



# BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

## NEWSLETTER

Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve

Fall, 2019

### Robin Kobaly Honored with 2018 Minerva Hoyt Award

Last spring, Robin Kobaly was honored by the Joshua Tree National Park Association with the 2018 Minerva Hoyt conservation award for her contributions in education, research and preservation of the California desert.

Robin worked for 20 years with the Bureau of Land Management as a botanist, wildlife biologist and natural history interpreter. She was the first preserve manager of the Big Morongo Canyon Preserve. She co-founded The Wildlands Conservancy and helped lead the effort to form the Sand to Snow National Monument after the BMCP was threatened by the Los Angeles Department of Water & Power's Green Path North Project.

Robin served on the Independent Science Panel to provide science-based input to the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan (DRECP) planning process and to develop recommendations to state and federal Renewable Energy Action Team (REAT) agencies for renewable energy development in the California Desert.

As founder and Executive Director of the SummerTree Institute, Robin impacts young citizen scientists through her "Discovering the Ancients" and "Saving the Ancients" programs.

Robin's most recent work on the science of desert plant, soil, and fungal communities and their role in carbon sequestration, "Groundbreaking Discoveries Under Our Feet" was cited, immediately upon publication, in public comment letters protesting projects planned on pristine desert lands.

Additionally, she designs and presents popular

and highly requested events and programs for adults and children through her organization, The Power of Plants, and is a current Board Member of the Friends of the Big Morongo Canyon Preserve. To learn more about her classes,

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Robin, holding her award, celebrates with husband Doug Thompson, Dave Miller, Cindy Zacks, Dee Zeller, and Claudia Sall. Photo courtesy Joshua Tree National Park Association

### Robert Bailey- Daily Walker & Lifetime Member ... by Cindy VonHalle

Robert Bailey has enjoyed daily walks in Big Morongo Canyon Preserve for twenty-two years. A long-time resident of the low desert, he and his wife, Linda, moved to the town of Morongo Valley soon after discovering the preserve.

Robert finds the variety of trails sometimes meditative and other times, exciting. Over the years, he's seen countless bobcats and has been surprised by deer jumping right in front of him. Among the most beautiful creatures he's ever seen is a red fox, hunting on the boardwalk. Once he turned the corner and caught himself staring at the tail of a mountain lion. The cat was loping along, 30 feet in front of him, and Robert quickly backed away. He has encountered a few non-aggressive rattlesnakes. Following the devastating Paradise Fire in the summer

of 2005, Robert stayed away for a couple of months. He found the aftermath depressing but missed his walking routine.



Robert Bailey

Photo by Cindy VonHalle

He didn't want to give up his favorite place. Soon he returned to hike up the Ridge Trail again and stroll the Marsh Boardwalk. Over the years, the scorched earth grew green and lush.

What keeps Robert coming back to the same trails? The terrain is interesting and not that far from civilization. It is peaceful, and he feels safe. Robert appreciates the recent trail improvements and new signage. Remarkable incidents like the turkey vulture migration also make walking around Big Morongo exhilarating each season. Imagine being so close to hundreds of roosting birds that you can feel a whoosh of air from their wing beats! Most of all, Robert has a strong respect for wildlife and an obvious love for the tranquil beauty found at Big Morongo.

**National Public Lands Day,  
Saturday, September 28**

BMCP Parking Lot, 8:30 a.m. - Noon  
Special Presentations, Noon- 1p.m.

**ALL ARE WELCOME**

National Public Lands Day (NPLD) is the largest single-day volunteer effort for America's public lands. This year NPLD will mark the 25th anniversary of the California Desert Protection Act. Join us on September 28 to help maintain Big Morongo Canyon Preserve. There will be work projects for every ability and age. Registration begins at 8:30 a.m. Minors will need signed parental permission to participate. Bring brown bag lunch to enjoy at noon while listening to talks on the California Desert Protection Act and Big Morongo Canyon Preserve. The preserve is part of Sand to Snow National Monument, one of the nation's most biologically diverse national monuments.

**If you have questions, contact  
Meg Foley at 760-646-5625,  
or [bmcp@bigmorongo.org](mailto:bmcp@bigmorongo.org)**

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**NEWSLETTER**

Editor: Joe Zarki

Fall, 2019

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**CHATting WITH DEE... by Cindy VonHalle**

I joined Dee on a regularly scheduled Wednesday bird walk in July. After 23 years of living in BMCP, he still sees new things. His wildlife observations this summer span the gamut from insects to the California black bear. Add a rare yellow-billed cuckoo to the mix and an interesting menagerie emerges.

