



BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

NEWSLETTER

Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve

Special Coronavirus Issue

Fall, 2020

Coronavirus Brings Major Changes to Preserve Operations by Meg Foley

Like every person and business in the world, the efforts to contain the coronavirus had swift, sweeping, and significant effects on the operations of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve.

March is one of the busiest months for visitation during 'normal' times. The first Saturday, March 7, was no exception. Even with a rapidly spreading virus and recommendations against travelling, the preserve was busy. College classes, scout groups, and birders had the parking lot and entry drive full of parked cars.

On Friday, March 13, we picked up the last issue of this newsletter from the printer. The next day Ambassadors worked their last shift and hand cancelled every item on the newsletter calendar: Wednesday bird walks, Nature Center Hours, Member Appreciation Night, and the Desert Wise Living Tour. COVID conditions cascaded so quickly that all the cancelled activities were prohibited in the one-week time since we submitted the issue to the printer. School field trips were also officially cancelled.



Margaret Hoggan models the latest in COVID fashion at BMCP. Photo by Cindy VonHalle

Weekend and weekday visitation continued to be high as people wanted to observe flowers, blooming shrubs, and the budding cottonwood leaves. Birdwatchers flocked to observe visiting migrants and nesting birds.

The following week, the Friends board held their last in-person meeting on March 11. Despite burgeoning COVID concerns, the board felt safe in meeting since much of the meeting was held outdoors while performing a long planned overall signage assessment.

On Tuesday, March 17, San Bernardino County ordered closure of all San Bernardino County Parks. The BMCP entry road, buildings, and most developed trails are on county land, so we were closed. The following day, the Interior Department announced free admission to open national parks. Although some sites were already closed for health and safety reasons, Joshua Tree National Park was still open.

On Thursday, March 19th, California Governor Newsom issued the nation's first statewide stay-at-home order, closing all nonessential businesses and restaurant dining. All volunteer activities ceased because of the order. The stay-at-home order did nothing to stop throngs of out of town visitors attracted by "free admission" to the national park. The great influx caused concern to Morongo Basin residents who were experiencing shortages of essential items like toilet paper and canned food. Residents were acutely aware of the limited medical facilities and worried about visitors travelling from coronavirus "hot spots" while this area had few recorded cases.

Saturday, March 21, Joshua Tree National Park officials received permission to close and "swept" the park, clearing all visitors by Saturday noon. The preserve was inundated despite being closed.



New trail signs direct visitors to follow COVID-compliant traffic patterns. Photo by Cindy VonHalle

Hundreds of visitors streamed past closed gates and through the porous entries near adjoining parks. They parked along both sides of nearby residential roads, creating traffic nightmares. The audience was filled with individuals who possessed no responsible outdoor ethics. Dee and I had to patrol and stop over a dozen dogs and their owners. Dee even had to reason with a visitor who wanted to bring a leashed domestic cat into the preserve, "But the signs says no dogs!" Dee informed him, "The sign says we're Closed!" Thankfully, the following day was not nearly as crowded with trespassers.

As the coronavirus spread quickly, much research was done regarding the method of transmission. Certain precautions seemed almost universally accepted and many were mandated: wear masks when indoors or in proximity of members from different households; limit prolonged (15 minute) indoor interactions; and maintain a minimum

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New Bi-Lingual Publications Available

We are pleased to announce several new additions to the array of publications we offer, free, to any visitor.

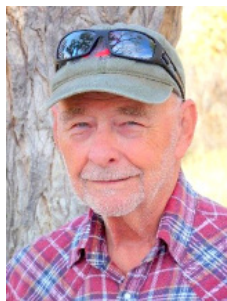
Big Morongo Bingo – a fun “bingo” game to encourage children to find as many animals, plants, feathers, nests, and other objects during their visit. Bingo is in English on one side and Spanish on the reverse side.

The Track Map is a fascinating guide to the “tracks” imprinted in the cement near the entry kiosk and stories they tell.

