



BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

NEWSLETTER

Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve

Fall, 2025

What is an 'Area of Critical Environmental Concern'?...

by Jim Kenna



An ACEC sign highlights Big Morongo Canyon's special management status. Photo by BMCP staff

Congress created the 'Area of Critical Environmental Concern' designation specifically to address concerns about degradation due to neglect of public lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). In 1964, Congress created the Public Land Law Review Commission which delivered their report in 1970 ('One Third of the Nation's Land'). The Senate bill that followed (2401) included provisions to use "all practicable means and measures" to protect environmental quality and to give priority to areas of critical environmental concern. The House bill (7211) placed emphasis on more uniform, easily understood policies for public lands, achieved by repealing hundreds of obsolete laws and coordinating land use planning and policy.

Almost 50 years ago, when the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) became law in 1976, the new law finally began to address what the Supreme Court had called "chaotic" management of the public lands under "various laws." The Senate committee report at the time made it quite clear that FLPMA was intended to change public land management to "assure the quality of their environment for present and future generations." In writing

FLPMA, "multiple use" was redefined from the 1960 version in the Multiple Use and Sustained Yield Act to 1) add emphasis to future generations when assessing land use needs, 2) include "recreation, ... watershed, wildlife and fish, and natural scenic, scientific, and historical values" as legitimate land uses, and 3) set a standard that "the quality of the environment" should not be impaired. To meet these goals, FLPMA instructed BLM to continuously conduct inventories, among other things, "giving priority to areas of critical environmental concern" and then, "with public involvement", to develop land use plans that also "give priority to the designation and protection of areas of critical environmental concern."

So, Congress made it quite clear that BLM, in its inventories and land use plans, was to identify public lands with critical environmental concerns, and then give those concerns priority when managing those areas. FLPMA describes how to identify, with public participation, which lands merit this management priority: "public lands where special management attention is required ... to protect and prevent irreparable damage to important historic, cultural, or scenic values, fish and wildlife resources or other natural systems or processes."

Just six years after FLPMA passed, Big Morongo Canyon Preserve had been inventoried and was identified as an Area of Critical Environmental Concern



The Big Morongo Canyon ACEC protects important riparian habitat as well as endangered Joshua trees. Photo by Dan Ward



Jim Kenna, Robin Kobaly, and Doug Thompson enjoy a moment together at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve. Photo by BMCP staff

(ACEC). Any visitor only needs to walk the trails, appreciate the importance of a cottonwood and willow riparian oasis in the desert, listen for the ever present migratory bird songs, and watch for critters that scurry about, to understand why this area was quickly identified for protection and special management attention. Beyond its importance as a critical component of a natural system, it has also become an important regional asset for environmental education and recreation. Today it also serves as one of the gateways to the Sand to Snow National Monument. It would be hard to find a place where the change in management of areas with critical environmental concerns has been more fully realized. Special thanks are due to BLM's botanist at the time, Robin Kobaly, the BLM volunteers who have worked at the Preserve (especially Dee and Betty Zeller), the strong partnership of San Bernardino County, and decades of dedication by Friends of Big Morongo Preserve.

Jim Kenna is the retired California State Director for the Bureau of Land Management.

Lin & Tish Earn Their Place on 'the Rock'

Two new plaques were installed on the **Recognition Stone** in the preserve. Lin Snyder is a remarkable volunteer who often arrives at the preserve at 5:30 a.m. to begin to clear trails for the benefit of our visitors. She hikes the Canyon Trail once a month to provide to the Bureau of Land Management a report on the invasive species, off-road incursions, and the general condition of the trail. In addition, Lin manages our recycling program and transports the recyclable items to be sold, and we average \$1,200 a year in recycling donations! The other recognized volunteer is Tish Miller, who served on our board for over 10 years. Tish says "I've been walking the preserve since the 1980's, and I loved it so much that I moved to Morongo Valley in 2001. I find peace, birds, nature, the occasional snake, and wonderful people. It was my pleasure to be a member of the Board of this enriching land." Thank you to these wonderful ladies!

Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve

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NEWSLETTER

Editor: Joe Zarki

Fall, 2025

P.O. Box 780
Morongo Valley, CA 92256

Phone: 760-792-1843
Email: director@bigmorongo.org
Web: www.bigmorongo.org

Kaeliegh's Korner...

There's always something exciting to observe and learn at the preserve. From witnessing births to unexpected deaths—and sometimes, the lucky ones escaping to live another day—nature constantly reminds us of the full circle of life. I love getting to share that wonder and knowledge with all our visitors!

At the preserve, you never know what you'll see. I've witnessed countless incredible moments—from life to death and everything in between. Most recently, I saw a deer giving birth. I've also seen predators in action, like a bobcat catching a squirrel. But sometimes the prey escapes, thanks to fascinating adaptations. For instance, lizards can drop their tails to distract predators like snakes and then make a run for it—and those tails even grow back!

One unforgettable moment involved a kingsnake trying to constrict a skink. The skink managed to wriggle free, leaving its tail behind. The snake still got a snack, and the skink lived to see another day—a relatively happy ending for both! But perhaps my most exciting encounter was with a Great Basin fence lizard that had two tails. This can happen when a tail doesn't fully detach during an attack, heals, and a new, shorter tail begins regenerating alongside it. Curious, I reached out to UCR biologist Mark Fisher.



A Great Basin fence lizard shows off a rarely seen set of two tails.
Photo by Kaeliegh Watson

by Kaeliegh Watson



Photo by BMCP staff

He told me: "Your observation is even less common because both tails are regenerated. It was probably from a very irregular injury site, right at the limit of where it could possibly autotomate [i.e., to cast off a limb or appendage]. If the predator had grabbed it any closer to the rear legs, the tail couldn't have broken off—and the lizard likely wouldn't have survived. That's one lucky lizard!" I've spotted it several times in the same area since, and each time fills me with joy—especially knowing just how close it came to meeting its demise.



A mountain lion seen on March 25. Photo by BMCP staff

Some of our most surprising sightings actually come from our trail cameras. We've recorded two mountain lion sightings—one right near the nature center on the very night our new host Ray arrived. Talk about a wild welcome! The second was spotted drinking from a watering hole. Another exciting clip showed a gray fox being closely followed by a western skunk. While scientists aren't completely sure why, some research suggests these two species may have a mutually beneficial relationship. Speculation is still ongoing. The desert is full of mysteries.

Our most frequent camera stars? Bobcats, foxes, skunks, and deer!

What cool things have you seen at the preserve?! I'm so lucky to walk these trails regularly and witness all kinds of wild interactions. Every day brings something new, and I can't wait to see what tomorrow has in store.

P.S. I've only seen one slug this entire year—and it was by the water fountain. A real slug shortage! Quite the bummer if you're a fan of slimy sightings like me.

From the Computer of the 'Prez,' Reflections on Our Mission...

by Maureen McCarty



Someone once told me that the Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve is a small but mighty non-profit. That statement is absolutely true. With that in mind, it may be time to take a closer look

at our mission statement:

"The Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve is dedicated to the stewardship of Big Morongo Canyon through education and responsible visitation."

Consider the weight carried in these simple words. They bring with them many challenges and responsibilities. Everything we do day in and day out revolves around two directives – stewardship through education and responsible visitation.

Education: This idea goes far beyond hosting schools or family groups. Our goal is for everyone who steps onto the preserve to leave with something new they have learned. Why are there wetlands in the middle of the desert? Where does the water come from? Why does it matter? Why do we see so many birds

here and where do they come from? Why do some stay year-round, while others migrate seasonally? How and when was this unique area formed?

These are just a few of the questions that help connect visitors to the land in a meaningful way. Education at the preserve is about sparking curiosity and fostering a deep appreciation for this special place. Let's continue to reflect on the importance of our mission and embrace the responsibility that comes with it.

So what are the challenges with education you might ask?

Often to get school children here, we have to help cover the cost of buses. As we encourage more school groups to visit, we need more education volunteers to assist.

Helping new visitors is also a challenge with our limited staff available each day. That's why signage and volunteers are important. These two educational resources help visitors understand the intricacies of the trail system, and also teach them to appreciate the fragile ecosystem which depends on and is protected by the preserve.

