



BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

NEWSLETTER

Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve

Winter 2015

Interior Secretary Sally Jewell Tours BMCP

by Robin Kobaly

When Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell visited Southern California at the end of September to announce the release of the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan and discuss renewable energy issues, included in her trip was a special visit to Big Morongo Canyon Preserve. BLM State Director Jim Kenna asked Dee Zeller and Robin Kobaly to lead Secretary Jewell on a private tour through the Preserve. Other dignitaries accompanying her on the tour included the Assistant Secretary of Land and Mineral Management, Janice Schneider; California Secretary for Natural Resources, John Laird; Tribal Chairman for the Agua Caliente, Jeff Grubbe; Riverside County Supervisor, John Benoit; and several directors of the California Energy Commission.

The tour began with an orientation at the kiosk using large-format maps that emphasized the strategic location of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve along an elevation gradient between the lower Colorado Desert and the higher Mojave Desert. This valuable, protected link provides transitional habitat niches during animal and plant migrations in response to seasonal changes, climate changes, or catastrophes such as wildfire. On the trail, everyone enjoyed samples of mesquite pods and flour, native fan palm dates, aromatic yerba mansa seeds, and wild tea that Robin had brewed from the same plants that grow in the Preserve, while discussing the sacred nature of the site to indigenous peoples who relied on those same plants.

One of the topics that Jim Kenna had asked Robin to address in the tour was the importance of efforts to pass forward the awareness, inspiration, and “fire in the belly” for land conservation to successive



BLM State Director Jim Kenna, Secretary Jewell, Dee Zeller, and Robin Kobaly (l to r)

generations. Robin was compelled to tell Secretary Jewell the inspiring story of one of our outstanding students in the Junior Ranger program at BMCP, Jennifer Harrower, a home-schooled student who faithfully attended every training program available at the Preserve while serving as a Preserve docent during her high school years. Jennifer is now pursuing her Ph.D. in integrative biology/ecology/conservation at UC Santa Cruz. Robin had scanned onto an iPad the feature article about Jennifer from UC Berkeley’s College of Natural Resources magazine, which had written about her outdoor science beginnings at Big Morongo and then followed her path as she attended UC Berkeley, conducted forest ecology research in Costa Rica’s Monteverde cloud forest, and worked as an artist in Argentina, among many other globe-trotting environmental and community-outreach endeavors. Robin shared the article on iPad with Secretary Jewell as she related Jennifer’s story, since the article also printed some of Jennifer’s exceptional

environmental art. Jennifer is working with the art department at UC Berkeley on projects to graphically depict biodiversity loss and climate change. Jennifer had applied for and has now received a grant for her dissertation research about Joshua trees’ northward migration as their climate warms and about the critical co-movement of their above-ground moth partner and their below-ground mycorrhizal partner. Secretary Jewell seemed very impressed with the entire story and didn’t doubt the impact of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve on Jennifer’s life path.

To conclude the tour, everyone participated in a toast (with wild tea) to honor the inspiration of the land, the people who came before us and passed this land on to us with sacred stewardship, and the efforts of the people on the tour who are dedicating their lives to the conservation of the land. Secretary Jewell also impressed us with her own enthusiasm and commitment to expand, conserve, and protect natural and wilderness areas, such as Big Morongo Canyon Preserve. In a thank-you letter, she promised to do her best “to get elected officials and other influencers out into these special places so they understand what’s at stake and why support is so important.”



Robin Kobaly (left) and Secretary Jewell (right) toast the land, the land ancestors, and the conservation efforts of tour participants

**Christmas Bird Count
Sunday, December 14**

BMCP Parking Lot at 7:30 a.m.

ALL ARE WELCOME

BMCP will be participating in the 115th 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*

Dee continues to see changes in the Preserve's ecosystem, which he suspects may be related to climate change.

