



BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

NEWSLETTER

Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve

Spring/Summer, 2021

Looking Back on 40 Years of Christmas Birding by Joe Zarki

In 1981, two young birders working at the Whitewater River Trout Farm sat down with some USGS maps and decided to create a new Christmas Bird Count circle. Centered around Morongo Valley, the count created by Stephen Myers and David Hatch was first held on December 27, 1981. Twenty-two local area naturalists including Gene Cardiff, Bob McKernan, George Helmkamp, Barbara Carlson, and Chet McGaugh took part that year and found 83 bird species.

On December 19, 2020, the Morongo Valley Christmas Count marked its 40th consecutive year as part of the National Audubon Society's annual winter birding tradition. The 2020 COVID crisis created special risks for participants, and we considered ways to run the count while adhering to mandatory public health rules. Our biggest change was a decision not to gather as a group— either before or after the count. We handled all count preparation and tabulation of results by email or phone. While a few 'snowbirds' missed the count this year due to travel restrictions, we still had 37 participants. It was a relief, as well, that no one contracted the virus during the count.

Was it worth it? For only the second time, Christmas counters totaled more than



"Ho-hum...just another birder," this burrowing owl seems to be thinking. Photo by Barry Mantell.

100 species of birds— 102 to be precise, the second highest total ever, topped only by the 105 species found during the 1984 count. One new species for the Christmas Count, a Cassin's kingbird, was seen at Covington Park, the 193rd Count Day species. A number of seldom seen birds made appearances on the 2020 count including hooded merganser, mountain quail, black-crowned night-heron, pygmy nuthatch, and, unusual for winter, a Wilson's warbler. We reached high counts for individuals of eight different species.

The 40-year history of the Morongo Valley Christmas Count represents many generations in the lives of birds as well as some significant ecological and social changes in the human ecosystem. The period is equally divided between the end of the 20th century and the first decades of the 21st century spanning seven Presidential administrations. California grew from a population of 24 million to more than 40 million, and issues such as climate change, alternative energy development, long-term drought, and cataclysmic wildfires became dominant environmental concerns. What lessons can we learn from our winter bird populations over that time? Do any particular trends stand out over the count's history (see Fig. 1)?

Simply put, the 1980s were for the birds. The three highest species total and the three highest individuals totals all occurred during the 1980s. In 1984 alone, count records for species (105) and individuals (7,615) were set that remain unbroken. Remarkably, the three counts from 1983-1985 each had more than 7,000 birds and averaged 97 spe-



Cassin's kingbird made its first appearance on a Morongo Valley Christmas Count. Photo by Margaret Hoggan.

cies. No count since 1985 has ever again reached 7,000 birds.

The 1990s saw dramatically lower numbers of bird species and individuals. This time was marked by the spread of exotic grasses and wet years followed by hot, dry years that led to larger and more frequent desert wildfires. This coincided with several counts having very low numbers of birds— 1,022 in 2000 and

1,895 in 2002, a year of exceptional drought. During a 10-year run from 1997-2006, no Morongo Valley count reached 80 species.

The first decade of the new century was a mixed bag for birds.

Several years of abundant rains led bird numbers to rebound yet overall species diversity was fairly low. The 2005 count was noteworthy for a high individuals total of 6,457, the highest since 1985. The 2009 count found 95 species, the best species total since 1987.

Fig. 1 Data by Decade for the 40-Year History of the Morongo Valley Christmas Bird Count.

Decade	Count Averages		Highs/Lows [Year]	
	Species	Individuals	Species	Individuals
1980s	92	5,183	105 [84] 84 [81]	7,615 [84] 3,388 [89]
1990s	78	2,895	89 [91] 65 [94]	4,089 [92] 1,022 [00]
2000s	79	4,588	95 [09] 62 [02]	6,547 [05] 1,895 [02]
2010s	88	3,932	102[20] 81 [16]	4,741 [17] 3,296 [14]

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Are COVID Changes Coming to BMCP?

