



# BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

## NEWSLETTER

Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve

Spring/Summer, 2020

### Ambassador Program Off to a Welcome Start by Ann Garry & Meg Foley

Launched in December, the new Ambassador Program has been a resounding success. Ambassadors greet visitors every Friday, Saturday and Sunday and holidays from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00. During January, Ambassadors, working four hours shifts, interacted with over 1,530 visitors! Visitors are pleasantly surprised to see the 'Meet and Greet' opened. One visitor exclaimed, "I've been coming here for years and am so happy to see this addition."

Ann Garry, Ambassador Committee Chair and Friends' board member, is happy to see the significant increase in donations received by Ambassadors as well as in the 'Iron Ranger'. This January we experienced a 31% decrease in traffic compared to last year, but kiosk donations increased 54% over January, 2019. The donation total of \$1,493 from January's visitors provides much needed support to preserve operations.

Steve MacArthur, the first Ambassador who staged at the kiosk to greet visitors

during construction, said, "I am amazed at the number of international visitors coming to the Preserve." During one shift in January, he conversed with visitors from Ireland, Denmark, Holland, England, China and France! Dee, our onsite host for over 23 years, knows how much visitors appreciate a personal interaction and the opportunity to ask questions. He proposed the meet and greet program

several years ago. Dee hears daily compliments about the volunteers' presence, and he personally appreciates the assistance we are now providing our visitors, "the program is performing better than I imagined!"

Volunteers are very happy with Dave Garry's functional kiosk design. It's quite comfortable, even on chilly days. There are still a few finishing touches to complete including a shelf and an interior display space. Friends of BMCP Board member Laura Sherrod, who has been opening the Education Center every Saturday for exhibit viewing and retail sales, notes increased foot traffic with the Ambassador Program.

If you enjoy sharing your love of the desert with visitors from all over the U.S. and beyond, consider volunteering in the Ambassador Program. We are specifically seeking volunteers for the Education Center on Sundays and kiosk on Saturdays. Email or call Meg for more info: [bmcp@bigmorongo.org](mailto:bmcp@bigmorongo.org), 760-646-5625.



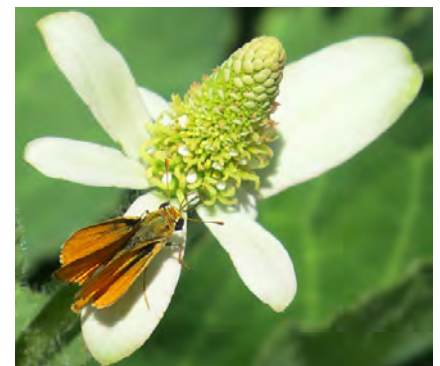
Ambassadors Steve MacArthur and Jean Kenna roll out the red carpet for BMCP visitors. Photo by Meg Foley

### Take a Walk on the Wild Side– A Mesquite Trail Profile by Cindy VonHalle

**Where to Find It: From the parking area, follow the Marsh Trail south to the Education Center. Just below the pollinator garden, the Mesquite Trail branches off to the right, makes a loop, and serves as a destination or a connector to the West Canyon Trail, the Canyon Trail and the Yucca Ridge Trail. (see trail map for details)**

Walking the nature trails at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve can grab your imagination. The Mesquite Trail offers an exciting mix of both natural and human history. There is something to see or hear around every corner. A defining characteristic is surface water, creating a rare lush riparian area. The high water table, caused

by an earthquake fault, promotes a rich flora that attracts a variety of birds and wildlife. Named for a thicket of honey mesquite (*Prosopis glandulosa*), the trail is partly shaded by a canopy formed by these small twisted trees. Native Californians– the Cahuilla, Serrano, and Chemehuevi– considered mesquite essential resources for food, housing materials and clothing. The sweetly scented yellow blooms produce long edible beans that were eaten fresh or stored for later. Today mesquite trees are favorite perches for phainopeplas– members of the tropical silky flycatcher family (a group related to waxwings). They nest in early spring, feeding on insects and mistletoe berries. Listen for their calls.