Fall bird migration was rather a bust, especially with respect to the very few warblers that were seen. And, bird numbers overall were dramatically down in October, as indicated by the bird feeders using 20 to 25% less food. House finches, of which we usually have more than we need, have been rare at the feeders. In the last days of November though, bird feeder activity is picking up, with Oregon Juncos, White-breasted Nuthatches, Ladder-backed and Nuttall's Woodpeckers, and White-winged Doves using the feeders. Oddly, White-winged Doves, which only in the last few years have stayed at the Preserve year round, were absent in October (when feeder activity of other birds was also way down), but the doves are back. A juvenile Red-shouldered hawk hasn't missed the upswing in activity at the feeders, as it is patrolling the area frequently.

One effect of climate change that scientists are concerned about is the



mismatch of migration time and food and habitat resources. Dee notes that there were fewer insects at the Preserve this summer, and in particular few dragonflies, which are normally abundant in summer. Our flycatchers found meager food resources here this summer, and stranger yet, there was an unusual eruption of dragonflies here soon after the flycatchers left in August.

There are almost no squirrels or rabbits being seen, and Dee is particularly surprised that rabbits or their tracks aren't being seen in the tracking area alongside the boardwalk where they used to always be seen.

One surprising and delightful sighting in late November is that of a gray fox and her two young. These foxes are rarely seen at the Preserve, so the occurrence of three is pretty special. It is a little surprising too, because, due to the decline in rodent populations, few coyotes are being seen or heard. So why the increase of the coyote's fellow canine, the fox?

On November 13, as part of the desert-wide celebration of the 20th anniversary of the California Desert Protection Act, part of Senator Dianne Feinstein's legacy, an Eco-Discovery Walk took place in Big Morongo Canyon Preserve led by botanist and wildlife biologist Robin Kobaly. The Preserve is fortunate that 20 years later Senator Feinstein continues her work to protect BMCP and the California Desert—see page 6 article.

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NEWSLETTER

Editor: Donna Thomas

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Winter 2015
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Gray fox. Look for this animal at BMCP. Note its similarity to a coyote, but the gray fox is shorter (shoulder ht. is 14-15") than the coyote (shoulder ht. 23-26").

Birds Do Know

by Jane Olson

How do birds know the difference? Why don't species that look similar always interbreed? When both sexes look alike, how do birds tell female from male? A friend recently asked me this set of questions. I found that the answers to these queries are complex. A short article will only brush the surface of this subject.

Birds have evolved over the last 150 million years into approximately 10,000 species. Their plumage includes many expressions of pattern and every hue. Birds exploit every habitat within every ecosystem on earth. Different shapes of feet, bills, and wings evolved to make a variety of life styles possible. But despite the diversity, many birds look pretty much alike to us. To name some examples, we are easily confused by the many gulls, sparrows, or black birds. Have you ever discussed whether the last bird sighted was a crow or a raven? Birds don't seem to be confused by who is who at all. (Or at least they are not very often.)

Obviously there is no confusion by birds or by people about the difference between a duck and a hummingbird. The puzzle of recognition is about species within families such as woodpeckers, flycatchers, or shorebirds. Many members of these groups bear a strong resemblance to each other. To unravel the mysteries, scientists have been observing birds and performing experiments for many years. The biology of birds is now fairly well understood. But the meaning of some behavior and why some traits developed is still under examination. There are several areas of study that may help explain how birds sort out who is who in their neighborhood, their flock or their pair. We are going to take a cursory glance at three areas: plumage patterns and color, behavior, and song.

Bird watchers use color and feather patterns to identify particular species of birds all the time. So do birds. Bird vision is more acute than humans. Bird eyes discriminate sharply between the hues they wear. Some birds see into the ultraviolet ranges and see nuances of color and pattern that are not discernable to people eyes. Besides the feathers, the colors on the bare parts of birds combine to signal that it is a specific species. Unfeathered parts may include beaks, feet, eye rings, eye color, eye pupil, and additional bare skin around the eye or at the base of the nostril. These bare parts may appear in one or a combination of yellow, black, pink, greenish or black. Bare skin may even be blue or red. Even with color clues, species of gulls that are very similar in color pattern and range interbreed often enough that the crosses are illustrated in birding field guides. Fortunately, the young imprint on their parents plumage color and pattern. This tends to reduce the mistake of choosing a mate outside the species.