Recent reductions in COVID case rates and hospitalizations, plus the more widespread availability of vaccines, offer hope that public health guidelines governing visitor use at BMCP may be relaxed at some point in the future. Any changes in public use will have to follow Bureau of Land Management, State of California, and San Bernardino County rules and procedures. Resumption of public activities will undergo a lengthy risk assessment and decision-making process before any changes to current restrictions can be made. Please check the BMCP website, www.bigmorongo.org, and Facebook for any news or updates regarding public use at the preserve. In the meantime, all BMCP visitors are urged to continue following current rules regarding use of masks, social distancing, and one-way directions on trails.

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Editor: Joe Zarki

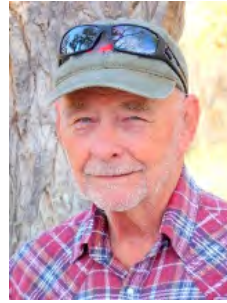
Spring/Summer, 2021

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CHATTING WITH DEE... by Donna Thomas

Turkey vultures, those magnificent birds with red, bald heads and huge wingspans, often decorate the preserve's trees during spring migration. The vultures are now being studied by Cal Poly Pomona student interns Alex Gresham and Alexandria Koedel. Dee couldn't be happier that "real science" is being done at BMCP.



A vulture-sized trap is baited with food and a captive vulture that can't fly. The trap has a funnel-shaped entry tube allowing a vulture to enter at the wide end, but once inside, it can't scrunch its wings tight enough to fit in the narrow end of the tube to exit. The trap must be closed every night to keep out night creatures, like bobcats or foxes. Captured vultures are fitted with wing tags, and blood samples are taken.

Studying animal behavior is always fascinating for Dee. The frequent visits of deer at his water dishes has allowed him to study male dominance. Two six-point male deer have been visiting in recent months, and one has always dominated the other. Surprisingly, that didn't change, even when the dominant male broke its ankle.



A mule deer buck at BMCP.

Photo by Joe Zarki

Despite limping with a permanently deformed ankle, this super male can still leap over the fence enabling it to continue to chase the other male away. Male deer shed their antlers in winter, and this dominant male has already lost one of his antlers. Over the years, Dee hasn't found shed antlers, but he suspects antlers may be lying in the woods northeast of his trailer. Because deer spend so much time there, he leaves the area to the deer, saying, "This is a place that humans don't go stomping around in."

Dee is finding more fox scat than coyote scat these days and isn't hearing the coyotes calling at night. However, he hasn't yet come up with a theory to explain this change at BMCP.

Now that water has resurfaced in the marsh, the pools of standing water are deeper than last year. This is another difficult-to-explain phenomenon, since the water mainly comes to us underground from high in the mountains and takes multiple years to reach BMCP.

Out on the trails, how does Dee readily spot birds? Dee laughs and says the "art of seeing" method described by Don Juan in Carlos Castaneda's series of books works well. Look ahead but don't focus, then your eyes catch motion. Dee also attributes his gift of seeing to his grandmother, who taught him to be a naturalist at a young age.

EDUCATION HAPPENINGS... by Angela Kinley

Thanks to board members and education docents Jane Olson, Cindy Von Halle, and Caroline Conway our virtual tour is ready for teachers to share with their students. The program is comprised of three short videos highlighting the geology, animal homes and habitats as well as the history of Native Americans at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve.

Teachers of the 1st- 4th grades are invited to share the virtual tour with their students and encourage them to visit BMCP in person. On their visit, each student will receive an Adventure Pack backpack that includes a water bottle, small compass, flash light and magnifying glass as well as an activity book and craft supplies to make an at-home bird feeder. A big

thank you to the Conservation Lands Foundation and Edison International for funding the backpacks and costs of producing the virtual tour.

Saturday Education Outside continues to engage the youth and community with topics changing monthly. We need more volunteers to help with the Education Station and expand the program to Fridays and Sundays. Students will be able to pick up their backpacks at the Nature Center during the *Education Outside* hours, currently 10:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m. If you're interested in sharing the wonders of BMCP with families and students, contact me at: education.bmcp@gmail.com, or call 760-363-1159 (message only – I will return your call!).

BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

MESQUITE, A NATIVE AMERICAN STAPLE... by Elize Van Zandt

Mesquite might be one of the most loved but also one of the most hated of all arid land plants. The Aztecs called it *mizquitl*, which evolved into mesquite with the arrival of the Spanish. For the Aztecs, and for many indigenous desert dwellers, it was a treasured plant for centuries. Later, it became the bane of cattlemen, as it invaded overgrazed grasslands, forming thick stands that were impossible to completely eradicate.