Our popular Map & Trail Guide is now published in Spanish to better serve all visitors to BMCP.

CHATTING WITH DEE... by Cindy VonHalle

On a hot July afternoon, I interviewed Dee over the phone. He announced that the bear is back! The bear’s recent visit brought down a few humming-bird feeders. Dee brings the feeders in nightly when the bear has been present. On the more tranquil side, a mother mule deer with twins and two does with one fawn each can be seen wandering about the preserve. Also, four bucks are in velvet with racks, ranging from “spike” to five point. The endangered least Bell’s vireos are in the area, with one nest, a suspected second clutch, visible near an observation deck. Dee reports no sign of cowbirds– birds that lay eggs in vireos’ nests and are a main reason for the vireo’s decline and endangered status.



The mornings at Dee’s porch are full of birdsong with a daily species count hovering around 15 or 16 including both hooded and the Bullock’s orioles. Occasionally a Cooper’s hawk lands nearby to

plop down in the bird bath, cooling itself in the water. I never imagined raptors using a bird bath. Summer tanagers, western tanagers, and lazuli buntings joined a raucous red-shouldered hawk in recent weeks to round out the arrival of summer’s avian menagerie.

Dee walks the trails every day. He has noticed a decline in predator sightings like bobcats and raccoons. When I asked about the recent COVID-19 closure, Dee quickly shared his disappointment at missing all the daily visitors and leading the bird walks. He often sees people entering the preserve to walk and enjoy being outside. His son, Bear, delivered lunch and supplies over the gate as Dee strictly observed the stay-at-home order. Dee learned, and now uses, COVID-19 cleaning protocols for the public rest-rooms. With the preserve open again, he is grateful to BMCP’s volunteer Ambassadors; who model COVID compliance by wearing masks to greet the public.

After hearing about all the comings and goings of wildlife from Dee, I can’t wait to visit the preserve again and get back to exploring.

Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve

Board of Directors

- Jane Olson, President
- Ann Garry, Vice President
- 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

Fall, 2020

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BMCP WELCOMES NEW EDUCATION DIRECTOR by Angela Kinley

Hi, my name is Angela Kinley, I am the new Education Director here at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve. I have worked in the non-profit sector for many years with a focus on programs and issues relating to children and young adults. Starting a new job is often challenging however starting that job during the beginning of a global pandemic is hard to describe. Dolly Parton once said, “We cannot direct the wind, but we can adjust the sails.” This has been my ballast while navigating the uncharted waters of COVID-19 and considering its effect on the future of educational programing. Unfortunately we had to cancel the Summer Encounter day camp, due to State and County mandates. Therefore, we had

to shift the focus to reviving the Junior Naturalist Program, a limited online and self-directed offering for High School students who want to learn more about the flora and fauna of BMCP. I have helped with trail maintenance, I even helped to develop and install the new COVID-compliant signage. Currently we are exploring how to bring our school programs and volunteer training to the digital world, with even the possibility of a virtual field trip, in hopes of offering and expanding our community programing making it accessible to anyone. This situation has presented an opportunity to creatively innovate new and enriching ways for people to experience BMCP I look forward to sharing them with you in the future.



Angela Kinley became BMCP’s newest Education Director in early April. Photo by Cindy VonHalle

Volunteer Services Take a Coronavirus Hit by Cindy VonHalle and Ann Garry

State and county COVID-19 mandates caused the cancellation of all activities: bird walks; school groups; Earth Day; the Desert Wise Living Tour of the pollinator garden, and Saturdays at the Nature Center. We were ordered to close the preserve and cease all volunteer activities. Volunteers at Big Morongo Canyon soon missed the reward that comes with joining others in the pursuit of service.

