



BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

NEWSLETTER

Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve

Winter, 2023/2024

Hilary Wreaks Havoc on Big Morongo Canyon Preserve... by Kevin Wong

On Friday, August 18, we watched the projected path and impact zone of Hurricane Hilary as she moved from Mexico towards Southern California. At that time, Hilary was a Category 4 hurricane with sustained winds of 145 mph. Once the storm made landfall, the National Hurricane Center issued its first-ever tropical storm watch for Southern California, which prompted us to enact our contingency plans for Big Morongo Canyon Preserve. We decided to close the preserve to the public on Friday night at closing time. On Saturday, preserve staff prepared for high winds and rain by securing buildings, moving the golf carts to sheltered areas, and collecting any loose items. John Springer, our preserve host, elected to stay put in his RV, even though I encouraged him to leave. He provided us with updates on Sunday and Monday.

On Sunday, August 20, the tropical storm hit the preserve with over five inches of rain and, luckily, the winds had diminished in force. The large amount of flowing water impacted the preserve from two different directions, from the north and from the east. Mud flows descended from Little Morongo Canyon covering Highway 62 and continued to flow down East Drive into the preserve washing out our entry driveway. Mud and debris flows from the east hit the Marsh Trail, and 17 trees fell on or near the boardwalk. The Mesquite Trail was also impacted by the mud and debris flows, and several sections of the boardwalk and two bridges were displaced.

Despite our attempts to reach the preserve on Monday morning after the storm had passed, California Highway Patrol had closed Highway 62 so that CalTrans could work on clearing the mud from the road surface. We spent time contacting our Morongo Valley volunteers to see how they 'weathered' the storm's fury. John Springer gave us updates on the road conditions and the many, many trees that had fallen.

See more of Hilary's storm impacts on p. 5.



Massive flood damage is revealed as Tropical Storm Hilary departs the Morongo Basin . Photo by Bob Wooling.

On Tuesday, we assembled a small, but determined group of volunteers at the preserve to assess the damage and to begin the process of clean up. One group shoveled mud at the kiosk area and another began to cut the downed trees. We had to cut the limbs off of the trunks of the trees that fell on the boardwalk and then climb over the trunks to gain access to the next tree. Tree by tree, we cut limbs the width of the boardwalk so that we could review the damage.

On the following days, San Bernardino County began to clear the streets of Morongo Valley of the mud that inundated the streets. Three dump truck loads of mud were brought to the preserve and deposited on the entry road to fill the ravines and a grader leveled the road. Unfortunately, a monsoonal storm arrived a week later and the resulting rain erased a lot of the work that was provided by the county.

Because of the substantial damage to the boardwalk on the Marsh and Mesquite trails, for safety reasons, we had to close portions of the trails, and

"Trail Closed" signs and barriers were erected.

Over 200 hours of volunteer activity occurred before we could reopen the preserve to the public. Through the generosity of our supporters and visitors, we had a very successful "storm relief" donation campaign to help with the repairs that could be accomplished with volunteers. We create new trail maps showing the trail closures and brought in multiple roll off dumpsters to remove all of the tree trunks and branches. Many thanks to the Bureau of Land Management who provided the Urban Conservation Corps teams to cut the heaviest of the fallen trees and the overhead snags.

The County of San Bernardino will take charge of the major boardwalk and bridge repairs. Recently, a county contracted project cost estimator visited the preserve and surveyed the many sections of the boardwalk and bridges that need to be replaced. This may not be a quick process, but we look forward to the days when all of the trails are open and enjoyed by our visitors.

Christmas Bird Count

Saturday, December 16

7:30 a.m.–4:30 p.m.

This year's Christmas Bird Count, the 124th for Audubon and the 43rd count for Morongo Valley, will meet at the Big Morongo Canyon main parking lot at 7:30 a.m. to sign in, organize into groups, and take a group photo. Come prepared for a full day in the field— food, water, sunscreen, a hat, comfortable walking shoes, and binoculars are recommended.

