



BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

NEWSLETTER

Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve

Spring/Summer, 2026

Partners Work Together to Conserve Public Lands

by Maricela Rosales



Maricela Rosales is the California Associate Program Director for the Conservation Lands Foundation.

Photo courtesy of CLF.

The partnership between the Conservation Lands Foundation (CLF) and Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve demonstrates how meaningful conservation happens when national support and local passion work hand in hand. Built on shared values of stewardship, education, and community

advocacy, this relationship reflects a model where uplifting grassroots leadership strengthens the long-term protection of public lands.

Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve brings conservation to life through consistent, hands-on programs and volunteer leadership. Dedicated to the stewardship of Big Morongo Canyon through education and responsible visitation, the organization works in partnership with the Bureau of Land Management and San Bernardino County Regional Parks. Their impact is visible throughout the preserve – clearing and maintaining trails, removing invasive weeds, greeting visitors, guiding bird walks, teaching outdoor education to elementary school students and homeschool groups, collaborating with local recreation departments, and caring for native plant and pollinator gardens that sustain wildlife and inspire connection to the land.

For the Conservation Lands Foundation, supporting organizations like Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve is central

to its mission of community-led advocacy. The National Conservation Lands system encompasses 35 million acres of public lands – including national monuments, wilderness areas, scenic rivers, and historic trails – yet they represent only a portion of the lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management. Protecting these vast and interconnected ecosystems requires local people who show up day after day with knowledge, care, and commitment.

Truly conserving natural and cultural values means protecting entire landscapes and the communities connected to them. By strengthening grassroots organizations whose shared love of public lands brings together diverse voices across the rural and urban West, Conservation Lands Foundation ensures conservation remains inclusive, durable, and deeply rooted in place. Together, CLF and Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve show that when community leadership is elevated and supported, public lands – and the people who cherish and protect them – thrive.

Planning for Wildfire Resistance at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve

by Zoe Dagan

It is undisputed that wildfire is now a top threat to not only wild Mojave Desert landscapes, but also the residential communities that make up our Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI). Big Morongo Canyon Preserve is an important natural buffer between wildlands and communities. You can read more about the complexity and consequences of wildfire in the Morongo Valley WUI in Justin Merino's article in this newsletter titled *"The Fire Safe Movement and the Morongo Valley Wildland-Urban Interface."*

Wildfires, once rare across the Mojave Desert, have become more frequent and burn with higher intensity. Historically, fires in the Mojave were smaller and less



intense. The trees and shrubs characteristic of our landscape were widely spaced, and there was very little fuel in between for fire to consume. Fires caused by lightning strikes, or even humans, could burn out reasonably

quickly without landscape-scale consequences.

Today, things have changed. Research has shown that fires in the Mojave Desert now spread faster and burn more intensely. A major reason for this change is the prevalence of fast-growing invasive annual plants such as non-native grasses. These non-native invasives populate and fill in the areas between native shrubs and trees (even sometimes outcompeting the natives). When these non-native invasives dry out in the summer heat, they become a fuel source that allows fires to spread rapidly. Recent examples of this phenomenon include the 77,000-acre York Fire (2023)

(continued on p. 4)

Birding with Friends... and New Binoculars!

As we expand our education programs, such as *Birding with Friends*, *Saturday Nature Walks for Families*, and *Summer Science Fun*, we are updating our supply of loaner binoculars thanks to grant funding for new Nocs Provisions binoculars. We also partner with the Desert Recreation District to bring families from under-served communities in the eastern Coachella Valley to the preserve for *Birding 101*. Each participant is given binoculars so that they can continue this new activity in their hometowns and public places. Thank you to the **Paul and Roxanne Education Foundation and Conservation Lands Foundation** for their financial support of these programs.

Kaeliegh's Korner

I often talk about the wildlife, the land, the seasonal shifts, and the special moments I get to share with visitors. But today, I want to talk about something that makes all of that possible: strong leadership. With all the incredible experiences the preserve has given me, one of the most overlooked gifts has been good leadership.

Since Kevin Wong stepped into his role, the preserve has felt more supported and connected. He has created a healthy balance between protecting the land and supporting the people who love it, which isn't always easy to achieve. He understands that conservation and community go hand in hand.