Dee described getting a brief glimpse of the cuckoo, "which was probably lost." It was spotted on the Marsh Trail as a group of birders were listening to a yellow-breasted chat. Dee quickly identified the silent cuckoo, a fairly long gray bird, and kin to the greater roadrunner. The cuckoo is long gone but the chat's jumble of chattering and whistles still lingers. Bird song also bursts forth from the secretive least Bell's vireo. The bird survey conducted this spring revealed seven nesting pairs, possibly a record high for the federally listed endangered bird. All cowbirds lay their eggs in the nests of other species. As a result, vireos are commonly tricked into raising baby brown-headed cowbirds instead of their own young. Dee confirmed that all three least Bell's vireo nestlings, in a nest near the marsh walk, had yellow "gapes" and not red, like a cowbird. Dee noted that this season no brown-headed cowbirds were sighted, which is unusual. Their absence hopefully means more successful nesting for the least Bell's vireo.



Yellow-billed cuckoo

The flashy male rufous hummingbird, the harbinger of southern migration, stopped by in the beginning of July. The females and young will follow in the fall. A few mammals, on the other hand, stay around long enough to make a more permanent home. Dee continues to see evidence of a young California black bear that showed up last winter. Bear tracks in the mud, log scrapes and sightings from visitors are commonly reported. The resident mule deer family is full of surprises. Dee recently watched a mother deer drink from the water station near the hummingbird feeders. She was accompanied by her fawn, who watched curiously for a few seconds, then ran away. "He'll soon figure out how that works," says Dee. Another doe recently startled him with loud noises like an irritated scrub-jay. This has Dee mystified. He never knew a deer could squawk like that! "That's the beauty of this place, says Dee. One can still see new things around here and keep learning."

*A special shout out goes to the BLM Black Rock Fire crew who responded quickly to Dee's recent request for help. Wind damage to an old Cottonwood tree in the parking lot weakened a giant limb. The fire crew chopped the limb into logs for firewood and did a great job clearing the debris.*

**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT, Summer Happenings... by Meg Foley**

Summer brings a different rhythm to the preserve. Birds like the summer and western tanagers provide colorful spots of contrast against the blankets of green foliage. The parking lot is often empty in the middle of the day during the midday heat – an odd sight after filling almost daily this past winter and spring, often with cars overflowing to park on the entry drive. Visitors from Germany and France join the daily walkers and families from the Coachella Valley. Glimpses of youngsters – fawns, big horn lambs, and young, noisy hawks – are rewards for visitors who brave the heat.

The marsh is dry of surface water at the areas we monitor weekly on the Marsh and Mesquite Trails. Last year was the first year in memory there wasn't evidence of surface water. We were hopeful, after the winter rains, that the marsh would be wetter this summer, but subsequent periods of drought combined with transpiration by the trees caused it to dry again.

Despite the slower pace of visitation and quieted activity, work kicks into higher gear in other areas. Grant applications and performance reports have summer

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## Erosion Is Real, Education Committee Report... by Jane Olson

On May 10, 2019, the last school program of the season was conducted by members of the education committee. The subject was Geology – and it rained! Ever flexible, the docents quickly rearranged plans. Half the group used the carport for a demonstration of the concept of erosion. It involves paint trays filled with sand. Boulders and trees are represented by pebbles and small weeds. And of course, there is water and then eventually mud. The other half of the class participated in a hastily assembled art project in the classroom. Meanwhile it looked like the rain was going to stick around for a while. About the time the groups were ready to switch, amazingly the rain stopped. As we assembled the groups on the patio for the trail portion of the program, one child exclaimed, "Look, erosion!" All around the patio the runoff was distinctly creating tiny little canyons. It is always a thrilling moment when the concept that has just been taught is recognized as happening in the immediate environment in real

time. It is nice when nature cooperates to help achieve that.

Thanks to a generous grant from the Conservation Lands Foundation and Edison International, the Friends of BMCP operated a very successful student education program last season. The Education Committee toured 894 students, 99 teachers and chaperones on 26 separate field trips in only two and a half months. We reached seven of the eleven elementary schools in the Morongo Basin and expanded our outreach to include one school in Desert Hot Springs, another community bordering Sand to Snow National Monument.

A series of training sessions were offered in January which netted half a dozen new docents. That brought our total number of docents to thirteen. Several others participated in crucial support capacities such as keeping our program supplies organized and helping with the classroom activities.

