



BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

NEWSLETTER

Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve

Spring/Summer 2012

Flashy Flickers *by Jane Olson*

The first time this woodpecker grabs your attention may be when it bursts from a tree, flashing a white rump patch as it departs in its typical undulating flight. The white patch makes it easier to see where the bird lands, and perhaps you can get a closer look at it. The patch disappears when the bird alights and its plumage blends into the surrounding tree or ground. The body is brownish with black narrow bars on the back and spots on a lighter front. Additional field marks are a black bib and a red stripe, which runs from the base of the bill towards the cheek. The red stripe is found only on males.

The flight feathers are the most remarkable visual aspect of Red-shafted Flickers, *Colaptes auratus cafer*, a subspecies of the Northern Flicker. Not many birds have colored feather shafts to augment the color of the vanes. The salmon-red color is most noticeable when they fly.

Native Americans in central California killed Red-shafted Flickers with wooden tipped spears or arrows to avoid damaging the feathers. The feather shafts, stripped of the vanes, were used to make sacred regalia, such as belts or headbands. They must have been a colorful addition to any ceremonial wardrobe

Colorful feathers attracted Native Americans to the woodpecker. The physiology of the woodpecker head has attracted modern scientists. The scientists are looking for ways to shield sensitive microelectronics from shock. For some time ornithologists have known that woodpeckers can drum up to 22 times a second when excavating for a nest or foraging for food. The questions were,



Red-shafted Flicker

“Why isn’t their brain pulp?” and “How do they disperse the vibrations?” The vibrations are the result of deceleration speeds of 1200g as the bird pounds the tree. Humans seriously concuss at speeds of 80-100g.

The researchers used video and CT scans to study the bird’s head and neck. They found four structures that absorb mechanical shock. These are its hard-but-elastic beak; a sinewy, springy, tongue-supporting structure called the hyoid that extends behind the skull; an area of spongy bone in its skull; and the way the skull and cerebrospinal fluid interact to suppress vibration.

The researchers were then successful in finding artificial analogues to all these

natural structures. Such technology may be used in the future to better protect flight recorders and the bodies of race car drivers in a crash. Thanks, woodpeckers!

At Big Morongo Canyon Preserve, we see Red-shafted Flickers mostly in winter. They are partial migrants that come from weather-impacted areas further north. Some years they seem to be all over the place. This year they are not so plentiful. (This year Yellow-shafted Flickers have been seen on several bird walks. This subspecies is usually found farther to the east of us.)

When flickers are present, you may hear their *wicka-wicka-wik* call. Their favorite food is ants, so you will find them foraging on the ground. Flickers supplement their diet of ants with seeds, nuts, or fruit.

Red-shafted Flickers share a number of attributes with other woodpeckers. Their feet have two toes that point forward and two that point backward. The outside back toe can flex to the side for better gripping. The tail feathers are structured for strength. They are much stiffer than tail feathers of other families of birds. They act as a prop to help maintain the vertical posture needed for foraging on a tree. The chisel-shaped bill is also common to all woodpeckers. The upright posture and the bill create a silhouette that helps you to identify a bird as a woodpecker.

However, if you are looking up Northern Flicker in a field guide, you will not find it under “Woodpecker.” You will find it under “Flicker”—even though flickers are pictured with other woodpeckers. That always confuses me. I don’t know about you.

BIG MORONGO BIRDERS



FIELD TRIPS

Mar. 2 — Pipes Canyon, lunch at Pappy & Harriet's

Contact the Preserve for information or to be added to email distribution for announcements about these trips.

BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

NEWSLETTER

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Spring/Summer 2012

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Bird's Eye View ... and more

*gleaned from
Dee Zeller*

Visitors of the human kind may be the most abundant species encountered at the Preserve recently. Betty has been directing traffic in the busy parking lot on the most high-traffic days, which is a challenging task. January had over 6500 visitors arriving by automobile, and February is seeing even more. Betty says that warmer than usual weather, high gas prices that keep folks from traveling too far from home, and the fact that the Preserve has no entrance fee are making BMCP one popular place.