An orange skipperling nectars on yerba mansa along the Mesquite Trail. Photo by Joe Zarki

Another notable plant is yerba mansa (*Anemopsis californica*). This low growing

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**Special Announcement:  
Big Morongo Canyon  
Preserve Closed Due to  
COVID-19 Coronavirus**

The rapid sweep of the COVID-19 novel coronavirus since has led to emergency measures by federal, state, and county public health officials to slow the progression of the pandemic.

At the direction of San Bernardino County, Big Morongo Canyon Preserve closed on March 17 and will remain closed at least until April 3. All preserve facilities including restrooms, the Education Center, and the parking lot will be closed, and the preserve entrance gate will be locked.

All BMCP public programs are suspended until further notice.

Please check the preserve website, [www.bigmorongo.org](http://www.bigmorongo.org), for updates on the COVID-19 closure and changes to public access at BMCP.

**CHATTING WITH DEE... by Cindy VonHalle**

Volunteers make exciting things happen around the preserve. On our last visit, Dee was quick to applaud the efforts of the new Ambassadors, greeting visitors at the kiosk. He likes the new arrangement that allows visitors to be met at the kiosk and greeted with a warm welcome before they hit the trail.



Volunteer Ray York recently retired from helping with the recycling project. For 14 years, Ray assisted with sorting and hauling recyclable bottles and cans from Cactus Mart and the preserve. Dee expressed much appreciation for Ray's dependability with the project. Cashing in on recyclables averages \$30-\$70 per trip and totals over \$1,000 per year, all

donated to the Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve. This worthwhile venture, according to Dee, would not have happened without Ray's help.

The Wednesday bird walks continue to be well attended. It is still a bit early for northern migration, yet the local birds never seem to disappoint. A vermilion flycatcher has been striking flashy poses. Active nesting is an on-going fascination from tiny hummingbirds to the much larger great horned owl. Some of the trees are beginning to "green up" with new catkins and leaves.

With spring just around the corner, Dee anticipates more wildlife activity. A hiker recently took an excellent photograph of a long-eared owl perched in a tree on the Marsh Trail. There have been reports of bobcats and fox in the area. Lastly, with a sparkle in his eye, Dee predicts that the rufous hummingbird will be showing up "any day now."

**CINDY VONHALLE JOINS BMCP BOARD by Joe Zarki**

**Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve**

**Board of Directors**

- Jane Olson, President
- Ann Garry, Vice President
- Patrick Casey
- Robin Kobaly
- David Miller
- Tish Miller
- Jane Mootz
- Laura Sherrod
- Cindy VonHalle

**Staff**

- Meg Foley, Executive Director
- Angela Kinley, Education Director

**NEWSLETTER**

Editor: Joe Zarki

Spring/Summer, 2020

P.O. Box 780  
Morongo Valley, CA 92256

Phone: 760-363-7190  
Email: [bmcp@bigmorongo.org](mailto:bmcp@bigmorongo.org)  
Web: [www.bigmorongo.org](http://www.bigmorongo.org)

The Friends of Big Morongo Preserve have a new Board member. Cindy VonHalle was recently added to the Board (replacing outgoing Board member Bill LaHaye) and brings a wealth of experience in public lands management, interpretation, education, and community outreach.



A Tennessee native, Cindy retired from the National Park Service after a 30-year career as an interpretive ranger at Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Cape Hatteras National Seashore, Ozark National Scenic Riverways, Joshua Tree National Park, and Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park where she was the Chief of Interpretation. Since retirement, Cindy has volunteered for the park at the Joshua Tree Visitor Center, and recently she has been helping with Desert Institute classes for the Joshua Tree National Park Association.

Cindy began volunteering at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve in 2019. She loves writing and is a frequent contributor to the newsletter where she writes the popular 'Chatting with Dee' feature, with inspiration from our favorite resident caretaker, and also the volunteer profile article. She will also develop feature articles on topics highlighting aspects of the preserve such as this issue's look at the Mesquite Trail.

As a Board member, Cindy is part of the BMCP Education Committee and helps plan and lead visits from area schools, something her prior NPS experience leaves her well positioned to do. Her retirement goals are to stay active, hang out with great people, and continue to support our nation's public lands. BMCP checks all those boxes, and the Friends are glad to welcome Cindy to the Big Morongo family.

