



BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

NEWSLETTER

Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve

Fall, 2021

Meet Big Morongo Canyon's New Executive Director by Joe Zarki

There's been a change in leadership at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve. With the departure of Meg Foley, Jocelyn Silverlight has arrived to take over the helm as Executive Director for the Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve. Jocelyn hails from Massachusetts by way of New Jersey. She's a graduate of the University of Massachusetts-Amherst with an undergraduate degree in Anthropology and a Masters in Social Justice Education.

Jocelyn brings a varied and interesting background to her role at BMCP. She has worked as a veterinary technician and was also the elected president of United Auto Workers Local 2322 representing mainly educators and social service workers in Massachusetts, Vermont, and New Hampshire. She most recently served as a volunteer campground host at Jumbo Rocks Campground in Joshua Tree National Park where she gained on-the-ground experience in park and recreation management as well as volunteering for a public-lands agency.

Arriving in May, Jocelyn began her tenure at BMCP during an unsettled time.



The country is slowly, but unsteadily emerging from the COVID pandemic that has claimed the lives of well over 600,000 Americans and more than 2 million people worldwide. At the preserve, public programs, such as our popular bird walks, were discontinued and have yet to be resumed. Most education programs were cancelled in 2020 due to public health restrictions and only now

are plans being made to begin offering school programs again this fall.

The pandemic had a tremendous impact on volunteer recruitment and regular operations. With seniors, a group especially vulnerable to the coronavirus, forming a large component of the preserve's volunteer corps, one of Jocelyn's immediate tasks is to rebuild volunteer support for BMCP operations as soon as it is safe to do so. The repeated waves of virus infections and the large numbers of unvaccinated people make resumption of normal activities a real challenge amid all the uncertainty.

Jocelyn hopes to reach out to Morongo Basin youth to provide more education opportunities for young people both inside and outside the classroom. With the ever-present need to find volunteers, it is hoped that more young people can be enticed to learn about the natural history and beauty of the preserve while at the same time stepping up to help take care of their public lands. This newsletter issue has a feature on one local youth

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THERE'S NO BRUSHING OFF BRUSH MANAGEMENT AT BMCP... by Eric Sippert

The accumulation of brush is a growing problem at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve. Brush at BMCP comes from two sources. First, the removal of tree limbs and branches that have been cleared near trails, in particular the Marsh, Mesquite, and Desert Willow trails. This brush is created both by individual volunteers and groups. Ideally, when trimming is done the brush is hauled out immediately, such as when a team from the California Conservation Corps visits. However, removing brush can be more work than the trimming itself. Second, brush comes from older or dead trees and plants; a problem that has been worsened by the drought and heat waves we are currently experiencing.

With the fire season growing longer every year, brush management is increasingly important. In recent years, brush has been identified as an important component of wildfires. Counties such as Los Angeles County now require landowners to remove brush within 200 feet of buildings. Here in San Bernardino County, county ordinances specify all "flammable vegetation and combustible growth" must be removed within 30 feet of buildings. Clearing brush is an expensive and time-consuming task. When should it be removed, where should it be moved, and who has the responsibility to do so are important conservation policy questions across California. BMCP must also consider that brush is the habitat

of many creatures that call this preserve home. What impact does brush clearance have on animals that rely on brush as a home, hunting area, or resource?



Mount 'Brushmore' is a constant presence near the Natural Science Education Center. Photo by Eric Sippert.

BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

BMCP NEEDS YOU!

Running a place like Big Morongo Canyon Preserve requires a lot of help. People are always needed to serve in a wide variety of roles. If you'd like to get involved, there are plenty of things you can do. In this issue, you'll read about the never-ending need for trail work. It's a giant task. But there are many other ways that people can pitch in such as working with visiting school groups and other preserve visitors, helping raise funds to support BMCP, collecting data on natural resources such as monitoring water levels, and helping maintain the gardens near the Education Center. Perhaps you have a skill or talent that could help make BMCP a better place. If so, please contact Jocelyn to discuss how you can be part of the BMCP team.

ATTENTION SHOPPERS

New BMCP merchandise is coming this fall so watch for an announcement about availability of these new items. Get a head start on your holiday shopping this year at BMCP!

Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve

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Angela Kinley, Education Director

NEWSLETTER

Editor: Joe Zarki

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CHATting WITH DEE... by Donna Thomas

The Big Morongo Canyon Preserve continues to provide a refuge for wildlife and human visitors throughout this summer of record-breaking heat.

Our feathered friends were here in good numbers, even on days that exceeded 100° F, such as July 7 when 38 bird species were spotted at BMCP. Dee was thrilled that a long-eared owl was seen that day, moving through mesquite and terrifying nearby birds—quail, a California towhee, and a verdin. He had been hoping all summer that long-eared owls would return to the preserve this summer, as they had nested here last summer. His wish came true.