Responsible Visitation: Most folks come to Big Morongo Canyon Preserve because they love this beautiful and

peaceful place. It is a refuge where they can connect with the healing aspect of nature or enjoy a shady walk with friends. But here lies a 'catch-22'. The more people who visit the preserve, the more revenue we need to keep it operating. Even more concerning is that too many people can impact the quiet charm that makes the preserve special. Especially when they are not responsible visitors.

Unfortunately, with more people, we are more likely to get a handful who just don't respect the preserve. Like our friend "Modelo Man" who regularly left bottles behind. Or the graffiti writer who pledges love while defacing a tree. And then there are those who insist on bringing their dogs despite the clearly posted "No Dogs Allowed" signs. Some people either can't read or believe the rules don't apply to them.

Our mission is to share the unique value of our preserve, while fostering a deep respect and love for it in all who visit. With a small staff and a limited number of volunteers, this is no easy task. Your board is committed to meeting the challenge by raising the funds needed to support our work, while also preserving the natural beauty of the land. We work hard to ensure that every decision we make stays true to our mission and is made with care and intention.

Executive Director's Report: Working Sharper, Tighter, and More Focused... by Kevin Wong



We entered 2025 thinking that our infrastructure improvements, funded by a multi-year federal grant, would give us the tools to replace the aging and,

sometimes inaccurate, signage in the preserve, to improve the information displays in the visitor kiosk, and to add more education programs that serve our visitors. However, in February, we realized that this dream had evaporated. So, instead of licking our wounds and wondering what a small non-profit could do, we embarked on building upon our existing partnerships and developing new collaborations to continue our work as defined by our mission statement. Besides fulfilling phase one of the

signage project this summer, we are tackling the following projects:

1) Revitalizing the native plant garden (see Svetlana's article in this issue) is funded by the Mojave Desert Resource Conservation District. We have developed new partnerships with The Living Desert has offered plants and future seed propagation, and the Mojave Desert Land Trust has offered to give us "left-over" plants from their October plant sale and nursery space for seed propagation.

2) We are working with Digital Nomad Video for a video on the preserve and the Friends group to support new and exciting fundraising efforts. This project is funded by the Conservation Lands Foundation.

3) Another organic collaboration is centered around the ever-present threat of

wildfires, evidenced by May's 241-acre wildfire in neighboring Joshua Tree National Park. Addressing wildfire mitigation, we are building a coalition with San Bernardino County Regional Parks, Morongo Valley Fire Department, Morongo Valley Community Services District, Desert Fire Safe Council, and California Conservation Corps to reduce fuel loads and to create a fire break along our western boundary. This is a multi-year project and we will keep you informed of our progress.

4) Recently, we began providing new birding experiences with the Desert Recreation District to provide "Birding for Kids", and with Audubon California by hosting the program "Let's Go Birding Together." We will be repeating "Birding for Kids" again in November and December.

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Bird Song and Birders: A Sociologists View of Birders...

by Jordan Rowley



Dr. Jordan Rowley

It was a brisk morning at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve. My breath swam in the air in front of me creating small wispy clouds of vapor. As the air filled with the sound of bird song, I couldn't help but see the preserve not only as a sanctuary for birds, but as a gathering place for people too.

In the avian world, we often focus on the intricacies of birds, their behaviors, identification features, and songs. But we rarely look into who is behind the binoculars, the birders themselves.

My name is Jordan Rowley and I am a Ph.D. student at Utah State University, studying birders, their behaviors, and their demographics.

About Me

Ever since I was a kid I have been obsessed with birds. My grandma used to feed hummingbirds, and it quickly became something I needed to know more about. Things spiraled from there, and my collection of bird field guides grew year after year.

The hobby grew more into a past-time activity for me. I wanted to share my love for birds with the world as much as I possibly could. About two years ago, I started a YouTube channel called *Bright-Eyed Birding*. The goal was to awaken as many people as possible to the beauty found all around us and hopefully inspire more people to take up birding. I have since highlighted over 200 birding adventures on the channel, and thousands of people have joined me virtually on those adventures.