## Joe Zarki- a Leader for Citizen Science by Cindy VonHalle

Joe Zarki retired from the National Park Service as Joshua Tree National Park's Chief of Interpretation and Education in 2013. A year or so after hanging up his ranger hat, he decided to don several volunteer hats for Big Morongo Canyon Preserve (BMCP). He started out helping with the newsletter design and lay-out and now serves as editor. His love of natural history soon led him to join other volunteers interested in creating butterfly habitat. Joe expertly designed a new garden, helped select plants, collected native seeds and lastly, produced a publication for the garden and a butterfly checklist. Are you wondering which plant to put in your yard to attract colorful butterflies? Just ask Joe! On Wednesdays, you can find him helping lead the popular bird walks at BMCP.

As an avid birder, Joe first heard about Big Morongo Preserve when he was working as a ranger in Death Valley. When he moved to Joshua Tree in 1995, the preserve was one of the first places he visited. He loves chasing rare birds

as well as seeing the regulars such as the summer tanager and vermilion flycatcher. Joe's interest in recording bird observations began in the 1980s while stationed at Yellowstone National Park. Throughout the year, he orga-



nizes several bird counts in our area. In addition to the Audubon Christmas Bird Count, (on-going since 1981 at BMCP) he coordinates a newer event called the Big Backyard Bird Count. This four-day activity enlists bird watchers to count

local area birds and submit an electronic checklist to *eBird*. A real-time snapshot of bird populations is created to show how birds are doing worldwide.

Under Joe's leadership, we are able to contribute to the knowledge about one of California's most special places. He and his wife, Marilyn Lutz, organize several butterfly counts for the North America Butterfly Association in Joshua Tree National Park. Joe recently facilitated a butterfly workshop at BMCP by the Southwest Monarch Study offering members an opportunity to engage in citizen science by learning to spot migrating monarchs. He believes that BMCP is valuable bird and wildlife habitat as well as a respite for relaxation. His efforts lend credibility to our stewardship mission by keeping our publications up to date and attractive. Thanks to Joe, we continue to have new opportunities to explore and learn about our natural world. To get on the mailing list and participate in a bird or butterfly count, contact: [jwzarki@gmail.com](mailto:jwzarki@gmail.com).

## EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT: Sustainable Tourism and the Morongo Basin by Meg Foley

Perhaps you have noticed that visitation to the Preserve has been steadily increasing. Last year, over 100,000 visitors came to BMCP based on the most conservative calculations. For a long time, we averaged 60,000 visitors annually, but visitor traffic has soared in recent years. It is not unusual now for cars to completely fill the parking lot *and* line the entry drive on weekdays during the height of the tourist season— an occurrence that used to happen only during special events.

For 23 years, Joshua Tree National Park averaged 1 to 1.3 million visitors, but the park experienced a significant jump in 2014 and an even larger increase in 2015 when it surpassed the 2 million mark for the first time. Last year, 2,998,989 people visited JTNP. Since 2013, Joshua Tree's attendance has grown faster than any of the state's eight other national parks. At Big Morongo Canyon Preserve we receive countless first-time visitors who stop on their way to or from our local national park.

The impacts of such high visitation in areas lacking infrastructure to deal with growing numbers led to recent local conversations about "sustainable tourism." Chris Clarke, NPCA's California Desert Associate Director, is facilitating efforts for residents, organizations, public land representatives, and business owners to educate and inform public lands user groups. While there is economic opportunity to be gained by local businesses and residents, all acknowledge the need to protect natural resources and fragile desert landscapes. Business owners were very willing to expand efforts to educate visitors about "desert etiquette." Chris pondered the possibility of improved visitor experiences and enhanced land stewardship if we could engage just 10% of visitors in positive interactions to protect our desert resources. Ideally, we will be able to meet the challenge of minimizing the impact on the environment and local culture, while helping support jobs, local people, and businesses.

It will be interesting to see what directions the engaged and informed Morongo Basin communities take. The Morongo Basin Conservation Association celebrated their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary by hosting a public conversation between David Smith, JTNP Superintendent and Chris Clarke, about "sustainable tourism," a gathering attended by 147 people! Video of the presentation is available on MBCA's website: [mbconservation.org](http://mbconservation.org). Joshua Tree National Park Association's Desert Institute is hosting a panel discussion in coming weeks with additional speakers.