BMCP photo

Conservation Lands Foundation Summit. Experiences like that expand my perspective and remind me why I chose this path in the first place. Having a leader who actively wants you to grow is truly a blessing.

He extends that same care to our volunteers. They are not "extra help." They are part of the heartbeat of this place. He listens to their ideas, ensures they feel valued, and provides meaningful roles where they can truly contribute. When people

feel appreciated, they show up differently and you can feel that energy throughout the preserve.

He also prioritizes keeping visitors connected. Through newsletters, updates, and genuine openness to feedback, he makes sure people feel informed and involved. Visitors aren't just passing through; they're part of something bigger.

Because of that leadership, I get to experience a job where no two days are the same. From trail maintenance to bird walks to education and outreach, he provides the tools, freedom, and trust to move between different parts of the preserve, which keeps the work dynamic and deeply fulfilling.

Conservation is about protecting land and wildlife. But it's also about building community. When leadership prioritizes trust, growth, and connection, the ripple effect reaches visitors, volunteers, staff, and the land itself.

Strong leadership doesn't just keep an organization running. It creates a culture, and that culture is something you can feel here. Sometimes the most important parts of a preserve aren't just the plants, wildlife, or trails; it's the people who guide and support it.

And I'm incredibly grateful to be part of that ripple.

Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve

Board of Directors

Jan Anderson
Caroline Conway
Zoe Dagan
Kellie Flint
Kurt Kosek
Maureen McCarty, President
Tom Scanlan

Staff

Kevin Wong, Executive Director
Kaeliegh Watson, Education Ranger

NEWSLETTER

Editor: Joe Zarki

Spring/Summer, 2026

P.O. Box 780
Morongo Valley, CA 92256

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

A lot of what he does happens behind the scenes. He's constantly building connections, forming partnerships, networking, securing grants, and fundraising to ensure the preserve continues to thrive. That work may not always be visible, but it directly impacts everything we're able to offer, from habitat management and trail improvements to educational programs and outreach.

What stands out most to me isn't simply his work for the preserve, but his leadership style. He leads with trust. There's no micromanaging, no hovering; just confidence in his staff and volunteers to step fully into their roles. That trust creates a sense of ownership. It allows us to make decisions, try new ideas, and take initiative without fear of being boxed in. He's given me flexibility in my schedule, space to explore creative ideas, and the freedom to grow into my work in a way that feels authentic and empowering.

Growth is something he genuinely prioritizes. He encourages learning opportunities, like the upcoming

From the Computer of the 'Prez,' "Passing the Torch"

by Maureen McCarty



"The time has come," the walrus said, "to talk of many things: Of shoes and ships and sealing wax, of cabbages and kings."

The board has been informed, and I am now sharing the news

with everyone. This will be my final term as president of the Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve. However, you're not entirely rid of me yet. I'll continue as an ambassador at the kiosk and hope to remain on the board. As I complete my fourth year at the helm, I reflect on the significant changes and accomplishments we have seen.

Management Changes

Shortly after I took office, we learned that stewardship of key areas would shift from BLM to San Bernardino County Parks. This change affected 241 acres serving as the gateway to BLM and Sand to Snow National Monument lands, while we maintained our relationship with BLM for the broader, less-visited areas. Also, Dee Zeller, our long-time host who, alongside his wife Betty, had overseen the preserve for over two decades, stepped down from his role. Simultaneously, our executive director announced her departure for a new opportunity elsewhere. These

developments marked the beginning of a transformative period for our organization.

Challenges

In those early days, the situation seemed dire. The board grappled with keeping the preserve open amidst multiple crises. Besides finding a new Executive Director and host, we had the task of drafting a new Memorandum of Understanding with the County. As we emerged from COVID, the neglected trails and absence of school groups were a high priority. The plumbing issues and rodent infestation rendered the Nature Center unusable.

A Glimmer of Hope

Board members and volunteers rose to the occasion, handling daily operations and maintenance. Our meetings were relocated to Covington Park's Mesquite Room. Former Executive Director Meg Foley provided temporary assistance. This stopgap measure allowed us to focus on our search for permanent leadership culminating in the hiring of Kevin Wong as our current Executive Director. With his appointment, a path forward finally emerged.