Also abundant in the parking area are the American Robins, who according to one bird walk leader, "have been littering the parking lot." Up to 67 individuals have been counted at one time. Dee says that American Robins usually show up at the Preserve at the time the cottonwood trees are budding, which is quite early this year. Whether they are eating insects associated with the buds or are nibbling on the buds themselves he is not sure, but the parking lot with its stand of cottonwood trees is a popular site for them. They have also been mobbing the water dripper by the bird feeders, splashing and leaving the water dish dry until the dripper has had time to refill the dish.

Another recent visitor to the parking lot was the bobcat that Dee came upon at a less congested time of day. Dee says that the bobcat "dismissed me as insignificant and continued on."

Dee is thankful for the Preserve's many bird walk leaders, especially during this recent two-week period when he has been recovering from respiratory problems and croaking has been his usual mode of communication—kind of reminds one of the Baja California treefrogs that are now in their breeding season and vocalizing in

the marsh area.

Other people on Dee's to-be-thanked list are Jerry Messerschmidt, Tom Haworth, and Brian Hocutt. Jerry has returned to the Preserve once again this winter and is directing the Cal Fire crews in replacing sections of the boardwalk. Tom, in addition to his usual responsibilities as a member of the Friends Board of Directors, has also been busy with the boardwalk project, busily sawing planks to keep the work crews supplied with the new Trex material. Then there is Brian, who Dee can't say enough good things about. When Brian joined the volunteers at BMCP, he told Dee there wasn't anything he couldn't do, and that has been the case. Whether it is assisting Jerry in directing the Cal Fire crews, otherwise maintaining trails, running the workshop, making facility repairs, or readily sharing his knowledge with visitors he meets out on the trails, Brian has been a valuable resource.

You won't find it on the BMCP Checklist of Birds, but a new species showing up on bird walks lately is the California Quail. A Preserve neighbor first reported this bird last year, when a pair nested and produced young by his house. Dee finds this not too surprising, as this more coastal species is resident at the not too distant Whitewater Preserve and has also been found as far east as the Boyd Deep Canyon Desert Research Center near Palm Desert.

Long-eared Owls are being seen once again from the Marsh Trail boardwalk. Dee has seen both a male and a female, which he is able to distinguish due to the male's broader face, with the female's face appearing long and narrow.

Bighorn sheep are not frequently seen at the Preserve in winter, so Laura Sherrod was thrilled to see six sheep a short ways down Big Morongo Canyon in February. With spring and warmer weather just around the corner, we can all hope to spot these large mammals as they travel to the Preserve for its water and to feed on the newly emerging sedges, one of their favorite foods.

BMCP Junior Docent Program *by Pat Stoner*

In February of 2007 we introduced the Junior Docent Program for students in sixth through ninth grades. The Preserve has always supported the "Take it Outside Program," which is designed to get our youth to connect with their public lands. Our goal has been to stimulate their interest in what surrounds them by learning about Big Morongo Canyon Preserve, the environment, conservation, and giving back to their community through volunteering.

Currently we have ten trainees and four junior docents enrolled in the program. Eight of these trainees were participants in our 2011 Summer Nature Encounter Program, which is a two-week, free program for students entering fourth, fifth, or sixth grade. It seems to be a stepping stone to joining the Junior Docent Program. The participants come from throughout the Morongo Basin.

The Junior Docent Program meets at the Preserve the third Saturday of the month from 10 a.m. to noon during the school year. Before becoming a junior docent, they are required to complete seven workbooks covering subjects such as geology, habitats, birds, Native Americans, and environment, to name just a few. There are eleven subjects to choose from with service learning being mandatory, which requires them to complete 60 hours of volunteering in their community or at the Preserve.

If you attend the Earth Day Conservation Fair in April this year at the Yucca Valley Community Center, please visit our display and meet our junior docents and trainees. They will be happy to explain the program as well as answer any questions you may have.