Please let me know if you will be able to participate this year. The Christmas Bird Count is free to participants, although the Friends of Big Morongo Canyon welcome donations in support of their activities.

Count results will be posted on the BMCP website.

If you have questions, contact Joe Zarki at 760-401-3903, or jwzarki@gmail.com.

Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve

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NEWSLETTER

Editor: Joe Zarki
Winter, 2023/2024

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Kaeliegh's Korner...



Hey y'all, it's Ranger Kaeliegh here! It's been almost a year since I began working at BMCP and it's been quite thrilling!

Tropical Storm Hilary showed the

great camaraderie among those who love the preserve, with volunteers and donors coming together to help with the aftermath of the storm. As soon as the highway opened up, several volunteers, Kevin, and I showed up to assess the damage and start the cleanup process. It was amazing working with everyone as we all marveled at the sheer force of nature and how powerful was the water and mud coursing through the preserve. Despite all the negatives, we focused on the bright side of things, and the day was full of smiles, laughter, and sweat. It was a strenuous and rewarding effort working together to reopen the preserve promptly. Once we were open again, it was nice seeing the familiar and new faces of visitors. It's reassuring to talk with volunteers and visitors who have been coming to the preserve for decades as they recall how much the preserve has changed throughout the years but always maintains its beauty. They seemed unphased by the storm and marveled at the resilience and never-ending transformations in nature. A lot of us agreed that it would've been spectacular to be there during the storm and watch the force of nature from a safe place.

The precipitation from Hilary has been beneficial to the flora and fauna. With all of the summer rain, mesquite trees, apricot mallows, and many other wildflowers bloomed twice this year providing extra food for the fauna. Usually by now the water is below ground level until the leaves of the trees fall, however due to all the summer rain there's still flowing water above ground in sections of the preserve. After the leaves fall, it will provide even more water for the flora and fauna. There was mud everywhere following the storm, and it was fun examining the different tracks and seeing what animals have been active. The most interesting tracks

by Kaeliegh Watson

were from the raccoons and bears. Years ago, the preserve had high raccoon activity, but in recent years signs of raccoons dwindled so it was exciting to see so many raccoon tracks. There was even one weekend we saw a half-eaten frog with raccoon tracks surrounding it. I was referring to it as the crime scene and we knew the culprit was a raccoon because its prints were all over. It worked great that weekend with the education program focused on identifying animals through scat and tracks. Everyone found the crime scene rather intriguing!



Stream orchid, *Epipactis gigantea*.

Photo by Kaeliegh Watson

It's fascinating to observe the seasonal and environmental shifts taking place within the preserve. A noticeable alteration is occurring within the plant communities as they change colors and exhibit new growth habits. A huge indicator of environmental change is the presence of more palm trees, which tolerate a drier and warmer climate than cottonwoods or willows. There's an abundance of mesquite and palm trees sprouting up, but no signs of cottonwoods or willows sprouting. One of the most interesting plants I observed this year were the stream orchids. There used to be dozens of orchids that grew along the Marsh Trail, but over the years as the Marsh Trail dried up the number of stream orchids along that trail declined. Now the stream orchids are growing in a new area where it's wetter and more suitable for the flowers' growth. This year a few stream orchids sprouted along the Marsh Trail, however, due to the dry environment, they died

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From the Computer of the Prez... by Maureen McCarty, President, Friends of BMCP Board of Directors



Visitors see and enjoy so much at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve that needs to be celebrated, such as the plants and animals just to start. Or if you are a rock person, the geology of the area is just

amazing. Our friends that come to visit our happy place rave about the preserve.

What most visitors do not see is what has been done behind the scenes. Even before the storm of 2023, the volunteers put in many hours pulling invasive species, chopping fallen branches, removing fire fuel, greeting guests, watering and protecting our gardens, introducing folks to the birds, and keeping the trails clear and safe.