A Turning Point: Kevin's Hiring

The decision to bring Kevin on board marked a significant milestone. Under his direction, we have seen numerous positive changes, such as the hiring of education ranger Kaeliegh, substantial volunteer growth, Nature Center renovation, trail restoration, and

increased visitation. Educational improvements brought the return of school groups and collaboration with the Malki Museum for cultural signage. You may have noticed the new educational and trail navigation signs, and the revitalization of the native plant garden. Our relationships with Conservation Lands Foundation, BLM, and San Bernardino County Parks have also strengthened. This improved preserve management has led to better overall visitor experience.

Passing the Torch: Big Morongo Canyon Preserve's Future

As I prepare to step down, our preserve faces several exciting new challenges. We are currently working on striking a balance between habitat conservation and fire resilience, enhancing our education programs to be more inclusive and reach a broader audience, and expanding our paid staff to meet growing needs. While we foster our existing partnerships, we will be cultivating new ones to help secure sustainable funding for ongoing initiatives.

Throughout this transition, we have aimed to maintain the preserve's unique atmosphere and direction while embracing future opportunities. The incoming president, to be selected in September, will build upon our achievements and guide Big Morongo Canyon Preserve toward continued growth and success.

Executive Director's Report

by Kevin Wong



Great news! On March 5, Beahta Davis, Director, San Bernardino County Regional Parks, announced that the boardwalk trails at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve are now open. These trails

suffered tremendous damage from Hurricane Hilary and San Bernardino County Regional Parks spearheaded the repairs with new bridges over the waterways of the preserve. On behalf of our Board of Directors, staff, and all our supporters, we thank Beahta Davis and San Bernardino County for the repairs. After the 2026 bird nesting season, the

county will continue infrastructure improvements in the preserve by paving the parking lot and the entry driveway.

Our volunteer appreciation lunch on February 14 was attended by 48 dedicated and passionate individuals who provide the support that we need to maintain the great trails, provide clean bathrooms, produce educational activities for children, young families, and for adults, engage our visitors at our welcome kiosk, lead our weekly bird walks, and oversee the revitalized native plant garden. This day was a celebration and, as it was held on Valentine's Day, we expressed our love and gratitude to our volunteer team that now exceeds 75 individuals. One of my earliest mentors defined success by asking the following

questions: *Did you bring joy to your community? Did you give something back into the world?*

Our volunteers bring joy to the many communities that engage with the preserve, offering their time, energy, and heartfelt dedication. Everything we achieve is due to the passion and commitment of our incredible volunteer team. When you see them hard at work in the preserve, please thank them for their work!

Moving forward in 2026, our board has authorized hiring a new part-time employee to help with the administrative needs of Friends of Big

(cont. on p. 7)

Planning for Wildfire Resistance... (cont. from p. 1)

by Zoe Dagan

and the 43,000-acre Dome Fire (2020), both in the Mojave National Preserve, and the 61,700-acre Sawtooth Complex Fire (2006).

The time has come to reframe the question we've always asked, "What do we do if fire comes to the preserve?" Now, with the escalated threat of wildfire, the question is not "if" but "when." Taking action for fire prevention, response, and recovery has never been more important.

In fall of 2025, the BMCP Board of Directors voted unanimously to engage Rohde & Associates to develop a Fire Management and Recovery Plan for Big Morongo Canyon Preserve. Mike Rohde and his team of consultants provide Wildland-Urban Interface Fire Emergency Response Planning services and are subject matter experts in wildland fire response, planning, and risk reduction. Rohde & Associates was selected based on a number of factors, especially their experience working with our local, regional, and state agency partners and their track record of developing plans that have been implemented throughout San Bernardino County on a number of high-profile incidents. We confirmed their credentials through a number of reference checks, which were unanimous in their support.

Investing in a Fire Management and Recovery Plan is an investment in the future of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve, the community of Morongo Valley, and adjacent communities and landscapes. A wildfire resilience plan gives us a framework to do our best to prevent



ignition, protect critical resources like our boardwalk and nature center, and recover more quickly if fire occurs. We don't want to wait until after a fire to figure out the best way to recover.