As a field trip leader, Jane “Spider” Fawke missed her outdoor classroom. Jane finds delight in sharing the beauty and life of Big Morongo Canyon with future nature lovers. She also missed seeing all the migrant birds during spring migration. When Caroline Conway’s field trips were cancelled, she missed seeing children spill out of the school buses, full of questions and excitement for a day in nature. She reminds us that “there is nothing like the bright energy and sharp eyes of children to make a walk into an adventure.”

To resume limited volunteer activities, COVID protocols, risk assessments and



Birders walk the Marsh Trail during one of the last pre-COVID bird walks. Photo by Cindy VonHalle

decision trees had to be written for each activity, volunteer position, and project (the installation of ‘one-way’ signage was considered a project!). All protocols had to be submitted for approval at the state level. As of this writing, we have received permission to resume trail work (including pollinator garden work), restroom

cleaning and the Ambassador Program. New protocols include individual wellness checks, special COVID cleaning protocols, masks, social distancing, limited entry into buildings, and Blood Borne Pathogen training for restroom cleanings.

Last year during March, April and May volunteers contributed 1,691 hours, valued at \$29.95 per hour, or \$50,645.00—an amount we can use when applying for “match amount” grants. This year’s closure leaves a large deficit in contributed hours, especially evident on the overgrown trails that lacked regular attention during spring.

We were limited to a maximum of six people for volunteer trail crews. Thankfully, six strong volunteers braved the heat on short notice to get the signage installed. Ambassadors immediately returned when we opened to help orient visitors to the new one-way trail routes. They reported visitors’ gratitude and appreciation for being able to come to BMCP again.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR’S REPORT: BMCP in the Time of COVID by Meg Foley

As detailed in other articles, COVID-19 closures and restrictions had a big impact on BMCP operations.

While programs and activities were postponed indefinitely, daily duties continued. During the closure we applied for and received a very generous grant for Youth Engagement from the Conservation Lands Foundation and Edison International. The funding helps underwrite part of the Education Director’s wages, provides for bus funding to bring students for field trips. Each student will receive an “Adventure Pack” – a backpack with a reusable water bottle, magnifying glass, notebooks, Leave No Trace principles, and lots of education material designed to further interest kids in the environment, whether in their own backyards or on public lands.

The preserve’s operating budget is about \$100,000 per year with over 75% funded through grants, memberships, and donations. Our revenue took a tremendous “hit” due to the closure. Public support is almost \$21,000 behind budget projec-

tions since we were closed during the busiest months of spring. Recycled cans, bottles, and glass, redeemed by Dee and our volunteers, were also prohibited for many months.

Directors and volunteers stayed busy during the stay-at-home orders. Dave Miller revised the large maps to reflect the ‘one-way’ routes on some trails. He also did layouts for the bilingual maps and animal tracks map thanks to Marlene Wilson’s translating skills. Ann Garry and Cindy VonHalle developed the Big Morongo Bingo activity. Donna Thomas began the daunting task of updating the reptile and amphibian list – a task she has the experience and skill set to tackle. Some local volunteers “snuck in” to help keep an eye on the many visitors who streamed in during the closures.

Dee, Angela, and I safely worked in separate buildings and managed to keep an eye on the trails while keeping distance from each other. The need for a presence, on grounds, even during the closure was made clear by the increased

number of visitors trying to ride bikes on trails and bringing dogs into the marsh area. We managed to clear egress through several large trees that fell across trails. BMCP owes a big thanks to BLM fire department for sending the on-duty engine crew from JTNP to clear a huge, double-trunked cottonwood canopy from the trail. The impenetrable canopy knocked another large tree over when it fell.

More Zoom meetings, COVID webinars, applications for COVID grant funds, writing coronavirus protocols for the resumption of volunteer activities, and planning contingency Education programs kept us hopping in between trail work and patrols. Friends’ volunteer support was critical since the volunteer co-host position is still unfilled and awaiting permission to advertise.

While there was, and will continue to be, extra work and COVID considerations, we are grateful to know our valued volunteers remain healthy – the most important factor for all of us!