Then along came a new challenge in the form of Tropical Storm Hilary. We have all seen pictures of the damage this storm brought our way. If you have walked the area since, you can see just what our volunteers have done in getting the

preserve ready for our visitors. It is nothing short of a miracle that the volunteers were able to get us open in slightly over two weeks. There are no words eloquent enough to say thank you to the hard-working volunteers who made this possible.

The storm however keeps giving. Now that we moved the mud and chopped the trees so the trails can be walked, the invasive plants are back with a vengeance. While the trails are clear, the piles of fire fuel still haunt us. The volunteers are continuing to work on eliminating these issues.

If you should by chance run into a volunteer at the preserve be sure to say hello and thank them.

BMCP Recognizes Jane Mootz

The board of directors of Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve is happy to announce the latest person to be recognized on the Recognition Rock near the Visitor Kiosk.

Jane Mootz has been an amazing volunteer since 2003. She started out as

a school docent and later became an education group leader for school tours. She quickly moved into being a committee leader for the Wednesday bird walks. Jane joined the board of directors in 2007, where she was a valued board member for sixteen years. She also served as the board secretary for the last few years.

We are pleased to honor Jane for her years of dedicated service to the preserve. Congratulations Jane!



Executive Director's Report...

by Kevin Wong

You have already read about the storm damage on August 20. Despite that major event, we continue to do the work that we are entrusted including our outdoor education programs for both children and adults, trail maintenance, the weekly bird walks, greeting visitors at the kiosk, and maintaining the native plant and pollinator gardens.

The rain from Tropical Storm Hilary gave the vegetation much needed summer moisture and everything became so green, so quickly. Unfortunately, Sahara mustard and other invasive species began to sprout everywhere. On Saturday, October 28, we celebrated Public Lands Day with over 40 volunteers helping to haul out cut timber and pulling the invasive species. These volunteers ranged from high schoolers, Marine and Navy personnel from the base in 29 Palms, and "snow birds" who seasonally migrate for the warm winters. Another large "roll off" dumpster was

provided by the Bureau of Land Management and was filled in just four hours.

So, you might ask me, "How do you stay so optimistic after everything that nature has thrown your way?" My answer is that nature is characterized by change, it's adaptable. It's able to just do what it wants it to do. We are not here to "preserve" the Preserve, but to monitor and steward the flora and fauna *when and where we can*. Nature will take its own course. Many cottonwood trees have died within the Marsh trail, but small palm trees have sprouted. Maybe someday they will be a dominant tree. That's just the way this ecosystem is. It gets thrown a "curve ball" and then it just recovers and does something different. It doesn't have to turn back into what it was before. For that reason, I look forward to seeing how this beautiful preserve and BLM Area of Critical Environmental Concern will evolve.

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BMCP Selects Two New Directors



Tom Scanlan

De Karlen

During our November, 2023 meeting of the Friends' board of directors, two new board members were chosen from an impressive pool of applicants.

Tom Scanlan is a Preserve volunteer leading our boardwalk repair team, and he is an education docent for school field trips. Tom has a Master's Degree in Business Administration, and in his career, he has been responsible for multi-million-dollar capital and operating budgets. Tom is an Archaeological Site Steward in the Cleveland National Forest and at Joshua Tree National Park. Currently, Tom is enrolled in the California Naturalist Program, UC Riverside.

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UCR Vertebrates Class Visits Big Morongo Canyon Preserve...by Assoc. Prof. Christopher J. Clark, UC, Riverside

The springs at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve sit at a critical junction, in between the Mojave Desert at higher elevations and the Sonoran Desert at lower elevations. It is also an oasis, where water pools after the rain. Water is the resource that is in shortest supply in the desert. As a result, BMCP has high biodiversity and shows several different habitat types. Finally, it is right on highway 62. All of these things make it an excellent place to bring my Vertebrate Natural History class at UC Riverside.