While discussions ensue about the ways to minimize local impacts on the preserve, you can help at the BMCP in several ways. We have steadily increased our volunteers and have 57 active volunteers who contributed over 5,700 hours last year. Despite the impressive number of volunteers and hours, we need more help to serve our growing audience. We have multiple committees that need

(cont. on p.4)

## The Birds of 2019 by Margaret Hoggan

In 2019, the five bird walk leaders at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve led 53 bird walks and a Christmas Bird Count, during which the leaders compiled lists of every bird species seen and counted the number of individuals of each species. In all of 2019, 105 species of birds were recorded.

One species was recorded at the preserve for the first time ever. A gray catbird showed up at the preserve's November 20, 2019 bird walk and stayed on for weeks. Local birders, for many of whom it was a life bird (bird seen for the first time in your life), were delighted! (Visitors from the north and east where it summers were more blasé about seeing it.) In winter, it is normally limited to the gulf coast of the U.S.



A rare gray catbird was just one of the stars of BMCP's fall and winter bird parade. Photo by Paul Evans

In June of 2019, we were also lucky enough to see a yellow-billed cuckoo along the Marsh Trail. This bird does occur in the west and in California. Unfortunately loss of riparian habitat has greatly reduced its numbers in the west. It is about the size of a mourning dove but slimmer, dark brown above and white below, with black and white bands under the tail, and a mostly yellow beak. This cuckoo was the first one seen on a bird walk, and one of only two reported, in the 17 years I have been at the preserve.

Another vagrant not normally seen in Southern California, and usually found south of the border in winter, was a scarlet tanager (a life bird for me!). It appeared on our October 30, 2019 bird walk and frolicked in the Education Cen-



Even in winter plumage, a visiting scarlet tanager lit up the garden fountain at the Education Center. Photo by Joe Zarki

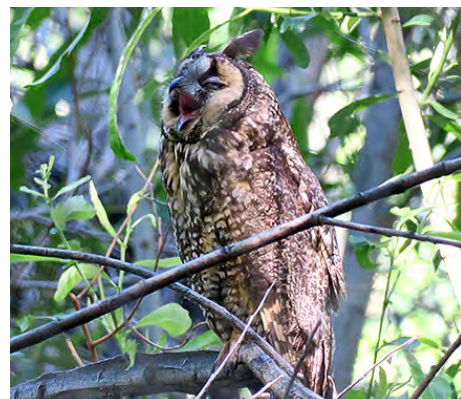
ter fountain, ignoring the large group of birders watching and snapping photos. Unlike its local relative the summer tanager, the male scarlet tanager changes color seasonally, from bright red and black in summer to bright yellow and black in winter (and here's me looking for a red bird!).

A one-page report titled "Birds at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve and adjacent Covington Park" is available at BMCP's kiosk. It lists the 254 birds that have been seen there by family, and tells whether they are common or rare, permanent or seasonal residents, or migrants or vagrants. The current list was completed in 2010 and used several years of data to update the previous list.

Among the birds that are year around residents of our local area are American kestrel, greater roadrunner, Anna's hummingbird, California scrub-jay, oak titmouse, verdin, Bewick's wren, California thrasher, phainopepla, spotted towhee, house finch, and lesser goldfinch, to name just a few. Forty-three of the 105 species recorded in 2019 were residents all year. While you may not see rare, out-of-area vagrant species every day, some of our interesting and beautiful local species are seen on each bird walk.

One bird species that is resident only in winter is the white-crowned sparrow, typically here from September through mid-April. By December they are typically our most numerous bird. You may expect the last white-crowns

currently here to depart for their summer homes in western Canada and Alaska by late April. Over the next few weeks, red-naped sapsuckers, northern flickers, American robins, hermit thrushes, dark-eyed juncos and other species will also leave us until next fall.



A family of long-eared owls nesting along the Marsh Trail delighted birders in June. Photo by Joe Zarki

As the winter residents are leaving, summer residents are arriving to take their place. The most famous avian resident of Morongo Valley, the vermilion flycatcher, should be here, and is! Orioles should arrive in late March. Most migratory and summer resident flycatchers generally show up in May. The beautiful male blue grosbeak appeared on bird walks in May through August in 2019, so look for them again in 2020 during the summer. Every month will bring changes and surprises, and the spring months ahead typically record the greatest number of species during the year. Strap on your binoculars and come join us to see what happens next!