The preserve may be a "dry" oasis these days (no standing water along the Marsh Trail) compared to the wetter, lush oasis before climate change brought on different conditions, but it is still an oasis. Visitors continue to tell Dee how much they enjoy the preserve. Here one can walk along trails that are well shaded and several degrees cooler than the surrounding area. Birding is good, and wildlife—mule deer, bobcat, mountain lion, black bear, and smaller creatures like the pocket gopher, lizards, and snakes—continue to delight people of all ages. This riparian ecosystem is real and not virtual, and it fills a deep need in humans to connect with the natural world.

SAVE the DATE! ... by Angela Kinley

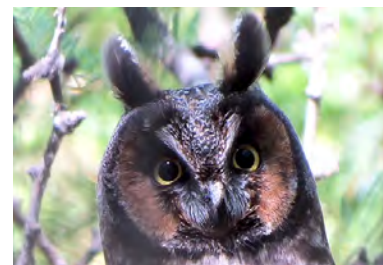
In anticipation of the upcoming school year and seasonal community programming, the Education Committee is hosting a 'Welcome Back Orientation' on October 5th at 9am at the Natural Science Education Center, for former and future docents. This will be a great opportunity to catch up with familiar faces and make connections with new volunteers as well.

Elementary school field trips are the cornerstone of the educational programming at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve. In 2019, nearly 900 students were able to participate in 26 separate tours— all within a three-month period of time! This would have not been possible without the dedication of committed volunteers.



Dee's shaded and cool porch with feeders and water dishes is an oasis in itself. Wildlife can still find water here. Deer pass through frequently, including one doe and her new twin fawns in early July. Then Dee saw a doe with one fawn and thought this was a different doe and single fawn. That was until he received a report that a mountain lion was seen near Covington Park running off with one of two twin fawns.

Also at Dee's mini-oasis, birds cherish seeds, suet, jelly, and saucers of cool water. Vermilion flycatchers nested behind Dee's trailer this summer. A California towhee was able to grab big mouthfuls of suet for its youngsters nearby. And lizards— desert spiny, Great Basin fence, and Great Basin whiptail lizards— have increasingly moved into this microhabitat.



A long-eared owl seen July 8. Photo by Margaret Hoggan

Dee is happy to have partially out-smarted a black bear causing havoc since May. The bear had been tipping over the heavy metal dumpster to access its contents. Dee left the dumpster's lids open and put a yummy tuna sandwich sprayed with hot pepper spray in the dumpster. The bear has left the dumpster alone since then.

Future program goals and educational activities require an assembly of volunteers with varying skill sets and interest levels. Participation as an education volunteer can range from being a school tour docent, staffing the pop-up education stations, providing trail presence, and light administrative work.

Previous experience is not required, just an interest in education and a passion for nature. If you or someone you know would be interested in attending the orientation or participating in the educational programming at BMCP please contact Angela Kinley, Education Director, at education.bmcp@gmail.com.

BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

MEET KAELIEGH WATSON, BMCP VOLUNTEER ... by Eric Sippert

One of BMCP's newest volunteers is Kaeliegh Watson. Kaeliegh is a second-year student at Copper Mountain College where she is pursuing an associate's degree in Environmental Studies.

Born and raised in Joshua Tree, Kaeliegh first visited BMCP as a student at Landers Elementary while on a field trip. She remembers there being more water at that time and seeing frogs and tadpoles throughout the preserve.

After coming to the 2019 Public Lands Day volunteer event at BMCP, Kaeliegh returned in early 2021 to begin volunteering. Kaeliegh volunteers both to get hands on experience in the environment and conservation field as well as spend time in this desert oasis.

On her second day volunteering, Kaeliegh spotted a herd of bighorn sheep near the Canyon Trail and was able



Joshua Tree native, Kaeliegh Watson, hopes to pursue a career in conservation and the environment.
Photo by Jocelyn Silverlight

to show them to several preserve visitors. According to Kaeliegh, volunteering here at BMCP is rewarding because of how grateful people are, the chance to interact with visitors and other volunteers, and the opportunity to share this beautiful landscape with others.

Kaeliegh's volunteering has included trail maintenance as well as cleaning and organizing the nature center in preparation for its reopening. Her favorite task so far was taking a wheelbarrow from the nature center on the Desert Willow Trail and up the Yucca Ridge trail to remove the remains of an old bench.