Each year in October, my class has a big overnight field trip where we trek out into the desert. Our destination is the Mojave National Preserve, its sprawling desert landscapes filled with classic Mojave species and diversity. The city of Riverside is technically not quite a desert. As you drive east from Riverside, over the San Geronio Pass into the Coachella Valley where you reach true desert, the landscape dries out dramatically. As we cruise eastward on the 10, I point out to my students how the creosote bushes suddenly appear (marking the ecotone, the edge of the 'true' desert). Then, before you know it, we've arrived at our first stop: Big Morongo Canyon Preserve.

Big Morongo springs is a birding hotspot. It's also so much more: it has got great mammal and 'herp' diversity, where herps are snakes, lizards, and frogs. Every visit is different. This past October, some of the students found a



The rosy boa (also called northern three-lined boa) is sometimes encountered along BMCP's trails.

Photo by Daniel Moen.

rosy boa, *Lichanura orcutti*! I especially like finding and showing snakes to students. Some of the students have never held or touched a snake before. There are so many misconceptions that can be dispelled through experience, such as the idea that snakes are slimy. We handled the snake for a few minutes, showing the students the proper way to hold it to keep it calm. Then we released it back on the ground to take shelter underneath a log. Now that the weather

has turned colder, the snake will be hiding deep underground, waiting for the warmth to return next spring, when it will awaken to hunt rodents. Exposing students to wildlife is a critical step to helping them appreciate California's natural diversity. Big Morongo Canyon Preserve plays a critical role in conservation, education, and research. I am grateful that it exists, and I look forward to my next stop here.

Bird Rarities Add Spice to Fall Birding...

by Joe Zarki

A number of noteworthy birds put in appearances at the preserve in recent weeks adding excitement to the November birding season. On November 11, a pair of red crossbills, *Loxia curvirostra*, were found by Ezra and Matthew Murray. Normally found in mountain pine forests, crossbills are not often seen at BMCP. Cassin's kingbird, *Tyrannus vociferans*, previously unknown from BMCP in winter, has been seen at Covington Park throughout much of the month. A Cassin's kingbird was found on the Morongo Valley Christmas Bird Count for the first time last December. On November 8, a small bird with cinnamon-brown plumage was found during a Wednesday bird walk. It was first identified as an immature lazuli bunting,



but one with a very stout bill. Further examination found it was, in fact, a scaly-breasted munia, *Lonchura punctulata*, an exotic species found in the Coachella Valley, but seen at BMCP only once before in 2022. But the prize for bird of the month (at least as of this writing) goes to a rufous-backed robin, *Turdus rufopalliatus*, first reported by Dan Baumann on November 25 and well photographed by Kathy Snyder Woodall. This neotropical thrush is occasionally seen in the southwest, but this likely represents the first confirmed record of this species at the preserve.

Clockwise, from upper left: Cassin's kingbird, 11/23/23 (photo by Dan Ward), rufous-backed robin, 11/25/23 (photo by Kathy Woodall), and scaly-breasted munia, 11/8/23 (photo by Donna Thomas).

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Tropical Storm Hilary- the Afterparty...



Tropical storm Hilary left tons of silty mud, downed branches and trees, and the need for a massive clean-up effort on BMCP trails. The Marsh and Mesquite trails sustained significant damage forcing long-term closures on some trail sections. Local volunteers and Urban Conservation Corps crews worked tirelessly to clear dense piles of brush and debris. One surprising storm impact was the germination of nonnative millet (far right, middle) requiring localized weed pulls at BMCP and Covington Park. Fresh animal tracks, including bear, were a common sight in the drying mud.

Photos courtesy of Kaeliegh Watson and Joe Zarki.

BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

On Being a Preserve Host...

by John Springer



John Springer at work in the BMCP Visitor Kiosk
Photo by Kevin Wong.

I arrived at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve in May, in my 28-foot Winnebago, with ancient jeep in tow. My familiarity with birds ended at “feathered dinosaurs”. It’s now November, my time is up, and I’ll soon be off on another adventure.

Life has always been a bit of an adventure for me. Wise people choose careers and achieve great success. Adventurous people keep trying something new. Peripatetic is an apt word.