### Executive Director's Report (cont. from p.3) :

populating: Fundraising, Maintenance/ Trailwork, Publications & Signage, Retail, Education which includes school tours, hikes, the Ambassador Program, and public outreach. There are many needed tasks— like painting benches or picnic tables— that do not require an ongoing commitment. If you are interested in meeting new friends, spending time at the beautiful preserve, and lending much needed helping hands, call me at 760-646-5625 or email [bmcpc@bigmorongo.org](mailto:bmcpc@bigmorongo.org).

# BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

## Take a Walk on the Wild Side (cont. from p.1)

plant is identified by a large seed head with a strong peppery aroma. Yerba mansa was traditionally valued for its medicinal properties.

The trail winds along pools of water and a bubbly creek after rains. If you are lucky, you may hear California tree frogs singing from the marsh. The hillsides are laced with game trails made by bighorn sheep and mule deer that for decades have used this area to access water.

During August 2016, a prolonged drought caused a pond to dry up leaving only thick sticky mud. On three different occasions, a young thirsty sheep, anticipating a drink of water, got "stuck in the muck." The preserve manager and volunteers were luckily on hand each time to pull the poor animal from the mud. Rescue strategies varied from wading in and hoisting the sheep's hindquarters to using a tree limb to lift



A pair of bighorn sheep look for water during the 2016 drought. Photo by Joe Zarki

the hindquarters and pulling the horns with a rope. Water has returned to cover the mud allowing the sheep to sip safely from the edge of the pond.

One of the oldest rocks in California, dated at two billion years, is exposed on a slope adjacent to the Mesquite trail. A bench is located there allowing you to admire the beautiful banded Precambrian gneiss (pronounced *nice*).

Nearby is another artifact from the past. The rusty remains of a 1941 Ford Deluxe Coupe remind us of earlier days. How and when it got here is a mystery. After the Serrano Indians left the area, ranchers moved in, growing crops and raising cattle. Sadly, the rustic barn from the Warren Ranch era was lost in the 2005 fire. A cold slab of concrete is all that remains. Fire scars haunt the surroundings, yet this beautiful section of the preserve exemplifies Nature's resiliency. Grasses, shrubs and wildflowers adorn the forest edge. Enjoy this trail with binoculars or a camera, and a sense of wonder at this rare desert wetland.



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!*

NAME(S) \_\_\_\_\_

MAILING ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

CITY \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_

COUNTRY \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

EMAIL \_\_\_\_\_

**ENCLOSED MEMBERSHIP DUES:**

- \$ 25.00 STUDENT ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP
- \$ 35.00 INDIVIDUAL/FAMILY ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP
- \$ 100.00 INDIVIDUAL/FAMILY SUPPORTER MEMBERSHIP
- \$ 750.00 INDIVIDUAL/FAMILY LIFETIME MEMBERSHIP

**ADDITIONAL CONTRIBUTIONS:**

- \$ 10.00
- \$ 20.00
- \$ 50.00
- OTHER \_\_\_\_\_

**NEWSLETTER** (WINTER, SPRING/ SUMMER, FALL ISSUES)

- EMAIL  MAIL  NEITHER

**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).



## CALENDAR

AT BMCP

MARCH – AUGUST

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. The walks start at 8 a.m. and generally last about 1.5 hours. Bring your binoculars and spend the morning strolling the trails with knowledgeable local bird walk leaders. Meet at the BMCP parking lot. Beginning birders welcome.

### NATURE CENTER HOURS

The Big Morongo Canyon Preserve Science Education Center is open on Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. The Nature Center has exhibits, displays, and a natural history reading library. Volunteers are on hand to answer questions. Caps, t-shirts, and pins are available for sale.

### UPCOMING EVENTS

April 18, Yucca Valley Conservation Fair & Earth Day Celebration, Yucca Valley Community Center, 9:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.

April 18, Spring Native Plant Sale, Mojave Desert Land Trust, 9:00 a.m.- 1:00 p.m.

April 18, Member Appreciation Night. Food, night trek, and great company. 5:00 p.m. - 8:00 p.m. Watch for your invitation!

April 25-26, Desert-Wise Landscape Tour (at BMCP both days), see p. 2 for details.

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