Reproductive success is an imperative which is second only to survival. Many of us have marveled at the varied plumages in a flock of House Finches or of Yellow-rumped Warblers. Studies have shown that the more brightly colored males are the birds whose genes are best represented in their flock. Bright color is thought to equate to a healthy bird capable of breeding strong offspring. The duller male House Finches may not breed as often. However, studies show that their genes are not eliminated from the pool. Confusing isn't it? Some birds have evolved elaborate breeding plumage. Envision a peacock with his tail fanned. His badge of sexual identity may ensure reproductive success. The tradeoff is that the flamboyance destroys the safety of camouflage. The theory is that a spectacular tail tells the female that he is strong and alert and that he has survived predators and preserved his glory. Some birds are best distinguished by their behavior.

Many field guide notes allude to this. It is believed that non-signal behavior patterns (example: preening) develop over time into uniform ritualistic displays. Most ritualized behavior is thought to be inherited. These ritualized acts are used to exchange information. They may communicate attack, escape, or a desire to mate. Displays define one species from another as well as reveal male to female. Behavior provides additional clues to help a bird keep its genes in the right pool.

Bird song or sound is used by both birds and humans to separate one species from another. All studies agree that birds use sound to communicate. Some songs repel intruders from a choice territory. Others impress a prospective mate with their stamina needed to produce a lengthy and complex song. Usually, it is the male that sings. He is urged to do so by a complex set of hormones that are produced as the precursor of breeding. Birds acquire their songs in different ways. Many birds inherit their song directly from the DNA passed to them from their parents. The Alder Flycatcher and the Willow Flycatcher are examples of two birds that look and behave so much alike that their distinctive inherited songs are the best way to identify them. Songs may also be learned from parents or be borrowed from sounds around them. We have all been bemused by a mockingbird imitating a duck, a wren and then a kestrel. Slightly over half of the world's birds do not sing, but their sounds still identify their species. My favorite example from this group is the Blue-footed Booby. The male whistles and the female honks. There are songs and sounds that are distinctive to each species. In other words, it is another clue for birds to use to keep the gene pool tidy.

So, do birds know? I think that for the most part that they do know. What do you think?

BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

Fall and Winter Birds at BMCP

by Margaret Hoggan

Big Morongo Canyon Preserve is an unusual desert location in that it has water year around. This is a result of the earthquake fault that interrupts the underground flow of water down from the San Bernardino Mountains, forcing it to the surface. Because of the relatively abundant and reliable water, there is abundant vegetation, which in turn makes it a magnet for wildlife, particularly birds.

What birds you will see depends on what season you are here. Some birds are year-round residents, including Gambel's Quail, California Thrasher, Cactus Wren, Anna's Hummingbird, Black-throated Sparrow, Barn Owl, Roadrunner, and Bewick's Wren, to name but a few. If you are familiar with these species you will note they are a combination of birds typically found in the desert and in coastal lowlands. The wide variety of birds at the Preserve (which attracts birders from all over the country) is a consequence of the Preserve's habitat being suitable for both true desert birds as well as for those found in wetter climates. Of the 254 species recorded at the Preserve, almost a quarter are year-round residents.

In addition to year-round residents, there are also seasonal residents, both in the spring/summer breeding season, and in the fall/winter season when northern and mountain species are escaping bad weather and failing food supplies. Among our summer residents are some of the Preserve's most colorful and popular species, including the Vermilion Flycatcher, Summer Tanager, Blue Grosbeak, Hooded Oriole, and Yellow Warbler. The number of bird species that have been recorded spending the summer is about half the number of year-round residents.

Winter resident species number only slightly less than the number of year-round residents and about twice the number of summer residents. Our most numerous winter resident is the White-crowned Sparrow, a small gray-brown bird with a black and white striped head. It arrives in late September and stays until April, when it flies back to its spring/summer breeding-season home in Northwest Canada and Alaska. Many other species are seen in smaller numbers, and some may not be seen every year.