Different species of mesquite, or *Prosopis*, are found in the Southwest. At Big Morongo Preserve, there is honey mesquite, *Prosopis glandulosa* var. *torreyana*, and near Covington Park, a few stands of screwbean mesquite, *Prosopis pubescens*, are found.

For the Serrano Indians, who inhabited the Morongo Valley until being decimated by smallpox in 1862, honey mesquite was their most utilized native plant. Because of the permanent water flowing through Big Morongo Canyon, mesquite flourishes here, and because of these mesquite bosques, the Morongo band was able to establish a stable settlement.

It was not just a food source, however; every part of the plant was utilized. The trunks were used to make wooden mortars in which to pound the pods, and the limbs were shaped into bows and arrows. Larger limbs were used in house



Shown here c. 1903, Captain Luis Torres stands next to a mesquite granary. The granary is made from mesquite branches and may have been used to hold acorns.

Photo courtesy of the USC Digital Library and the California Historical Society.

construction. The bark became kindling, and also was pounded and shaped for clothing. Even the thorns were sometimes used for creating tattoos. Women would sit in the shade of the groves to work, and small game, also seeking the shade and protection of the mesquite, could be flushed, then shot with the mesquite bows and arrows.

But it was as a food source that it was most valuable. The blossoms were roasted, squeezed into balls, and either eaten on the spot or stored. The green pods were crushed into a pulpy extract that, combined with water, made a good thirst-quencher in the warmer months. The mature pods were the most important, as they could be ground in the mortars and made into cakes that didn't need baking, and hunters could easily carry the cakes on long trips. The pods could also be stored in granaries for up to a year. The nutritional value of mesquite beans compares favorably to barley, providing protein, carbohydrates, and fat. And for variety, mesquite pods could be traded for acorns harvested by the mountain Serrano.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT: BMCP ANNIVERSARIES... by Meg Foley

It is hard to believe we just marked the one-year anniversary of the first COVID cases detected in San Bernardino County. COVID-related travel continues to have an impact on visitation. The preserve was extremely busy in December and January despite Stay at Home orders. The estimated visitation, from the traffic counter, for January 2021 is 10,502 visitors, compared with January, 2020's count of 6,064— a 73% increase! December's count of 7,896 is a 55% rise over December, 2019. February appears to be on track with similar increases. These counts exclude any estimates of visitors entering via Covington Park and the other porous entries.

Some of the increase can be attributed to milder weather this year and the continuing trend toward higher visitation on our desert public lands. Tailgaters, picnickers, and visitors from the Los Angeles and San Diego area have been observed in numbers not seen before COVID-related visitation. We were unable to schedule any volunteer activities during the 'Stay at Home' orders and greatly felt our volunteers' absence. The "new user groups" don't always adhere to Leave No Trace ethics as is evidenced by trash on

the trails. We're fortunate that so many regular walkers feel ownership of BMCP and help pick up litter, report graffiti and move limbs from trails.

This March marks 11 years since the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power abandoned their plan to bring a 500kv transmission line through the BMCP and Pioneertown. An incredibly impressive, local grassroots effort worked for years to show a "smart path" to increasing renewable energy production. The success led to efforts to form the Sand to Snow National Monument and offer greater protections to Areas of Critical Environmental Concern, like BMCP.

February 16th marked the 5th anniversary of the designation of the Sand to Snow National Monument. The preservation of wildlife corridors was needed, especially considering the extreme impact of wildfires in 2005 and 2006 to the BMCP and surrounding lands. The presence of bear each spring and summer and healthy big horn sheep populations illustrates how wildlife depends upon the corridors to find suitable habitat between Joshua Tree National Park and the San Geronio Wilderness.

Much of our success, whether it's maintaining the preserve's facilities, educating our visitors, or fighting the battles to protect BMCP and adjoining desert landscapes, is owed to a common factor— volunteers. BMCP is fortunate to be located in an area with extremely engaged, giving communities. Many of our board members and volunteers were actively engaged in the efforts to protect and preserve the BMCP. Sally Jewell, former Secretary of the Interior, visited the BMCP in 2015 and observed that she wasn't aware of another preserve run by volunteers, with no full-time staff presence. The BMCP still does not enjoy a ranger presence and the state of the preserve is truly a credit to our volunteers. We appreciate your support whether working on the trails, educating visitors, or providing financial support.