We are very proud of our four junior docents. They have worked very hard to complete their training and now have the same rights and responsibilities as our adult docents/volunteers. Britney Sessum, Kyler McKay and Samantha O'Connell have been in the program since its inception. Kyler and Britney joined the program

following their participation in our Summer Nature Encounter Program. Kaitlyn Woolling joined the program in September 2010.

Britney and Kaitlyn are seniors in high school, and Kyler and Samantha are juniors. I recently asked them, "Has the program helped in determining your future plans?" Each of them agreed the program played a big part in confirming the decisions they had already made. They all agreed that the experience has given them the opportunity to develop their social skills. They are very comfortable communicating with other people, especially adults. Over the years, many lasting friendships have developed as they work very closely with each other.

I would like to do a short profile on each of our junior docents.

Britney's future plans are to get her college education, and upon completion, her goal is to become an EMT for the Morongo Basin Ambulance Service. To prepare for this, she is currently in the Explorer Program at the Morongo Valley Fire Department. Last October she attended the Fire Academy at Fort Irwin for four days. She currently volunteers to ride with the Morongo Basin Ambulance Service, which involves being available for a twelve hour shift from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m.

Kaitlyn has her applications for college already in the works. She will be majoring in environmental studies with possibly a minor in archaeology. She also volunteers for The Wild Lands Conservancy at Whitewater Preserve and Pioneer Mountains Preserve whenever her schedule allows. Once a week she volunteers at Yucca Valley Elementary School as a teacher's helper. Part of her duties involves tutoring students.

Even though Samantha is a junior, she has set her sights on becoming a veterinarian. She has said, "I don't even need to think about it." It is her goal. Whenever she assists at a function sponsored by the Junior Docent Program, you will get to meet one of her pets named Rosy, which happens to be a rosy boa snake. If you wish, she will even let you touch her or maybe actually hold her if you want. In the past she has volunteered as a



Junior Docents (l to r) Kaitlyn, Britney, Kyler and Samantha

teacher's helper.

Kyler is home schooled so is available to assist me with my field studies in his free time. He is so attached to the Preserve, his mother has said, "If I gave him my permission and a sleeping bag, he would move there." If Betty Zeller needs help, Kyler is the first person she calls. His future plans, like those of Samantha, are set in stone. He wants to be a BLM park ranger. Kyler also has a pet California kingsnake, appropriately named King. We are so fortunate that he and Samantha will be with us for another year.

The Junior Docent Program is very challenging and not for every student. We lose some because of relocation and some because of a lack of interest. We are very aware of additional activities such as sports that they may be involved in, and we work around their schedule whenever possible.

I know I also speak for my docents when I say it is very rewarding to have played a part in their development. Please visit us during the annual Morongo Valley Spring Festival on Saturday, March 31. Don't forget the Earth Day Conservation Fair at the Yucca Valley Community Center on Saturday, April 21.

A Hike in Big Morongo

Canyon by *Dorothy (Dot) DeGennaro*

The morning of February 4 was clear and very cool as 16 people gathered at the BMCP kiosk for an adventurous hike down the canyon. Our leader was Ann Garry, docent and botanist. Four additional docents accompanied the group.

Along the way, Ann pointed out creosote and yerba santa and described the ways these plants, as well as several others, were used by the Native Americans who once inhabited the area. Ann also explained the different characteristics of plants as they adapt to the various desert environments. Other points of interest were the history behind the remains of the old barn and the old, decaying car.

We were all delighted by the surprising amount of water running down the canyon; at one point on the trail, we made

a crossing using large rocks strategically placed in the stream. Much of the way we were accompanied by the drumming of woodpeckers, and the group was awed by the sight of a large Red-tailed Hawk gliding on a thermal current and disappearing over the crest of the hills.

Our lunch break was a welcome rest. As we ate and relaxed, Ann talked about desert survival. She reminded us to drink water, not just carry it. She also explained that sounds, such as blowing a whistle, do not carry in the desert as they would in a different, less expansive environment; the best way to get attention in an emergency in the desert is through visual signals, such as flashing a mirror.

On the way down the canyon, there was a lot of conversation among participants as new sights were seen and commented upon. But the main sound on the return was of our footfalls as we climbed back up the often steep, sandy trail.