I spent 18 years getting an education, culminating in a master’s in chemistry, after which I knew I never wanted to pick up another test tube as long as I lived. After working in Silicon Valley, the pharmaceutical industry, running a grocery store, a motel, and a surf shop,

Education News...

Our education team, which is composed of volunteers, has always provided outdoor field activities for our local Morongo Unified School District. Recently, we have added schools and homeschool programs from as far away as Los Angeles. We also hosted a summer camp from the Recreation Department of 29 Palms and two programs are scheduled in December for the Recreation Department of Desert Hot Springs. Thank you to the many

finally, at age 62, I found my real passion: geology.

After retiring, I took geology classes at the local university, bought an RV, and started exploring my part of the world, from I-90 to I-8 and the Pacific to the Rocky Mountains.

I had a cousin who was a park ranger at Joshua Tree National Park, and so for several years I volunteered at the park, doing stints in the visitor centers, giving some geology talks on the Coachella Valley, and finally becoming camp host at Indian Cove. Life was good— great co-workers, interesting people, fascinating geology.

Then, my little world fell apart: my cousin got moved to another park— in a city! The good thing about living in an RV, as I have been for eight years now, is that there’s not a lot of pressure to find a place to live. You know where you’re going to live; you just don’t know where you’re going to park it.

Eventually, I heard there was an opening at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve. I had visited the preserve before, but not regularly. I knew Kevin from the park, and friends encouraged me to apply.

And that’s how I become the Preserve Host for the summer of 2023. The position here is fairly simple. It primarily consists of opening up each morning, keeping the bathrooms clean, closing at night, and being present 24-hours a day.

As Kevin will attest, I can complicate almost anything. Take bathrooms, for example. I’m a guy. That does not bode well for cleanliness. I am resolute, though, so I started studying YouTube videos on caring for commercial

restrooms. I learned a lot and am confident that ours meet the highest standards of clean and sanitary.

I’m not a birder, either. That does not bode well for ‘early to rise.’ So being up, dressed, and caffeinated for opening hour has been a bit of a challenge. But I rose to meet it, so to speak. I also learned a lot about birds, though I’m still not a birder. I was astounded to hear people in “the bird group” hear a teeny cheep and go “that’s a blue-billed heron,” or something like that. (I can appreciate expertise, without having any— *Editor’s note: herons, blue-billed or otherwise, don’t ‘cheep!’*).

The most remarkable thing about Big Morongo Canyon Preserve is the incredible contributions of the volunteers here. So many people have committed to the success of this place by showing up and making things happen, day after day, week after week. They pull invasive weeds; they rake gardens; they clear over-growth; and they keep it safe for the birds and other wildlife. They greet visitors, provide educational programs, write articles, and expose kids to new experiences. And they handle the business of being a responsible legal non-profit organization.

So, I’ll soon be saying goodbye to BMCP, its amazing volunteers, the visitors, and the few birds I recognize. I still call Oregon home. I’m looking forward to taking a few weeks off and then heading north. I always take 395. I love the eastern Sierras, Lassen, and the Siskiyou. It might be a challenge this time of year, but I can go slow. I know where I’ll be living; I just don’t know where I’ll be parked.

by Kevin Wong

volunteers who make this program a success!

Earlier this year, the education team worked collaboratively with the Malki Museum on the Morongo Tribal Reservation to create a curriculum with the tribal school. The school brought 21 students, teachers, and school administrators to the preserve for a pilot program taught by Aaron Saubel. Aaron showed the students how their ancestors would have stewarded a mesquite grove

for food and shelter. As he is the school’s language teacher, he taught the children bi-lingually, both in the Cahuilla language and English.

Ranger Kaeliegh continues to offer family science education on weekends at the Education Center. She has programs on owls and birds of prey, water cycle and what makes water possible in the desert, clouds and weather patterns, and the special adaptations of bird beaks.