Two wintering species that are seen regularly in small numbers are the Red-naped Sapsucker and the closely related Red-breasted Sapsucker. These two striking red, white and black woodpeckers are currently in residence and may be seen visiting the sap wells they drill into the bark of trees. Both have been seen on fall bird walks.

In addition to annual or seasonal residents, there are many species that are transients, present only for short periods when traveling between summer homes to the north and winter homes further south. These species account for almost half of all species recorded at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve. Visiting transients swell bird populations in spring and fall, and April is frequently the month with the greatest number of species. In fall, September bird populations typically exceed summer and winter numbers.



Black-throated Gray Warbler at the Preserve's bird feeder patio

A number of species of small, colorful warblers are transients in this area, including Townsend's Warbler, Black-throated Gray Warbler, and Wilson's Warbler. All three are regular migrants through Southern California, and as expected, all three were seen on the Preserve's bird walks this fall.

Occasionally a bird not normally a migrant in this area will show up, such as the many Eastern warblers that are noted on the bird list for Big Morongo Canyon Preserve. Another transient species not seen every year at the Preserve is the beautiful Varied Thrush. It was seen on a fall bird walk.

If you want to learn what birds may be seen, when, and how frequently, pick up a copy of the bird list "Birds at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve" at the kiosk adjacent to the Preserve's parking lot. Join the upcoming bird walks to get a first-hand look at permanent and winter residents currently being seen. Or join our Sunday, December 14, Christmas Bird Count, which is part of a nationwide annual census of birds. Happy Holidays and Good Birding!

BMCP Weather by Ray Yeager

October at the Preserve was exceptionally warm, as the average high temperature was nearly five degrees above the historical average of 82°F. In November, the warming trend seems to be continuing. Our biggest problem is the drought that has been with us for the last three years. In Morongo Valley, October averages 0.24 inch of rain and 1.12 inches in November. As of November 24, these two months have produced zero rain. NOAA's latest report states that the confidence of having an El Nino event this winter has fallen from 65% to 58%. An El Nino event usually means above average rainfall, so we can still hope for an average rainy season. I recently asked Dee Zeller about his take on the drought and how it has effected the Preserve. "Two things come to mind, the feeders are requiring about 20 to 25% less food and there are fewer insects."

BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

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, Sun. (7:30 a.m.-late afternoon) - Christmas Bird Count. See page 2.

Jan. 17, Sat. (10:00 a.m.-noon) - Junior Docent Training.

Jan. 20, Tues. (9:00-11:00 a.m.) - Volunteer Meeting.

Feb. 21, Sat. (10:00 a.m.-noon) - Junior Docent Training.

Mar. 17, Tues. (9:00-11:00 a.m.) - Volunteer Meeting.



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 FRIENDS OF BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

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 received from 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

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P.O. Box 780
Morongo Valley, CA 92256

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



Sand to Snow National Monument Update

by Donna Thomas

On November 6 at Whitewater Preserve during a celebration of the 20th anniversary of the California Desert Protection Act, U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein vowed to reintroduce a bill to Congress that will include incorporation of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve into a proposed new Sand to Snow National Monument.

The new bill, the California Desert Conservation and Recreation Act, would, among other goals, include establishment of Sand to Snow National Monument, stretching from Joshua Tree National Park to Mt. San Geronio, and establishment of the Mojave Trails National Monument, between Joshua Tree National Park and the Mojave Preserve.

The senator has twice in recent years introduced similar legislation.

The new version includes modifications that were made in an effort to boost support among lawmakers.