Big Morongo Canyon

Preserve by *Allyson Hocutt, Junior Docent, and Brian Hocutt*

The Big Morongo Canyon Preserve is a pleasant place to visit if you want to escape from the everyday hassle. Or if you just want a deep breath of fresh air, this park is a getaway to things you don't see every day.

The trails are always cared for, so you won't get lost. Who trims the bushes, cleans the boardwalk, chops the trees, and tends to this nature-filled park? Volunteers, of course! Volunteering may sound like a worthless job that's not necessary, but it's actually quite fun knowing you contribute in making such a wonderful place look beautiful. All that hard work pays off in the enjoyment of walking all the trails, just as if it were made for you.

The Preserve is for all ages and has a wheelchair-friendly trail as well, and it

brings a smile, knowledge, and a joyful walk all for free—"donations are accepted." It is filled with tons of birds in the spring and furry critters year-round. This is one of the biggest hotspots in the country for bird spotting, especially those little rare hummingbirds. Coyotes, deer, bobcats, and even a badger are seen, if you're lucky.

The Education Center also has bird books you can check out, but don't forget to return them. It also has records on all of the plants in the Preserve and in some of the states. There are even bugs and butterflies on display inside. Also, the butterfly garden outside attracts a lot of flying insects, rare ones too.

Even if you are not a volunteer, you help the Preserve in some way, like picking up your trash, recycling your bottles, and even making the trails with your own footsteps. Come by sometime; you won't find anything like it in your backyard.

**Take a Hike
at
BMCP**



**Family Hike
March 3**

Meet at the kiosk at 9 a.m. for an interpretive hike on Native American Uses of Plants. We will walk the boardwalk with its easy access to views of plants and open water and often wild-life and animal tracks. You may also hear frogs calling.

View displays in the Education Center, tour the Butterfly Garden, and learn about the Preserve's children's programs.

Wear sturdy shoes and a hat and bring water and a snack. Call the Preserve to make a reservation.

**Moonlight Hike
March 6**

Meet at the kiosk at 7 p.m. to enjoy a silent hike by the light of the moon. After traveling up the West Fork Trail and down into Big Morongo Canyon, we will sit on the large deck in the marsh area and listen to poetry.

Wear warm clothes and sturdy shoes and bring water. Call the Preserve to

CALENDAR

at BMCP
MARCH – AUGUST
 Gate open 7:30 a.m. to sunset
 365 days a year

Wednesday Bird Walks

Every Wednesday at 8 a.m. in March and at 7 a.m. beginning in April and continuing through the summer. Bring your binoculars and spend a couple of hours strolling the trails with birding experts. Beginning birders welcome.

Saturday Bird Walks

Saturdays (except the first Saturday of each month) at 8 a.m. in March and at 7 a.m. in April and May. Same format as Wednesday Bird Walks.

Upcoming Events

- March 2, Fri. - **Big Morongo Birders Field Trip.** To Pipes Canyon, followed by lunch at Pappy & Harriet's. Call Preserve for details.
- March 3, Sat. (9 a.m.) - **Family Hike.** See page 4.
- March 6, Tues. (7 p.m.) - **Moonlight Hike.** See page 4.
- March 17, Sat. (10 a.m.-noon) - **Junior Docent Training.**
- March 20, Tues. (9 a.m.-noon) - **Docent/Volunteer Meeting.** Topic: Plants; Speaker Ann Garry.
- March 31, Sat. (10 a.m.-3 p.m.) - **Morongo Valley Spring Festival.** BMCP and the Morongo Valley Chamber of Commerce present a spring festival/Earth Day event. With multiple events located at both Covington Park and the Preserve, there will be something to interest everyone: family fun activities, children's games, food, entertainment, workshops, bird walks, hikes, speakers, exhibitor tables, and more. Preserve activities will include a bird walk at 8 a.m., a hike TBD., and displays at the Education Center.
- April 21, Sat. (9 a.m.-2 p.m.) - **Yucca Valley Earth Day Celebration/Junior Docent Training.** Sponsored by the Town of Yucca Valley and held at the Yucca Valley Community Center. Junior docents will be educating the public about our Preserve.
- April 24, Tues. (9 a.m.-noon) - **Docent/Volunteer Meeting.** Topic: General Land Office; Speaker Greg Hill.
- May 15, Tues. (10 a.m.-1 p.m.) - **Docent/Volunteer Meeting & Luncheon.** Recognition by BLM, and the Friends of BMCP will be hosting a luncheon in recognition of the hard work of all our docents and volunteers.
- May 19, Sat. (10 a.m.-noon) - **Junior Docent Training.**