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Kaeliegh's Korner... (cont. from p. 2)

before reaching maturity and never produced a flower. There were more than a dozen stream orchids that grew in a wetter area, and these plants reached maturity and all produced flowers. It was insightful watching the stream orchids grow in two separate areas and seeing how it affected their growth. It is sad witnessing some of the changes, but nature is always in flux and is interesting to observe.

One of my favorite transitions in the preserve are the cottonwood leaves turning yellow and falling, which brings forth water and frogs! With the wildflowers blooming again, it's going to be a colorful fall. My favorite view is on top of the Yucca Ridge Trail overlooking the golden tops of cottonwood trees. There's nothing more relaxing than strolling under the cottonwoods with falling leaves and frogs croaking nearby. I hope to see you out there on the beautiful trails of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve!

Exec. Dir. Report.... (cont. from p. 3)

So where do we go from here? Knowing that we have most of the solutions that we need –our partners, Bureau of Land Management and Regional Parks of San Bernardino, our many dedicated and passionate volunteers, our Board of Directors, and our large community of supporters. Let's roll up our sleeves. Everyone has a role to play. And if you haven't already found yours, please contact me to find out how you can help this wonderful reserve working alongside of great people!

And, please don't forget to make a year-end, tax-deductible donation today at bigmorongo.org/donate. Your contribution makes a difference!

Education News... (cont. from p. 6)

We had a solar eclipse viewing session, with telescopes and binoculars (with solar filters) and education provided by Jim and Ellen LaMotte.

Adult education continues to prosper with "Geology of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve," and "Photographing the Autumn Colors at the Preserve." In the spring, we will schedule a wildflower photography class, acrylic painting, and "How to Identify Birds by Sight and Sound." Watch for our upcoming spring schedule!

New Directors... (cont. from p. 3)

De Karlen's experiences include being an Interpretive and Wilderness Ranger with the National Park Service, a guide trainer for Desert Adventures, and a Certified Interpretive Guide – National Association for Interpretation (NAI). Currently, De is completing her Master's degree in Public Administration specializing in Nonprofit Leadership.



FRIENDS OF BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

PLEASE RETURN YOUR TAX-DEDUCTIBLE DONATION TO:

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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 may also be tax deductible.

BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE



All stages of the life cycle of the western monarch butterfly have been observed in the BMCP Pollinator Garden this fall. Upper row, l.to r., a female monarch lays an egg on rush milkweed, followed by the developing early and late instar caterpillars. Bottom row, l. to r., early and late stages of the chrysalis, ending with the adult phase monarch nectaring on butterweed. Upper left image by Bill LaHaye; all others by Joe Zarki.

CALENDAR AT BMCP DECEMBER – MARCH Gate open 7:30 a.m. to Sunset

WEDNESDAY BIRD WALKS

Bird walks are offered each Wednesday morning at 8:00 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. (7:00 a.m. from April through September), excluding Thanksgiving Eve, Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, and New Year's Eve or New Year's Day. Meet at the main preserve parking area. Recently seen bird lists are updated weekly and may be viewed at: www.bigmorongo.org/birds.

AMBASSADOR KIOSK

Friday, Saturday & Sunday: Ambassadors will be at the kiosk to provide information on the latest BMCP happenings. They are very happy to tell you about recent wildlife sightings, safety precautions, and make recommendations for walks based upon weather, fitness, and time. BMCP branded merchandise is available for sale at the kiosk. The kiosk also has educational displays including the history, geology, flora, fauna, and bird sightings of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve.

UPCOMING EVENTS

December 16, 7:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m. Morongo Valley Christmas Bird Count. See p. 2 for details.

January 7, Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Fundraiser at the Spaghetti Western. Stay tuned for more information!

January 13, Volunteer Orientation at Covington Park, 1:00 - 3:00 p.m. Learn about volunteer opportunities at BMCP. Contact Kevin Wong for additional information, or to enroll as a volunteer, at 760-792-1843, or by email at bmcp@bigmorongo.org.

February 10, Volunteer Appreciation Party, Covington Park. Contact Kevin Wong for additional information at 760-792-1843, or by email at bmcp@bigmorongo.org.