Our Fire Management and Recovery plan is intended to be a dynamic, living document, guiding our planning and implementation for the next 7-10 years. As conditions and/or science changes, the plan is designed to be updated and adapted.

Plans like these are used by agencies and partners as guiding documents to assist with coordination and collaboration when a unified response is required. Upon completion, our Fire Management

through education and responsible visitation. We hope to lead by example by educating preserve visitors, enhancing wildfire-related signage, modeling fire resilience, and hosting partners like Desert Region Fire Safe.

The Fire Management and Recovery Plan is just the beginning of our ambitious journey toward wildfire resilience, and we need your help. Opportunities to assist with wildfire education, defensible space demonstrations, fuel reduction, and fundraising are forthcoming. Currently we're seeking interested volunteers to join our wildfire advisory group - let us know if you'd like to learn more.



and Recovery Plan will be available to emergency service providers and agency partners such as Morongo Valley Fire, San Bernardino County Fire, CalFire, BLM, the National Park Service (NPS), and adjacent private land owners like the Mojave Desert Land Trust (MDLT).

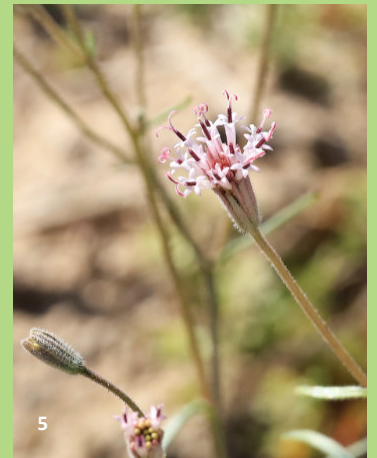
Planning for wildfire resilience is clearly tied to our mission of "stewardship of Big Morongo Canyon"



Photos in this article are from the 2022 Elk Fire at Black Rock Canyon and the 2025 Eureka Fire at Covington Flats, both within Joshua Tree National Park. Photos courtesy of the author and the National Park Service.

BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

Spring Comes Early to the Morongo Basin in 2026



Ample rains and mild winter days have prompted an early wildflower season at the preserve and elsewhere throughout the Morongo Basin area. Going clockwise from the upper left are 1) desert globemallow (*Sphaeralcea ambigua*), 2) California buckwheat (*Eriogonum fasciculatum*) with mating shield bugs, 3) desert chicory (*Rafinesquia neomexicana*), 4) Canterbury bells (*Phacelia campanularia*), 5) Spanish needle (*Palafoxia arida*), 6) a checkered white butterfly on sweetbush (*Bebbia juncea*), 7) a monarch butterfly on chuparosa (*Justicia californica*), 8) notch-leaved scorpionweed (*Phacelia crenulata*), 9) Bigelow's Crossosoma (*Crossosoma bigelovii*), and 10) Anna's hummingbird feeding (*Calypte anna*) on bladderpod (*Cleomella arborea*). All images above were taken between January 23 and February 14, 2026. (Photos by Joe Zarki)

BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

The Fire Safe Movement and the Morongo Valley Wildland–Urban Interface

by Justin Merino, Director of Wildfire Mitigation and Resilience, Desert Region Fire Safe

Morongo Valley sits at a critical crossroads between intact desert ecosystems and a growing residential footprint. This boundary, known as the Wildland–Urban Interface (WUI), is where homes, infrastructure, and natural landscapes meet and where wildfire risk is most complex and consequential.

The Fire Safe movement exists to address exactly this challenge.

Rather than a single organization, the Fire Safe movement is a community-driven approach to wildfire preparedness that brings together residents, fire agencies, land managers, nonprofits, and local governments. Its focus is proactive: reducing risk before a fire starts through planning, education, and coordinated mitigation.



Fire crews carry out mop-up operations on a wildfire near Morongo Valley. Photo courtesy of Robin Kobaly

In Morongo Valley, the WUI is shaped by rugged terrain, limited access roads, and wind-driven fire behavior, all compounded by vegetation that responds quickly to drought and heat. On red flag days, these conditions are not abstract; they are felt immediately across neighborhoods and open spaces. Wildfires do not respect jurisdictional boundaries, making shared responsibility and coordination essential.