Through her volunteer service, Kaeliegh is both learning about and developing important skills for the environment and conservation field as well as contributing to the never ending daily upkeep of BMCP.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT: FIRST IMPRESSIONS... by Jocelyn Silverlight

Hello everyone! My name is Jocelyn Silverlight, and I am the new Executive Director here at Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve. Starting here in May, 2021 has presented both opportunities and challenges—most obviously, the heat. Here in Morongo Valley, we are experiencing historic heat waves that are sweeping the entire western United States. Sixty-seven weather stations across the region have recorded their highest temperature readings ever. This June was the hottest on record in California. On July 10 and 11, during our third heat wave of the summer, Morongo Valley broke records as it reached 102 and 108 degrees on each day. We are also slightly below the average rainfall for June with only .02 inches for the month.

This heat impacts daily life here at the preserve. As an oasis, the preserve is a vital source of life at the meeting point of high and low desert. Deer frequently visit the fountain outside of the Education Center. At least one black bear has made the preserve his home. In addition to visiting Dee's bird feeders and the parking lot dumpster, the bear has been heard, smelled, and seen on the Marsh and Mesquite trails. One of the easiest ways to avoid encounters with bears is to make noise while hiking by jangling keys and talking loudly. If you do encounter

a bear, the U.S. National Park Service recommends that you speak to the bear so it knows you are human, make yourself large, leave the bear an escape route, and walk away slowly while facing the bear.

Bighorn sheep descend into valleys in search of water and often surprise BMCP volunteers working to maintain our boardwalks. As the summer heat continues, we are working to schedule volunteer activities in the cooler morning hours. Recent volunteer activities have included trail and road maintenance. In addition to our own volunteers, the California Conservation Corp (CCC) worked with us on removing previously cut debris from some of our trails. We are very grateful to have their hard work as they accomplished a lot in a short amount of time.

We are working with Sand to Snow National Monument and the Bureau of Land Management to plan for "Make a Difference Day" on October 23rd. Normally we would participate in "National Public Lands Day" on September 25th, however, due to the hot weather, we have chosen to postpone our local event until late October. Save the date and keep an eye out for more information regarding COVID-safe ways to volunteer.

Although starting this position at the tail end of migratory season, during a global pandemic, and with record high temperatures, I have had the wonderful opportunity to meet some of the many important BMCP volunteers and supporters. In my short time here you have educated me on our many significant avian visitors. While we have not yet restarted educational programs to the level prior to COVID, Education Director Angela Kinley and I have been plotting and planning on how to bring back youth and adult educational opportunities starting in the fall. We will be readying the Education Center to hopefully open back up this fall as well as forming and invigorating committees such as our Retail Committee to create new and exciting BMCP merchandise.

Big Morongo Canyon Preserve is a special place, made even more unique by the volunteers and supporters who love this land and the flora and fauna who call it home. I am honored to follow in Meg Foley's footsteps of fantastic leadership, and to work with our outstanding Board of Directors, both new and seasoned. Let us all stay safe and be able to come together this year in protecting and preserving the great treasure that is Big Morongo Canyon Preserve.

Phainopepla: Up Close and Personal... by Cindy VonHalle

The phainopepla's lifestyle and habits make it a compelling local bird. Their close association with mesquite and mistletoe is unique among birds.

My first introduction to phainopepla (pronounced *fay-no-pepla*) was from an interpretive sign. As a new supervisor at Joshua Tree National Park, I suggested that the common name be used on a trail sign rather than the scientific one.



The shiny black male phainopepla is a common and unmistakable sight in mesquite thickets.

Photo by Larry Rosen

That's when I found out that this desert resident has no other name than phainopepla, Greek for "black, shining robe." *Phainopepla nitens* is the most northern member of the silky-flycatchers. They are agile in catching insects but are not related to North American flycatchers. Their nearest common ancestors are cedar waxwings.

Soon I began seeing dozens of them perched in sprawling branches of mesquite in the Oasis of Mara. The male often sits at the top of mesquite trees, making it easy to observe. He is jet-black and sometimes appears to have a bluish sheen. Females and juveniles are ashy gray. Bold white wing patches can be seen in flight.

One of my favorite work assignments was conducting nature walks around the oasis. I could regularly predict where visitors would see this elegant black bird with its distinguishing crest. The wildlife varied from day to day. We might see a whiptail lizard or a kingbird. And phain-

opepla was always there. As we rounded the corner of the trail, I pointed, and the birds seem to fly up and overhead on my command. I enjoyed sharing the habits of this desert bird, which to a novice birder resembles a black cardinal.

In southwestern deserts, nesting coincides with the peak of mistletoe berry production and insect populations. Males build a small, cup-shaped nest of twigs for a clutch of two to four eggs. Their courtship is believed to be monogamous, with females visiting several nests until one suits her. Incubation is accomplished by both sexes. After 14 to 16 days, the young chicks hatch naked and helpless and are tended by both parents. Successful fledging occurs within 18 to 25 days, a remarkably long time for open-cup-nesting songbirds. Males have been observed bringing in most of the food, comprised of crushed berries and insects. They often take insects on the wing such as moths and flies, important protein sources for young growing birds.