My passion wasn't satisfied with just learning about the birds however. I wanted to know more about who birders are, and what makes up the ever-growing population of "birders" and "birdwatchers." This led me to pursue a Ph.D. at Utah State University in Environmental Sociology where I have been conducting research on the topic.

My Connection to Big Morongo

I live in Utah, so you might be wondering about my connection to the preserve. I first arrived at the preserve in December, 2023 while visiting family in Southern California. I ran into Dan Ward who was gracious enough to show me around. I was amazed by the diversity of birds found throughout the preserve, and Dan helped me find several lifers. After posting that adventure on YouTube, my audience insisted I return for more. If you'd like to see my latest trip to Big Morongo featuring Dan, you can check out that video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FuWRvBtWDA>.

The World of Birders

In November of 2023, the American Ornithological Society (AOS) announced that they were going to change all eponymous bird names to promote inclusivity and address historical issues. This became a largely polarized issue amongst the birding community across the United States and Canada. My team and I, Kirsten Vinyeta (Utah State University), J.M. Bacon (Grinnell College), and Graham Ward (University of Oregon) led a national survey to examine perceptions among U.S. birders in the wake of this decision.

Through surveys and interviews, we learned so much about who birders are demographically. In 2015, it was estimated that 46 million people in the United States considered themselves to be birders. Just six years later in 2022, the number of birders had nearly doubled and was estimated to be 96.3 million.

Despite large numbers of people participating in the hobby, previous studies have shown the lack of diversity in birding. For example, a survey conducted in 2020 found that out of 29,380 respondents only 5.2% were BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) while 94.8% were white.

In terms of gender there is more of a split. According to the National Audubon Society, 42% of birders in the United States identify as women.

Birding has a long way to go to be inclusive, but Audubon chapters and local birding groups around the country are making it their mission to be inviting to all people of all backgrounds. The world

of birding is shifting towards inclusivity, and millions of people are enjoying the birds that are found around them due to these efforts.

So, what did we find in our survey and interviews of U.S. birders in regards to eponymous bird name changes? When asked whether the decision to change eponymous bird names was a positive development for birding, 48% of respondents somewhat or strongly agreed, 29% were neutral, and 22% somewhat or strongly disagreed. Respondents who reported a non-white racial identity had 2.1 times greater odds of "strongly agreeing" with the renaming decision, rather than "somewhat agreeing" compared to respondents who identified as white.

Interview participants in favor of the AOS renaming decision had several main reasons for their support including: making birding more welcoming to historically excluded demographics, increasing the number and types of people that care about birds and their ecosystems, and easing the learning curve for new birders by making bird names more descriptive.

This research is in the process of being published and should be available in the next few months.

Conclusion

Birds come in every shape, size, and song—and that diversity is exactly what makes them so fascinating. The same should be true for the birding community. While our research highlights real gaps in representation and belonging, it also reveals hope: a growing movement toward inclusion, education, and empathy. Places like Big Morongo Canyon Preserve play a vital role in that transformation. This preserve isn't just a sanctuary for wildlife—it's a meeting ground for people of all backgrounds who come together in awe of the natural world.

Whether you're a seasoned birder, a curious newcomer, or someone simply seeking peace in nature, Big Morongo has something to offer. As we work to make birding more welcoming for everyone, we must also remember to support one another—just as we support the habitats and species we cherish. After all, when we make space for more voices, the chorus only gets richer.

Fall Brings Visiting Birds and Humans to Big Morongo Canyon Preserve



Fall is a great time to visit Big Morongo Canyon Preserve. The worst of summer's heat is generally past, and if there are fall rains, there may even be late season flowers. Migrants of all kinds can be plentiful, making for great birding and some exciting finds covering all aspects of natural history. Fall colors attract more walkers, joggers, and snowbirds to the preserve's trails. Going clockwise from the upper left are a flock of Morongo birders, a friendly lizard greets a Wednesday morning bird walker, a group of birders debate a mystery bird, a glorious August sunrise, a visitor gets help from a volunteer ambassador, a young birder is ready for some birding action, October black bear tracks on the Canyon Trail, evening walkers enjoy a stunning sunset, a Thanksgiving visitor snaps a photo of a monarch butterfly, National Parks and Conservation Association members and staff visit the preserve, and fall colors paint the entrance road.