The Fire Safe movement supports this coordination by aligning local knowledge with professional fire science. Through defensible space education, home hardening guidance, evacuation planning, fuel reduction projects, and community outreach, residents gain a clearer understanding of how individual actions contribute to collective safety. Just as importantly, this work helps maintain open, working relationships between communities and responding agencies before an incident occurs.



The old Warren barn is seen here just before it was consumed by the 2005 Paradise Fire.

Photo courtesy of the Morongo Basin Historical Society

This approach is especially important in areas where residential neighborhoods border protected lands, including Big Morongo Canyon Preserve. Preserves are vital ecological assets, yet they also require thoughtful wildfire planning that balances environmental stewardship with the safety of nearby residents. Fire Safe efforts help bridge that balance by emphasizing prevention, preparedness, and shared planning.

The upcoming Wildland–Urban Interface plan being developed by Rohde and Associates (see the article by Zoe Dagan) represents an important next step. A strong WUI plan clarifies agency roles, identifies priority risk areas, and establishes coordinated preparedness, response, and long-term resilience strategies. The Fire Safe movement complements this work by helping ensure the plan is understood, supported, and carried forward at the community level.

Community wildfire resilience ultimately depends on local participation. Residents can get involved by learning

how to reduce wildfire risk around their homes, staying informed about evacuation planning and preparedness efforts, and working collaboratively with neighbors to address shared hazards. More information about local Fire Safe initiatives, resources, and opportunities to participate is available at www.desertfire.org.

Residents are also encouraged to stop by MVFD Station 2, located at 11207 Ocotillo Street, where the Fire Prevention Office and Disaster Community Center are staffed by Desert Region Fire Safe, following recent rehabilitation work that returned the facility to active community use. The site now serves as a local hub for wildfire prevention information, preparedness guidance, and community coordination.



Firefighters battle the July, 2006 Sawtooth Fire near Morongo Valley. U.S. Forest Service photo

As wildfire seasons grow longer and more intense, resilience in Morongo Valley will depend on collective action. The Fire Safe movement provides a grounded framework for residents, agencies, and organizations to work together to protect lives, homes, and the natural landscapes that define this community.



Aircrews drop fire retardant on a small wildfire in west Morongo Valley, May 15, 2024.

Photo courtesy of Cal Fire

BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

Executive Director's Report

(cont. from p. 3)

Morongo Canyon Preserve. This position is the first opportunity to add staff since we hired Ranger Kaeliegh three years ago. We have identified two needs to meet our growth goals: recruiting new volunteers and coordinating our many volunteers and supporting our fundraising strategies that proved so successful in our 2025 Year-End Giving Campaign.

Major projects that we are currently working on include removing the encroaching vegetation from around the Nature Center to provide a defensible space in case of wildfires. In addition, we will fire-harden the



Brush piles await removal as part of the effort to create a defensible fire space around preserve infrastructure. BMCP photo.

building by completing the suggestions provided by CalFire which include boxing-in the eaves, installing a sprinkler system on the roof of the building, and replacing the emergency water pump and fire hose for the 1,200-gallon water tank that is located at the Nature Center.

Another project that we are excited about is the "Mission Video" being created by Digital Nomad Video. This eight-minute film shows how Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve is dedicated to the stewardship of Big Morongo Canyon through education and responsible visitation. The purpose

of the video is not to increase visitation, but instead to support our fundraising efforts. We plan to share a "soft" premiere of the video on Earth Day, April 25. One of our board members shared a draft of the video with her husband and he was "teary-eyed" at the conclusion. Yes, the video is impactful! Thank you to the Conservation Lands Foundation for funding our new audio-visual production.

Our education team is proposing the addition of twice-monthly nature hikes for families to be held on Saturday mornings. In addition, they are busy planning for the continuation of "Summer Science Fun", a pop-up program for families during their summer breaks from school. Last year, this science activity was very popular with 83 participants.