A female phainopepla feeds her hungry nestlings.

Photo by Julianne Koza

Like the Oasis of Mara, Big Morongo Canyon contains perfect habitat for phainopelas. Thickets of mesquite with clumps of mistletoe are favorite nesting sites. Desert mistletoe, (*Phoradendron californicum*) is a parasitic plant that blooms with minute flowers without petals. Stems are showy red, with leaves reduced to scales. White, pink or red berries grow in clumps on mesquite, and palo verde. Berry-eating birds, like the phainopepla, can process food in as little as half an hour. According to Cornell researchers, 1,000



Phainopeplas have a variety of calls; the most commonly heard is a soft, whistled 'hooeet.'

Photo by Joe Zarki

berries may be eaten in one day! Phainopepla has been called a "farmer bird," for growing their own food. This symbiotic relationship with desert mistletoe is formed in two ways. The seeds may pass through the gut undamaged and when defecated, planted on branches in sticky mucus. Or the bird wipes off the berries with their short, broad bill onto tree branches. Either way, seeds covered with sticky mucus take root to grow more mistletoe.

A few years ago, I returned to the Oasis of Mara and was disappointed. There were no phainopeplas there to greet me. No whistling *hooeet* from the mesquite. Perhaps they had moved on to find more berries. Ornithologists have traced their movements from lowland deserts to higher, moister oak and chaparral in mid-summer. Conservation studies indicate that phainopepla populations have been stable since the 1960s. However, uncontrolled widespread fire is a real threat for all birds and wildlife. Mature mesquite forests continue to be destroyed for development. Thankfully, the islands of cool shade found at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve are here for the rare migrant as well as our remarkable desert residents. Perhaps their adaptability with a varied diet of berries and insects will ensure a place for phainopepla in a rapidly changing world.



In good winters, the phainopepla is one of the most common birds at BMCP.

Photo by Larry Rosen

BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

Meet BMCP's New Executive Director (cont. from p.1) :

who has felt the attraction of BMCP and is now a preserve volunteer. The preserve can use many more.

An updated long-range plan is clearly needed to provide a vision for how the Friends will meet the tremendous increases in recreational visitors coming to the Morongo Basin. Facilities including parking, restrooms, trails, and space for public programs were not designed for the rapidly growing numbers of people that now visit the area at all seasons. This fall, the Friends' Board will hold a strategic planning session to address some of these pressing issues. A long-term dream is to eventually establish an Artist-in-Residence program for BMCP.

With more visitors, there is a need to provide improved safety, regulatory, and interpretive information about the preserve. Modern interpretive media are a key to communicating relevant information to preserve visitors. New interpretive signage is being planned that will provide an improved look to BMCP's outdoor signage.

Jocelyn has been most impressed and gratified by the warm and welcoming community of people that are drawn to the preserve. This sense of caring, for the place and for each other, has made the adjustment to her new role much easier.

Jocelyn confesses that she is surprised by how much the place has changed ecologically over the years. The decrease in surface water from California's prolonged drought has profound implications for the future health of BMCP's riparian ecosystems. Already, large mammals such as mule deer, bighorn sheep, and even black bears are changing their behavior as they seek out the water they need for their survival. The water feature outside the Education Center is increasingly important for local wildlife. Other less obvious ecological changes are certainly taking place as well.

Whatever challenges the Big Morongo Canyon Preserve faces, whether its growing numbers of visitors, lack of funding, or environmental stresses from a changing climate, Jocelyn hopes that

the preserve will always retain its special qualities of peace and respite that comes from the presence of a vibrant oasis in the midst of a vast desert landscape.

Brush Management (cont. from p.1) :

Currently, brush is stored in a large pile near the Education Center. Periodically, the Bureau of Land Management brings a "chipper" to process and remove accumulated brush. Another difficulty is that brush clearance is most needed during the summer months when volunteers may not be available and federal, state, and local resources are stretched thin.

There are many approaches to brush management. As a nature preserve in a changing climate, BMCP strives to provide a habitat for the many native animals that call it home, prevent conditions favorable to wildfires, and use volunteers safely and effectively. Brush management will continue to be issue in the months and years ahead. If interested in volunteering, please contact Executive Director Jocelyn Silverlight.



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.

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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 (**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

October 5– ‘Welcome Back Orientation.’ Natural Science Education Center, 9 a.m. Contact Angela to sign up: education.bmcp@gmail.com.

October 23– Make a Difference Day. Help support the preserve by volunteering on Saturday, October 23. Sign up in advance as spaces are limited so we can ensure COVID-compliant work situations. Contact Jocelyn to sign up: director.bmcp@gmail.com.

Check BMCP’s website and Facebook pages for any announcements about new events or updates on changes to visitor programs and services.

Check www.bigmorongo.org for information and updates on future events.