporter of the Preserve, passed away this summer. Mike will be profoundly missed. A Celebration of Life was held in the parking lot of the Preserve and brought an estimated 200 plus crowd of friends, supporters, officials, and family to remember and to bid farewell to our dear friend. He is fondly remembered by birders from around the world, Friends who walked the Preserve with him every week, and by his beloved artist community.

This year also marked the retirement of our on-site manager, **Betty Zeller**. Betty has given us many years of her passion and remarkable skills as our volunteer manager and “den mother” for the entire operation. Any true measure of her contribution can only be expressed by the enormous vacuum left by her retirement. Very special thanks go out to **Dee Zeller** and the score of volunteers helping us to “recover” as we wish Betty a full and rewarding retirement. While Betty’s volunteer program and hands-on management skills cannot be replaced, the redesign of our operations is underway.

Also, our long-term officer, education director and board member **Pat Stoner** retired from the board this spring, leaving the Preserve’s educational efforts in the well-trained hands of **Kc McKay** and the Friends finances to the equally capable charge of **Ann Garry**. Despite her leaving the board, Pat’s contribution to the Friends has not slackened. She has returned as our volunteer management coordinator to oversee the redesign of our Volunteer Program. We are in good hands!

Monument effort moving forward

Our continuing work to achieve national monument status has a developing support team reaching all the way to Washington,

as the **Sand to Snow National Monument** proposal continues its slow but positive movement. The **Conservation Lands Foundation**, a national group of Friends organizations associated with National Conservation Lands, has been working to forward both the **Mojave Trails National Monument** and our own **Sand to Snow National Monument**. The Feinstein bill creating the monuments continues to undergo adjustments and refinements before it goes to committee and ultimately to Congress, but there are additional efforts underway to get these monument designations in place on a faster track. More on that as the effort develops; remember, your continued support and assistance is vital.

On a more regional level, our new San Bernardino County Supervisor, **James Ramos**, has designated a new support structure to better represent the Preserve’s and the community’s needs and to speed the lines of communications between the Friends and the County Board of Supervisors. We now have both regional and community representatives. We hope this new, more direct line of communication will assist us in getting support from the county, which has been slow or non-existent over the years.

There has been much change, adjustment, and highly-appreciated volunteer help as this year has unfolded. Community and local support remains strong, even as they too have seen much turmoil. All this makes it very clear to me that dedication to the Preserve deepens. Despite our loss and the adjustment to constant change, the Preserve and the Friends remain focused on our principle charter: to watch over the Preserve’s wildlife and habitat while encouraging its full enjoyment and appreciation by people from all over the world. Thank you all--Friends, community supporters, regional leaders, and our youth and junior docents for another year of outstanding support.



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



Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve — Board of Directors

David Miller • Patrick Casey • Jane Olson • Jane Mootz • Thomas Haworth • Ann Garry
Kc Robin McKay • Laura Sherrod • Meg Foley

Paul Michael (Mike) Smiley

October 6, 1952 - May 10, 2013

You will always walk among us in our memories and in our hearts

Mike Smiley passed away unexpectedly this past summer within a few days of being diagnosed with cancer.

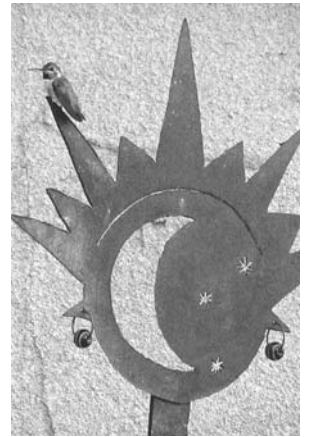
Were you fortunate enough to have known Mike? Did he give you one of his big hugs or a pat on the back every time you saw him? Were you called “kiddo?” Then you were one of his special friends, and everyone was special to Mike.

Whether you were officially on a bird walk, a plant walk, or a herp search with Mike, it was hard to distinguish, as Mike’s interests were many and he enthusiastically shared his field knowledge.

Any Wednesday you showed up at the Preserve for the weekly bird walk, you could almost be guaranteed to find Mike among the bird walk leaders. That is unless he was tasked by his wife Betty to complete art for the annual art tour—at least that is how he affectionately described his bird walk absences, but we all knew his passion for his art was the true motivating factor.

Never one to say no when someone needed his help, he figured out a better way when the calls for him to remove rattlesnakes became numerous—he taught us how to capture and remove our own rattlesnakes. There we would be, trembling in fear, a live rattlesnake in a bucket, and Mike walking us through our fear as we followed his instructions and practiced safe handling. That must have been one tired rattlesnake after one of these sessions, but the snake could look forward to release back into the wild soon thereafter.

We miss you terribly Mike; our gratitude for the times you shared with us is immense.



David McChesney

Mike Smiley Celebration of Life at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve, May 17, 2013