The Preserve Without Us by Joe Zarki

Recently, my book club read “The World Without Us” by Alan Weisman. The book discusses what would happen if people suddenly disappeared from the earth. How would it affect the remaining species, and how long will evidence of humans remain? The book was a best seller and an interesting thought experiment leading people to wonder if the virus pandemic may provide a real opportunity to see Weisman’s premise play out in reality.

The closure of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve on March 17 did not stop all people from visiting the preserve, but it did reduce the daily visitor traffic allowing wildlife a bit more human-free time and space at BMCP. How did Nature respond at BMCP? Could we detect any changes? And how would we know? Weekly bird walks stopped in late February and only recently resumed (without visitors), but a number of data collection efforts, both formal and informal, continued to produce records for BMCP during the closure, and examining these we can perhaps gain some insights into BMCP’s brief, Eden-like existence.



A broad-tailed hummingbird was an exciting mid-May discovery for visiting birders.
Photo courtesy of Roger Uzun

Looking at birds, some 95 trip checklists were turned into eBird for Big Morongo Canyon Preserve from March 17 until June 25 during the closure. A checklist on March 17, the first day of the closure, showed the presence of winter birds such as ruby-crowned kinglet and white-crowned sparrow but also picked up a few spring arrivals such as rufous

hummingbird and six unidentified swallows. Tom Benson, the San Bernardino County eBird Coordinator, found 42 species on March 21, the first day of spring, including early migrants such as Pacific-slope flycatcher, Cassin’s and warbling vireos, and Wilson’s warbler. Gene Cardiff turned in six Morongo Preserve checklists during the closure period. Among the notable birds Gene found are broad-tailed hummingbird, Hammond’s flycatcher, olive-sided flycatcher, hermit warbler, blue grosbeak, indigo bunting, and six Indian peafowl! Dave Goodward found 56 species on May 20– the most of any eBirder during the closure– including green heron, dusky flycatcher, and Swainson’s thrush.

On iNaturalist, 32 observers reported observations for 156 species of living things during the closure including 96 plants, 13 reptiles, 20 birds, three mammals, 22 insects (including 14 butterflies), one spider, and one fungi. Among the notable iNaturalist observations are a northern three-lined boa, a California vole (near the Education Center), a leda ministreak, and the diabolical ironclad beetle.

In late April, I took part in the 2020 City Nature Challenge. This worldwide event involves teams of field observers who canvas a given geographic area over a four-day period and record their sightings in the iNaturalist database. Over the course of the event, hundreds of thousands of observations are generated creating a treasure trove of natural history data. As part of the southern California Inland Empire team, my area of focus included the Morongo Basin, and I spent ½ day at BMCP on April 27. Our ‘team’ of 480 observers racked up 10,611 observation of 1,673 species. My personal haul was 125 observations of 103 species. The top observer for the Inland Empire put me to shame as Colin Barrows recorded 1,076 observations of 290 species. While these numbers seem impressive, the CNC team from South Africa amassed an astonishing 38,249 observations of 4,354 species, taking top world honors.

Although it’s clear that Nature does quite well without us, the closure shows us that the well-being of people depends on access to a healthy natural world.

Coronavirus Impacts (cont. from p.1)

distance of six feet from people of different households, whether indoors or outdoors.

Three of BMCP’s most heavily used trails– Marsh, Mesquite, and Desert Willow– were too narrow to allow walkers to pass and maintain the required safe distance. The trails were designated “one way” in hopes visitors would comply and negate the need to pass a fellow walker. New trail signage was developed, funded by board member donations, produced, and installed with volunteer help. COVID protocols to allow some limited volunteer duties were written and approved.

Most visitors are compliant. They follow the one-way routes and wear masks when in the vicinity of others. State and county regulations either relax or restrict in response to hospitalizations, positive cases, doubling time of cases, hospital capacity, testing availability and capacity of contact tracing capabilities.