Your assistance is needed more than ever and helps protect this unique place for wildlife, native flora, and visitors. Contact me, if you're interested in becoming more involved. Let's hope by this time, next year we will be able to resume full programs and activities and are celebrating new anniversaries!

A Newly Discovered Gecko and Other Rarely Seen Lizards... by Donna Thomas



Peninsula leaf-toed gecko— newly discovered at BMCP. Photo by Robert Black

A significant herpetological discovery was made in BMCP in May of 2018 when a leaf-toed gecko was found by 11-year-old Alyssa Worrell-Black, a local youth with a passion for reptiles and the natural world.

On that spring night, Alyssa, her dad, amateur herpetologist Robert Black, and her little sister Adya were ‘herping’— looking for reptiles—in a canyon at the far southeast corner of BMCP near Desert Hot Springs. Spotting movement, she reached out and grabbed what appeared to be a peninsula leaf-toed gecko, a clear give away being its leaf-like toe pads. This was a big surprise, because this leaf-toed gecko shouldn’t be here.

Scientists were excited by Alyssa’s find, which was a first ever recorded occurrence of the peninsula leaf-toed gecko (*Phyllodactylus nocticolus*) in the mountains of the Transverse Ranges on the north side of the Coachella Valley. This gecko was 20 miles from the species’ previous most northerly occurrence in Tahquitz Canyon on the south side of the Coachella Valley in the Peninsular Ranges.

Today the aeolian sand system of the Coachella Valley separates this newly found gecko from its relatives nearly 20 miles south, an unrealistically long trek for this rock-loving gecko. If of natural origin, the dispersal of the species would have occurred thousands of years ago at a time when the aeolian sand barrier was less severe. DNA testing showed that the disjunct Transverse Ranges population differed from that of any population sampled in the Peninsular Ranges. The test results showed a significant genetic difference, perhaps making Alyssa’s leaf toed gecko a new subspecies.

BMCP can now claim 13 lizard species, with much diversity in size, shape, color and pattern, preferred habitat, and activity. Visitors often see the small,

ubiquitous western side-blotched lizard, the spiny-scaled desert spiny lizard, the long-tailed Great Basin whiptail lizard, or the Great Basin fence lizard (often called “blue bellies”). But many other delightful lizards make the preserve their home, although they are seldom seen.

Besides our new leaf-toed gecko, there is another gecko, the desert banded gecko, *Coleonyx variegatus variegatus*, who moves about at night and thus is rarely seen. Its thin skin is semi-transparent on its belly, allowing a female’s eggs to be seen through the skin.



Desert banded gecko, common at BMCP but rarely seen because it is nocturnal. Photo by Robert Black

A most surprising, rarely seen lizard is the San Diegan legless lizard, *Anniella stebbinsi*. Yep, this lizard has no legs, so it can be mistaken for a snake. But, it can readily lose and regenerate its tail, something no snake can do. It forages by day underneath decaying organic matter where it goes unnoticed.



San Diegan legless lizard— it’s not a snake. Photo by Robert Black

The common chuckwalla (*Sauromalus ater*) isn’t so common at BMCP, at least not in the main part of the preserve where visitors enjoy our many trails. A



Common chuckwalla, a very large lizard measuring up to 16-1/2 inches in length. Photo by Bill Truesdell

hike down the Canyon Trail to the lower canyon though may reward one with a view of this large, potbellied lizard that has skin folds and a thick tail. Look up at the rocky cliff faces along the trail to spot a sun loving chuckwalla basking on hot rock ledges. If frightened, the chuckwalla will escape into a rock crevice and inflate itself to prevent its removal by a predator.



Amorous long-nosed leopard lizards— female is larger than the male. Photo by Robert Black

With its spots and large size, the long-nosed leopard lizard, *Gambelia wislizenii*, is a stunning lizard, especially females who develop colorful orange spots and bars after mating. Lying in wait for prey in the dappled light below a bush, it is well camouflaged and easily overlooked.