Before our Education Committee recessed for the summer, we had a meeting to analyze the year's efforts and to plan for next year. We will hold training sessions throughout the year to help everyone (new and returning volunteers) become comfortable using our programs and to develop their own understanding of the natural history concepts that we present in our programs. To help those who are newer to the group, we are going to begin a mentoring system. We listed the variety of jobs that are incorporated into our total program. Various committee members agreed to adopt a job. However, there are several more jobs waiting for adoption! If you would like to support our school education program at the Preserve, we would very much appreciate your help. We plan to have an orientation meeting on Thursday, October 10 at the Education Center at 9:00 a.m. Part of our time will be spent exploring the trails, having a snack, and enjoying the company of like-minded people. Bring a friend!

### Executive Director's Report (cont. from p.2)

deadlines. Supplies and training materials for school tours planned for the fall must be ordered and assembled. Many of our volunteers leave for the summer so help is in short supply. Dee and I spend much time dealing with some significant "branch drops" from Cottonwoods. According to the University of California Cooperative Extension, research found that summer branch drop most likely happens in the afternoon on hot, calm days. Older, less vigorous trees are more likely to be affected, but otherwise, any big tree may be a candidate for limb drop. Both native and non-native trees can drop limbs. Trees that receive adequate irrigation, as well as drought-stressed trees, will drop branches.

During the first day of temperatures in the mid 90's, six large limbs dropped at BMCP. Several branches blocked trails but, luckily, didn't damage the boardwalk. Cottonwood branch drops continue on at least a weekly basis at the preserve and Covington Park – almost always after 1:00 or 2:00 p.m. A special thank you to Midge Hood and Sharon Mattern who made gifts to help with replacement of chainsaws and other tools stolen in the February robbery. The cleanup is quite a job *with* chainsaws but would be impossible without the mechanical help. Mesquite, grasses, and

willows grow over trails, making some impassable without brushing against shrubs, trees, and thorns. A few stalwart volunteers help prune while taking walks and several new volunteers signed up during July and continue to return to work in the extreme temperatures.

Thanks to the BLM Fire Department for sending a California Conservation Crew to assist with trail maintenance and fuel reduction. They were originally scheduled for two days to chip the giant limb removed from the main parking lot and the large brush pile that accumulated near the Education Center over the winter and spring. The all-female CCC crew's chipper broke after chipping 80% of the pile but they returned for several more weeks to help with heavy trail clearance and pruning.

Thanks to bird walk leaders Margaret Hoggan, Larry Rosen, and others, the BMCP has an amazing natural history data set. During weekly bird walks, they record bird species sighted, number of individuals, weather and other wildlife observed. Unfortunately, the data exists on paper and not in electronic form. We were fortunate to have a BLM intern input several years of data into the California Natural Diversity Database for BLM's use. "Citizen Science" is increasingly

important as BLM's field staff shrinks, and natural history data is needed to inform local and regional land use planning. We hope to complete input for all years and to also input into Cornell Laboratory's [eBird.org](http://eBird.org), the most popular citizen science website for birders. The bird walk leaders publish a list of birds sighted each week. Due to popular demand, the list can be downloaded from [bigmorongo.org](http://bigmorongo.org) on the bird page so you can keep up with the latest sightings.

Volunteer extraordinaire, Joe Zarki, just completed a BMCP butterfly checklist – a pamphlet that will soon be available at the kiosk. The checklist is the result of several years of record keeping and fieldwork by Joe, Bob Cullen, and other observers. So far, field observers have documented 72 species at the preserve with many more species likely to be found in the BMCP's hinterlands.

The Friends strive to increase our presence on the ground to assist Dee with an endless array of tasks. To accomplish this, we obtain grants to fund our limited staff and increase our volunteer numbers. Thanks to your support and to our dedicated volunteers, we manage to keep the preserve trails accessible and safe, no matter what the weather conditions!

## Big Morongo's Riparian Trees: Cool Shade and So Much More... by Joe Zarki

As temperatures climb throughout the summer, many animals, humans included, seek refuge from the scorching heat in the shade of the occasional desert tree. Ephemeral streams, desert washes, and the rare spring or permanent watercourse provide the best shade and relief from the heat. As sweltering July fades into the dog days of summer, this seems like the perfect time to take a closer look at Morongo's most leafy residents— its deciduous trees.

Big Morongo Canyon Preserve is well known for its riparian woodlands. The brilliant green foliage of its water-loving trees stands in stark contrast to the arid hillsides at the boundary of the San Bernardino and Little San Bernardino Mountains. Chief among the preserve's deciduous dwellers is the Fremont cottonwood, *Populus fremontii*.

Cottonwoods are members of the Willow family and specifically belong to the poplars. It is a tall, broadleaf tree that favors streamside environments where frequent flooding occurs. Unlike many trees, it doesn't mind getting its feet wet, and it can rapidly colonize riverbanks following destructive floods or wildfires.