It has been a challenge, and will be for the foreseeable future, to keep apprised of changing regulations and try to adjust our operations and programming accordingly. This unprecedented experience has made several points clear at BMCP– the preserve is a social heartbeat for so many of us who volunteer here. Everyone expresses grief over the loss of regular contact with volunteer friends while accomplishing needed tasks.

We are committed to resuming programs when it is safe and modifying activities to allow a healthy and beneficial experience at Big Morongo Canyon.



Screwbean mesquite was recorded at BMCP during the April CNC Challenge. Photo by Joe Zarki

BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

Stay Engaged, Get Involved by Meg Foley

Local engagement and involvement in governmental processes can have a positive effect. The Big Morongo Canyon Preserve directly benefits from past efforts of a galvanized community. In 2007, the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power wanted to build a 500 kv transmission line through the preserve. This detrimental project was permanently defeated thanks to an incredible, concerted local effort. The designation of the Sand to Snow National Monument was a result of many different stakeholder groups, individuals, recreational users, local governments, businesses and churches advocating for the designation for many years.

There has been a marked increase in proposed projects on Bureau of Land Management Lands since the coronavirus struck. The BLM was pushed to move ahead with oil and gas lease sales on more than 200,000 acres of public land in Wyoming, Nevada, Montana,

and Colorado. Jim Kenna, who retired after a 40-year career with the Bureau of Land Management and joined the Conservation Lands Foundation board of directors, noted, "This [action] is despite the fact that America has so much oil that we're out of places to store it and oil and gas companies are already sitting on nearly 10,000 unused drilling permits."

In mid-July, President Trump announced an overhaul of the 50-year-old National Environmental Policy Act claiming it has slowed the construction of highways, pipelines, and other major projects across the country. The law ensures public input and requires the federal government to analyze environmental impacts of major projects and federal actions.

Limited space here doesn't allow the listing of dozens more such actions and proposals. If you care about preserving unique environments for future generations, you can have an impact by staying

engaged in the process. The Morongo Basin Conservation Association does a phenomenal job tracking ill-suited projects and legislative proposals as well as hosting informative events, lectures, and programs. You can sign up for free e-blasts to keep apprised of action items at: <https://mbconservation.org>.

The Conservation Lands Foundation supports National Conservation Lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management. They track concerns, legislation and projects impacting western lands. See: <https://www.conservationlands.org/>.

These are just two organizations that offer an easy means to stay informed. Mojave Desert Land Trust and the National Parks Conservation Association are other partnering organizations that provide concerned individuals ways to stay engaged, support public lands, and have your voices heard.



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.



CALENDAR

AT BMCP

AUGUST – NOVEMBER

Gate open 7:30 a.m. to Sunset, 365 days a year

WEDNESDAY BIRD WALKS

All bird walks have been cancelled during the pandemic and will not be rescheduled until permitted by state and county regulations. Please stay tuned for announcements concerning the resumption of activities as soon as conditions allow.

NATURE CENTER

Starting September 4– Outdoor Education Station Saturdays, 9am-1pm. Join us on the Nature Center patio as volunteers and staff will be on hand to share displays and to answer questions. Caps, shirts, and pins are available for sale.

Friday, Saturday & Sunday: Ambassadors will be at the kiosk to provide information on the latest BMCP happenings. They are very happy to make recommendations for walks based upon weather, fitness and time.

UPCOMING EVENTS

August 28, Education Docent Zoom Orientation. Come learn more about Big Morongo Canyon Preserve and how to work with students or adults to provide an introduction to BMCP and foster an appreciation for the preserve.

Email: education.bcmp@gmail.com for more information and to receive a Zoom invitation.

September 18, 2020, Every Friday, 1:00 – 4:00. Junior Naturalist Nature Center drop in hours.

October 14, 2020 Annual Meeting - 3:00 p.m. Check our website www.bigmorongo.org and/or Facebook for details and meeting format.

Check www.bigmorongo.org for more information on future events.