FRIENDS OF
 BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE

Yes, I Want to Help

PLEASE RETURN YOUR TAX-DEDUCTIBLE DONATION TO:

FRIENDS OF BMCP
P.O. Box 780
MORONGO VALLEY, CA 92256

NAME(s) _____
 MAILING ADDRESS _____
 CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____
 EMAIL _____

ENCLOSED MEMBERSHIP DUES:

- \$ 25.00 INDIVIDUAL ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP
- \$ 35.00 FAMILY ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP
- \$ 250.00 LIFETIME MEMBERSHIP

ADDITIONAL CONTRIBUTIONS:

- \$ 10.00
- \$ 20.00
- \$ 50.00
- OTHER

**BECOME A MEMBER OF THE
 FRIENDS OF
 BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE**

The Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) association organized solely for the advancement of programs at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve/Area of Critical Environmental Concern. The primary purpose of the Friends is to enhance wildlife viewing, wildlife protection, educational programs, and recreational opportunities provided by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) within the Preserve. The Friends provide ongoing support of the Bureau's conservation, education, and recreation programs within Big Morongo Canyon Preserve. The Friends achieve these goals by raising funds, accepting donations, recruiting volunteers, and assisting the BLM in the planning, creation, and maintenance of programs and facilities at the Preserve.

All donations visitors are used by the Friends to purchase materials for trail construction, benches, signs, and displays. Maps, trail guides, brochures, and educational and informative printed material are also provided to visitors from these funds.

Donations to the Friends are tax-deductible and are not used to cover overhead or operational expenses.

As a Friend, you will receive an annual summary of accomplishments and new environmental education materials and programs made possible through the donation fund. Friends of BMCP are invited to attend the annual fall general membership meeting. As a special thank you, new Friends receive a unique BMCP embroidered color patch. Lifetime members also receive a canvas Preserve tote bag in addition to two BMCP color patches.

BIG MORONGO CANYON PRESERVE



NEWSLETTER

is published by
Friends of BMCP

P.O. Box 780
Morongo Valley, CA 92256

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for receiving your newsletter, call the Preserve



Drought & Mild Winter

by Ray Yeager

We are in the middle of a serious drought. BMCP rainfall figures from July 2011 through February 2012 total 0.61 inch. The average for this time of year is 7.02 inches. Fortunately, the general health of the Preserve is not impacted by local precipitation, as the San Bernardino Mountains aquifer supplies our needs. Of course our mountains are also in the midst of the same dry conditions, but this will not impact BMCP for five to seven years.

The bad news is these conditions will seriously damage our wildflower season. However, this will also give us an opportunity to observe which annuals and perennials can best handle these severe conditions.

An 82°F on December 30 was the highest temperature for December since we have been keeping records at the Preserve (2007), but it has been a mild winter so far, with near average temperatures most of the time.

Mesquite Trail Closure

Have you been missing a walk on the Mesquite Trail, down the steps along the watercourse, out onto the Helmkamp Deck for a peaceful sit, and across the bridge to return on the far side of the canyon?

This picture tells the story. Cal Fire crews have been busily replacing the defective Trex material that was put in place when the original Trex boardwalk burned in the 2005 Paradise Fire.

Loose and uneven boards had become a danger, and even the framework has had to be replaced in some sections due to settling in this marshy area.



Jerry Messerschmidt directs a CalFire crew in repairing the Mesquite Trail boardwalk