Cottonwoods are a dominant tree species at Big Morongo Canyon.  
Photo by Joe Zarki

It grows fast, sometimes as much as half an inch per day of root growth, and trunk growth from 10-20 feet in a year under good conditions. Cottonwoods will reach heights of 35-110 feet with a maximum girth of nearly 13 feet and can form a canopy along watercourses and bottomlands where it thrives. The cottonwood's crown may spread as much as 100 feet or more providing substantial shade and cooling. The shape of the heart-like leaves is called chordate, and in fall, the foliage turns brilliant yellow.

The Fremont cottonwood is native to the American Southwest and found in parts

of New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Nevada, and California, as well as in adjacent parts of Mexico. In California it grows from sea level up to 6,500 feet. It is a common sight in the Central Valley, California's coastal valleys, and at scattered sites across the desert, wherever enough water is available to support them.

Cottonwoods can reproduce when 5-10 years old. Its flowers yield light, wind-borne seeds that produce fluffy white tufts resembling cotton balls. The seeds can germinate within 24-48 hours but will remain viable for 1-5 weeks after dispersal. Cottonwoods can also sprout from root stumps and root crowns, by forming suckers, and by sprouting from lateral buds. Ecologists consider the Fremont cottonwood to be both a successional and climax plant throughout much of its range.

Other important riparian trees at the preserve are the willows. Three willow species occur in Big Morongo Canyon— the narrow-leaved, or sandbar willow, *Salix exigua*; the red willow, *S. laevigata*; and the arroyo willow, *S. lasiolepis*. Sandbar willow is a smaller species found along streambanks, marshes, and ponds. It will

reach 13-23 feet in height and grows from seeds or from basal clones leading to dense thickets. Its leaves are long and slender. By contrast, red willow can reach a height of 50 feet under favorable conditions. It often forms multiple trunks and will spread laterally away from its base as well as up. It grows in or near creeks. Arroyo willow is found in marshes, springs, and other wet areas. A medium-sized willow, it reaches from 7-35 feet in height and can reproduce from seeds or from root sprouts. It is a good indicator of fresh water.

The willows are successional plants and colonize open areas after floods, fires, or other disturbances. The Kobaly Deck along the Marsh Trail is a good example of how an open meadow can be taken over by willows as natural succession progresses.

One other deciduous tree found at Big Morongo is the western, or California, sycamore, *Platanus racemosa*. A type of plane tree, the sycamore grows along streams and in moist mountain canyons up to about 4,000 feet in elevation.

It also grows rapidly and commonly reaches a height of 60-75 feet with some growing up to 115 feet tall. It is characterized by its broad, deeply toothed leaves and its smooth gray and white bark that peels in distinctive patterns. Unlike willows and cottonwoods with their wind-carried seeds, sycamores form peculiar, round seed balls that are somewhat prickly on the outside.

Apart from the welcome shade they provide, the deciduous trees at Morongo are enormously important from an ecological standpoint. Biologists have found that about ¼ of California's mammal species (including all subspecies) are dependent on riparian ecosystems. The Fremont cottonwood is a primary food source and building material for California's beaver population. Mule deer find plenty of browse, cover, and water underneath the leafy foliage. Some 50 reptile and amphibian species are found



Gilbert's skink.

Photo by Joe Zarki

on lowland riparian habitats. One of those is the Gilbert's skink; an occasional find along the Marsh and Mesquite Trails.

Riparian woodlands seem just as important for birdlife. Studies have shown that riparian habitats support more than 10 times the density of migrant birds as non-riparian habitats. Dominant among these migrants are birds that glean insects from foliage or catch them in the air. The abundance of flycatchers and warblers at the preserve in spring provide visual and audible proof of these findings. The endangered least Bell's vireo relies on riparian woodlands for its nest sites. Walking the Marsh Trail this spring, it was not uncommon to hear numerous Bell's vireos singing their two-part song as they staked out nesting territories. Larger birds that use riparian woodlands for nest sites include just about all of the preserve's nesting hawks: red-tailed, red-shouldered, and Cooper's hawks as well as American kestrels. This year we have seen great horned and long-eared owls nesting in the preserve's

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# BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

## Minerva Hoyt Award (cont. from p.1)

visit <https://summertree.org>.

The purpose of the Minerva Hoyt Conservation Award is to recognize individuals or organizations that have made notable achievements in the areas of leadership, protection, preservation, research, education, and stewardship leading to a significant and lasting contribution on behalf of the deserts of California. Robin certainly fits the bill.