A western red-tailed skink emerges from below a boardwalk trail, providing a rare sighting. Photo by Ann Brooks

The western red-tailed skink, *Plestiodon gilberti rubricaudatus*, is likely common in the preserve’s marsh and riparian areas, but is secretive as it moves among low growth. This smooth-scaled and shiny lizard has small legs supporting its heavy body and thick neck.

The preserve’s current Reptiles & Amphibians checklist (available on our website, <http://www.bigmorongo.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Reptiles2021.pdf>) includes 31 species of reptiles, amphibians, and one turtle. Keep an eye out for our herpetological fauna, and bring a youngster along—their eyes are great at spotting little, moving things. Take pictures, and let us know what you have seen.

BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

Forty Years of Christmas Birding (cont. from p.1) :

The 2010s saw greater species diversity while overall numbers of birds remained fairly low. This trend of good species diversity but low overall numbers was also seen on the Joshua Tree National Park Christmas Count. Six years out of 10 during the decade saw below average numbers of individuals for the Morongo count, a good example being 2015 where 94 species were recorded, tying the 3rd highest species count at the time, but only 3,664 birds were found.

Looking at aggregate numbers for bird families, we find that some groups fared better during the 20th century counts. Among those groups doing better in the last century are: geese, rails, woodpeckers, wrens, thrushes, sparrows, icterids, and finches. Birds doing better during the 21st century are: ducks, quail, raptors, pigeons and doves, and mockingbirds and thrashers.

However, one must be careful in drawing conclusions from our count data. While the numbers of waterfowl found in the last two decades nearly quadruple those seen on 20th century counts, this may be



A sagebrush sparrow seen by a feeder watcher is one of the first identified on a Christmas Count.

Photo by Donna Thomas.

due, in part, to more observers looking in places such as golf course ponds, a habitat that has grown in recent years with the larger human population. Similarly, dove and pigeon numbers have also increased dramatically over time.

It's also true that the number of observers has been growing. Counts in the 20th century averaged 17 counters. In the 21st century, Morongo Valley Christmas Counts averaged more than 36 participants including a record 54 people who turned out for the 2018 count. All those extra eyes help to maximize the data

collected making direct comparisons of different eras more difficult.

A recent study of Mojave Desert bird populations comparing species composition and population levels of desert birds with data collected years ago by George Grinnell and others has caused alarm among ecologists. It appears that many desert species may be now reaching their physiological limits due to the warming climate (see: <https://www.audubon.org/news/how-climate-change-pushes-even-hardest-desert-birds-past-their-limit>). Long-term data sets like the Christmas Bird Count become all the more important as science tracks the growing impacts of a changing climate on the world's biota.

However, data alone can't express the value of the Christmas Bird Count to a social animal such as *Homo sapiens*. Bird counts are times to meet old friends, discover new ones, explore our varied desert landscapes, and enjoy the pleasure, the beauty, and the wonder of birds. Even a worldwide pandemic can't take that away.



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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NEWSLETTER (WINTER, SPRING/SUMMER, FALL)

- EMAIL MAIL NEITHER

SUPPORT

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.

Credit card donations can be made at www.bigmorongo.org. Donations are tax deductible. As a special thank you, new Friends receive a BMCP embroidered patch.

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GO GREEN...to choose the digital option for receiving your newsletter, email us @ bmcp@bigmorongo.org.



CALENDAR

AT BMCP

MARCH – AUGUST

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

WEDNESDAY BIRD WALKS (**CANCELLED** DUE TO COVID)

All bird walks have been **cancelled** during the pandemic and will not be rescheduled until permitted by state and county regulations and authorized by the Bureau of Land Management. Please watch for announcements concerning the resumption of activities when conditions allow. Lists of recently seen birds may be viewed at: www.bigmorongo.org/birds.

NATURE CENTER

Outdoor Education Station: Saturdays. 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

April 22– Earth Day.

Volunteer Trail Crew– Celebrate Earth Day by volunteering to help remove invasive Sahara mustard plants and prune trails at BMCP on Saturday, April 24 from 9 a.m. to Noon. Sign up in advance as spaces are limited so we can ensure COVID-compliant work situations. Contact Meg to sign up: bmcp@bigmorongo.org.