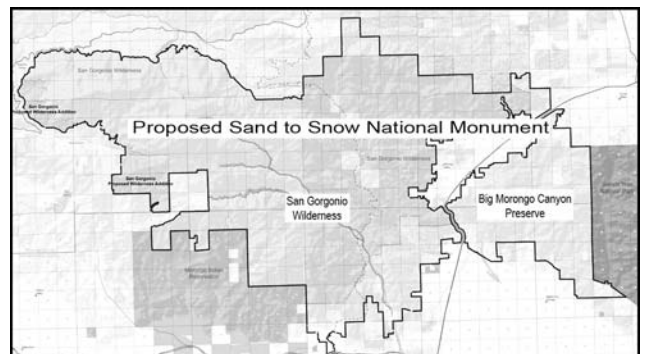
Senator Feinstein announced "This bill will be a first day bill, the day the United States Senate goes back." She went on to say, "I need your phone calls. I need you coming back to Washington. I need you to be at the committee hearings . . . If we can work out bipartisan sponsorship in the House of Representatives, we have a good chance to get this bill passed, I hope, within the next two years."

The Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve supports the proposed bill and any other legislation that can deepen protection for the Preserve's land, its habitat, and its wildlife.

With our support, Feinstein's optimistic prediction for a new Sand to Snow National Monument in the next two years may become a reality.



U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein at Whitewater Preserve



Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve

2013/2014 Annual Report

What a curious year we have had this 2014. In these stressful times volunteerism is off, quite dramatically, throughout the nonprofit sector. We too have had a year of reorganization and restructuring to bolster our volunteer involvement and Preserve maintenance.

As local and federal agencies experience budget cuts and diminishing resources, those of us who partner with these agencies must pick up the load with donations and volunteerism . . . or reduce activities and services. Your **Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve Board of Directors** will not reduce activities and services. We are deeply dedicated to our wildlife, our beautiful unspoiled habitat, and the incredible continued support we have experienced from all of you.

Board member **Jane Olson** has begun an impressive effort to reinvigorate our volunteer program. I encourage anyone with an interest in a day with nature to look into all the ways to have fun, learn, and engage with your Preserve. And our education program has actually expanded with more sessions, events, and experiences for the next generation of Preserve stewards. Schools no longer have the funds to bus kids to nature encounters and field trips so we have assumed that roll to ensure that the experience is available to all kids. Thanks to the dedicated volunteer effort from board member **Kc McKay** and her volunteers and to your funding and support, the education outreach is staying strong through these stressed times.

2014 has also been a year of concentrated efforts to clean up, fix up, repair, and enhance the Preserve's infrastructure, another opportunity for volunteers to help out, and we have also been coordinating with our San Bernardino County partners and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to fund several ambitious projects. This is still a work in progress, but both partners and your Board understand the need to keep our

Preserve the natural world-class preserve that it is known for and deserves.

As for the future, the **California Desert Conservation and Recreation Act of 2014**, the development of which I have been reporting to you for over four years, is now finally ready to be released to Congress on the first day it reconvenes in January 2015! This legislation, when enacted, establishes the **Sand to Snow National Monument**. This new monument includes approximately 135,000 acres of federal land between **Joshua Tree National Park** and the **San Bernardino National Forest**, and nestled within this new monument is your **Big Morongo Canyon Preserve**.

This is a game changer for us. As a national monument, we will have more budget flexibility, more protection, and more involvement in the entire conservation management of our sensitive desert region. And, we will still operate as we always have but with expanded capabilities. Don't worry, there will not be use fees or new frustrating restrictions or rules as this monument plan emerges. Life at the Preserve will be pretty much the way it's been for years . . . only better—better for our wildlife, better for our birds, better for our habitat and better for our visitors, volunteers, and supporters. Please watch, participate, and support the **California Desert Conservation and Recreation Act of 2014** as it works its way through Congress.

Our challenges continue as we enter 2015, but I am confident, even encouraged about our future. It's a future of vibrant volunteerism, loyal and trusted supporters, engaged local and federal partners, and, perhaps, elevation into the rich protections afforded a national monument.

Thank you all for your loyal and continuing support, and keep watching, the next few years promise to be most exciting.



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 Sherrad • Meg Foley

BMCP 2013/2014