Previous recipients of Minerva Hoyt California Desert Conservation Award are: 2004– Susan Luckie Reilly; 2005– Larry & Donna Charpied; 2006– David Myers and The Wildlands Conservancy; 2007– John Wohlmuth and the Coachella Valley Association of Governments; 2008– Mark Jorgenson, Superintendent of Anza-Borrego Desert State Park; 2009– United States Senator Dianne Feinstein; 2010– Owens Valley Committee; 2011– Elden E. Hughes; 2012– Steven L. & Ruth Rieman; 2013– Dee & Betty Zeller; 2014– The Desert Protective Council, Terry Weiner; 2015– Nancy Karl; 2016– Cindy Zacks; 2017– Pat Flanagan.

## Big Morongo's Riparian Trees (cont. from p.4)



Least Bell's vireo.

Photo by Rick Filafilo.

deciduous woods while barn owls use the occasional Washington fan palm found within the riparian zone.

Many invertebrates are equally dependent on riparian systems for their survival. The website calscape.org lists 10 butterfly species and another 129 moth species that are hosted by the Fremont cottonwood. Here at Morongo, some of the preserve's largest and most beautiful butterflies are found within this habitat. Western tiger swallowtail, mourning cloak, Lorquin's admiral, red admiral,

and the satyr comma all rely on cottonwoods, willows, and sycamores. Red admirals and satyr commas have been seen sipping sap from the sapsucker trees at Covington Park on warm winter mornings.

These facts merely confirm what we intuitively sense when walking BMCP's shady trails. The welcome relief from the punishing summer sun is just one more benefit from Big Morongo's riparian trees that, like Shel Silverstein's story 'The Giving Tree,' always seem to have more to give.



Satyr comma.

Photo by Joe Zarki



FRIENDS OF BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

PLEASE RETURN YOUR TAX-DEDUCTIBLE DONATION TO:

**FRIENDS OF BMCP**  
**P.O. Box 780**  
**MORONGO VALLEY, CA 92256**

*Yes, I Want to Help!*

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**ENCLOSED MEMBERSHIP DUES:**

- \$ 25.00 STUDENT ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP
- \$ 35.00 INDIVIDUAL/FAMILY ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP
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- \$ 750.00 INDIVIDUAL/FAMILY LIFETIME MEMBERSHIP

**ADDITIONAL CONTRIBUTIONS:**

- \$ 10.00
- \$ 20.00
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**NEWSLETTER** (WINTER, SPRING/ SUMMER, FALL ISSUES)

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**BECOME A MEMBER OF**

**FRIENDS OF BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE**

Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) association organized for the support of programs at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve.

We are dedicated to the exploration, preservation, and stewardship of the preserve by protecting and managing its resources, and by providing educational programs, access for wildlife viewing, and recreational opportunities for the enjoyment of its visitors.

Donations to the Friends are fully tax deductible in accordance with the IRS and State laws. As a special thank you, new Friends receive a BMCP embroidered patch. Lifetime members also receive a canvas 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, email us @ [bmcp@bigmorongo.org](mailto:bmcp@bigmorongo.org).



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## CALENDAR

AT BMCP

AUGUST – NOVEMBER

Gate open 7:30 a.m. to Sunset

365 days a year

### WEDNESDAY BIRD WALKS

Bird walks are held each Wednesday throughout the year excluding Thanksgiving Eve, Christmas Eve or Day, and New Year's Eve or Day. Bird walks start at 8 a.m. and generally last about 3 hours. Bring your binoculars and spend the morning strolling the trails with knowledgeable local bird walk leaders. Meet at BMCP parking lot. Beginning birders welcome.

### NATURE CENTER HOURS

The Big Morongo Canyon Preserve Natural Science Education Center will be open on Saturdays from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. starting October 5, 2019. The Nature Center has exhibits, displays, and a natural history reading library. Volunteers are on hand to answer questions.

### UPCOMING EVENTS

September 28, National Public Lands Day, 8:30 a.m - Noon; Noon -1:00 p.m. See p. 2 for details.

October 8, 25th Anniversary of the California Desert Protection Act, 5:00 p.m. - 7:00 p.m. Education Center, Mojave Desert Land Trust, 60124 29 Palms Hgwy., Joshua Tree.

October 9, Friends of BMCP Membership Meeting, 1:00 p.m. - 3:00 p.m. Education Center.

October 10, Orientation Program for Education Program Volunteers. Thursday, 9:00 a.m. Meet at the BMCP Education Center.

December 14, Morongo Valley Christmas Bird Count, 7:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m. Tentative date; details to follow.

Check [www.bigmorongo.org](http://www.bigmorongo.org) for information and updates on future events.