This year, the Friends group celebrates our **30th anniversary** as a non-profit organization *dedicated to the stewardship of Big Morongo Canyon through education and responsible visitation*. Our Board of Directors thanks all of you for your support over these three decades. We look forward to sharing more bold initiatives with you in 2026.



Work crews clear brush to help protect the Education Center from wildfires. BMCP photo.



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 75 passionate and dedicated volunteer team members,
3. Bringing us your recyclables which we convert to cash,
4. Purchasing Big Morongo Canyon Preserve merchandise.



Scan the QR code

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



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND
MANAGEMENT



In Partnership With

Regional Parks



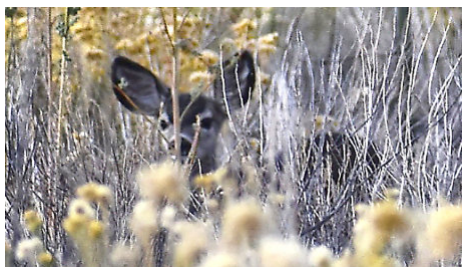
CONSERVATION
LANDS
FOUNDATION

BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

Reflections

Driving to the preserve the morning after the storms, with the snow-capped mountains glistening in the sun, I couldn't help but feel grateful—

...grateful to Kevin Wong for the opportunity,
...grateful for this chance to be here,
...grateful for the work I get to do,
...grateful that a place as beautiful and alive as Big Morongo Canyon Preserve is part of my daily life.



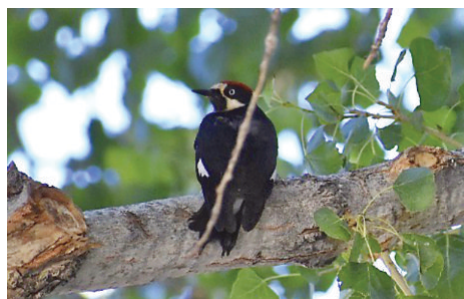
There's something grounding about seeing those mountains shining in the distance and knowing I'm headed somewhere that matters, to me, to the wildlife, and to the people who come looking for a little quiet. Every day out here feels like a gift, and today the desert made sure I noticed.

Beyond achieving my three goals, this semester gave me something harder to put into words, a deeper connection to this



place. The preserve became more than a requirement for my degree. It became a space where the treetops sing my soul in the breeze as the deep baritone of the trunks swaying acknowledges my sorrow. I witnessed seasonal changes, wildlife stories unfolding, and the quiet resilience of desert life. I felt myself slowing down, paying attention, and finding comfort in the rhythms of the preserve.

From making root baskets with Kevin and Ray, to working with the CA Cadet



story and photos by Teresa Nolan



Corps on National Public Lands Day, and hearing the wonder and amazement in a young woman's voice as we walked farther into the preserve—"It's like a tropical rainforest," to manning the kiosk and watching a red-shouldered hawk harass a mated pair of red-tailed hawks, each day was memorable.

The experiences I gained, bird knowledge, plant identification, ecological understanding, and visitor interaction, will stay with me far beyond this semester. More than anything, I carry with me a profound appreciation for the opportunity, for the wildlife that allowed me to observe them, and for the preserve that welcomed me so openly. This semester didn't just help me meet my goals; it deepened my sense of purpose in natural resources and conservation.

They say a picture is worth 1,000 words. I will let them do the rest of the talking.

CALENDAR

AT BMCP

MARCH – AUGUST

Gate open 7:30 a.m. to Sunset

365 days a year

UPCOMING EVENTS & COURSES

Sunday, March 15, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. 10th Anniversary of Sand to Snow National Monument at Whitewater Preserve. Free admission.

Saturday, April 25, 8:00 a.m. to Noon. Earth Day Clean Up and Bird Walk. Meet at the Main Preserve parking lot.

Friday, May 1, 9:00 a.m. to Noon. "Identifying Birds by Sight and Sound" with Robin Roberts. <https://bit.ly/4aE5JWM>. Course fee: \$65 per person. Class size limited to 8 participants.

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 1 through September 30. Bird walks start at 8:00 a.m. from October 1 through March 31. 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 April through August. Check <https://bigmorongo.org> for future dates and times.

AMBASSADOR KIOSK

Every Thursday thru 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.