Photos 2, 7, 9, and 11 by Joe Zarki; photo 8 by Meg Foley; photos 4 and 6 by Dan Ward; other photos courtesy of BMCP staff.

Revitalizing the Native Plant Garden...

When designing a garden, one of the most important questions to ask is: what purpose does it serve? In our redesign of the shady upper garden with its important water feature, we narrowed it down to a few things: educating visitors on the diversity of plants growing in the preserve, crafting an experiential and whimsical environment, and creating a great space for birding.

Native plants provide many excellent benefits for birds, like hosting insects, providing fruit and seed, and creating cover and habitat. Because plants have different flowering times, I carefully selected plant species that perform those functions at different times of the year so there is always something in bloom, providing both visual interest and habitat value.



The upper garden outside the Education Center is a 'must see' spot for visiting birders. Photo by BMCP staff

Birding With Friends, New and Old...

There is something magical about seeing a new birder light up with excitement when spotting a new feathered friend. For me, birding is more than just appreciating beautiful birds—it's about the human connections we make along the way.

I begin each beginner bird walk with a simple disclaimer: "I'm not an expert, but



Kurt Kosek helps a group of school children learn about Morongo's varied birdlife. Photo by Ranger Kaeliegh



A wrentit chills out on a hot June day. Photo by Dan Ward

Not being a birder myself, it was important to chat with bird lovers to get their perspective on what they want out of a human-created birdwatching environment. I learned that some birders prefer natural perches over artificial ones, so picking the right plants was a must. Shrub species that provide cover and foraging are also vital and provide an excellent backdrop. An unobstructed view of perches is important, especially for taking photos. We will be reworking the area around the water feature for optimal viewing and adding a new seating area.

In addition to plant elements, we are adding splashes of color throughout with a welcome sign, seating, and more. We want the garden to draw people in and explore it freely. New signage will describe plant groupings and habitats.



Brown-crested flycatcher in flight. Photo by Dan Ward

I love birds and sharing the joy of birding with others. This journey isn't just about identification or checklists; it's about building a welcoming community where knowledge and experiences are freely shared.

Co-leading these walks with our incredible Ranger Kaeliegh is my way of celebrating both the birds we see and the amazing people who make up the birding community. If you're new to birding or just looking for like-minded enthusiasts, come explore with us.

by Svetlana Iachkova

When I was approached about the garden redesign, I was over the moon, since I specialize in plants native to the Mojave Desert and designing habitat gardens. The added challenge of a public-facing garden and birding hub was very exciting, and I hope the thoughtfulness that went into the design comes through. Everyone at the Preserve was kind and encouraging, and I look forward to seeing our group effort come to life.



Svetlana Iachkova.

Photo by BMCP staff

by Kathy Snyder

Everyone is welcome!



Birders enjoy a moment of social interaction along the Marsh Trail. Photo by Joe Zarki

Executive Director's Report...

(continued from p. 3)

5) Thank you to our great education team for dreaming of a program for school-aged children during their summer vacation and implementing the dream. We enjoyed engaging the kiddos in **Summer Science Fun**.

Building, maintaining, and acknowledging our partnerships gives us the ability to improve the preserve for the wildlife, the vegetation, and for greater visitor experiences.

We wish to thank Jihadda Govan for all of her work in managing the Sand to Snow National Monument. She retired from the U.S. Forestry Service in April and her presence at the preserve will be missed. Recently, Jeremy Camara was appointed as the manager of the Sand to Snow National Monument and we look forward to working with him.

As outdoor environmental education is one of our primary activities, we also offer reimbursement to elementary schools for bus costs through an annual



Children enjoy a beautiful day at the preserve during a school outing.

Photo by BMCP staff

grant from Conservation Lands Foundation. This is very important to the school districts as they too have been impacted by decreasing federal funding. In addition to serving the Morongo Unified School District, we have reached out to the Palm Springs Unified School District, the Banning Unified School District, and the Beaumont Unified School District for outdoor education in the coming 2025/2026 school year.

In recognition of our stewardship of the preserve and for the outstanding work by our volunteers and our board of directors, the Basin Wide Foundation recently announced that Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve will receive their **"Non-Profit of the Year"** award. The award message stated, "It's one of the most inspiring nights of the year—where non-profits, local businesses, and community leaders come together for connection, recognition, and a delicious meal. And this year, **you're one of the reasons** we're celebrating!" The 27th Annual Awards Celebration & Dinner will be held on August 28.

As you can see, we are working **sharper, tighter, and more focused** to fulfill our mission statement:

"The Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve is dedicated to the stewardship of Big Morongo Canyon through education and responsible visitation."



You can support Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to the stewardship of Big Morongo Canyon through education and responsible visitation.

Please help us to provide quality outdoor environmental education to over 500 elementary school children each school year, to maintain our beautiful trails, to help with the revitalization of the native plant garden, to conduct our weekly bird walks, and to improve visitor experiences.

1. Use the QR code to make a donation (preferably monthly gifts),
2. By joining our 55 passionate and dedicated volunteer team members,
3. Bringing us your recyclables which we convert to cash, and
4. Purchasing Big Morongo Canyon Preserve merchandise.



Scan the QR code

And, yes, you can send a check to FoBMCP, PO Box 780, Morongo Valley, CA 92256



In Partnership With



**CONSERVATION
LANDS
FOUNDATION**

Summer Science: It's *Cool* and Fun!...

by Kim McClinton

Once spring field trips were over, our BMCP Education Committee had a new goal. How could we get kids and their parents to come outside and visit the preserve in the summer? We knew that

whatever we did, it had to be fun and it had to be cool.

We started with the **cool** challenge. Summers here are notoriously hot, so we felt that the milder morning hours would be best and decided on a nine to noon program time. Families could pop in whenever they liked during those hours. Another chill solution was to utilize the Nature Center with its air conditioning and surrounding shady trees.

The **fun** part required brainstorming and research. Besides being entertaining, our goal was to keep our activities science-based, hands-on, and tied to actual facts or experiences to be found in the preserve. We borrowed from some of Ranger Kaeliegh's Science Sunday activities and added several new adventures. Since kids' interests vary widely, we made sure that we had a range of discovery and art activities.

We started the program on June 26th and continued on every Thursday until August 7th, with each week featuring a new topic. We covered Insects and Spi-



A grandmother and her grandchild view the world through insect eyes. Photo by Kim McClinton

ders, Reptiles and Amphibians, Animal Architects, Native Americans, Water and Erosion, Mammals, and Birds. We had 10-20 participants

each week. Children, parents, and grandparents all found something to be excited about.

The summer program was a success. Not only did we accomplish our goal of engaging families with the preserve, but we had fun doing it. The program also inspired us to step up the challenge for next summer and plan our first Summer Science Camp by hopefully partnering with existing summer recreation programs in both the Hi-Desert and the Coachella Valley.



Children create bird nests from native plants during a Summer Science activity. Photo by Kim McClinton

CALENDAR

AT BMCP

AUGUST – NOVEMBER

Gate open 7:30 a.m. to Sunset

365 days a year

UPCOMING EVENTS & COURSES

September 27, 8:00 a.m. National Public Lands Day Clean Up at the Preserve. Meet at the Main Preserve parking lot.

November 15, 8:00 a.m. 25th Anniversary National Conservation Lands. More information to follow.

December 20, Morongo Valley Christmas Bird Count. Further information to come in October.

BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE BIRD WALKS

Bird walks are offered each Wednesday morning from 7:00 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. from April through September. Bird walks start at 8:00 a.m. from October through March. Meet at the Main Preserve parking area. Recently seen bird lists are updated weekly and may be viewed at: www.bigmorongo.org/birds.

Additional programs may be offered from August through November. For future dates and times see: <https://bigmorongo.org/educational-programs/>.

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 historic and geologic, fauna, and bird sightings of the preserve.