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Fins in the Lake



A threespine stickleback

“There isn’t a fish alive out there.” Such was the proclamation of elderly gentlemen several years ago along the shores of Lake Merritt. But nothing could be further from the truth. Unknown to most people, Lake Merritt is home to many species of fish, several of which breed here. And in March 2008, a 44-inch striped bass was caught in the Lake!

Large bass aside, because the largest opening between trash rack bars on the channel (which connects the Lake to the Bay) is only about 7.5 inches, most fish in Lake Merritt are small (less than 8 inches long). The big bass was undoubtedly trapped in the Lake for several years, feasting on topsmelt as the dominant predator.

Other than being small, it is also interesting to note that many of our fish species are not native (were not here before human civilization developed). Our proximity to the Port of Oakland, where ballast water from ships around the world is dumped, is one of the reasons the Lake has fish that came from somewhere else.

So what lives here? Following is a list of the more common species:

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Aspiring Filmmaker Theodora Ruhs

By Kaletha Patterson



“Lake Merritt pays a price for being at the heart of the City and at the center of so much activity. That price is pollution.”

This is one of the many informative statements made by Theodora Ruhs, a 28-year-old local aspiring filmmaker who captures a wealth of footage and insightful commentary by Dr. Richard Bailey, the Institute’s director.

The hour-long video talks about air quality, trash, storm drains, schoolchildren who have taken an interest in the Lake and the role the Lake Merritt Institute plays in keeping the Lake clean.

Ruhs began her journey into videography and filmmaking during college. She was always interested in documentary filmmaking and the creative freedom that it provided in educating others. After completing her undergraduate degree in New England, she obtained a master’s degree in media ecology from New

Fins in the Lake... con't.



A close-up of a halibut

San Francisco topsmelt (no, not the endangered delta smelt). In the 1950s, before the tide gates were installed, there used to be a mayor's smelt derby here. Nowadays, these fish provide forage for the many cormorants and other birds.

- Northern staghorn sculpin: Lives on the bottom, sometimes in discarded bottles.
- Northern bay pipefish: A relative of the sea horse; not very numerous.
- Threespine stickleback: This fish moves up into the fresh water channels.
- Chameleon goby: Blunt head with black stripes; bottom dweller.

In the late spring, halibut are sometimes seen in the Lake, having turned vertically to pass through the trash rack bars, and juvenile shiner surfperch have also been found here. Gill nets set by the Department of Fish & Game brought up small leopard sharks as well as brown smooth-hound sharks, and for a while this agency stocked steelhead (rainbow) trout here as part of a fishing program which was later canceled by the City.

Fishing is legal at the Lake, but you must have a state license. Most people fish from the 12th Street Bridge at night, during an incoming tide.

Lake Merritt History Facts

- 1884** By this date water quality problems had become acute, since 90 percent of the City's sewage was deposited in the north arms of the Lake.
- 1898** The Lake was branded as a cesspool, an eye sore and a menace to public health. Boaters complained of a thick scum which prevented good sailing. Improvement was still a subject of controversy.
- 1907** Oakland electorate approved a bond issue of nearly \$1 million for park lands, the greater part for property adjoining the Lake.
- 1907** Mayor Frank Mott procured the funds and authority to dredge the Lake north of the bridge and use the dredge spoil to fill in the mud flats around 12th Street.
- 1909** State of California conveyed ownership of the acreage covered by the game refuge to the City of Oakland. Soon after, the channel was dredged and widened and homes constructed on the streets created by the reclamation program.
- 1909** An independent water supply was created for Lakeside Park at a cost of \$10,000. Two 12-inch wells were drilled, one to a depth of 150 feet and the other to 175 feet. Two centrifugal pumps, able to supply 700 gallons per minute, were installed in connection with a 250,000-gallon reservoir.
- 1914** Municipal Boathouse opened at a cost of \$35,000 and was a financial success beyond all expectations of the City officials. They considered the recreation activities thus realized as the big feature, with the revenue-producing activities to be secondary.

Aspiring Filmmaker, cont.

York University. For her senior project, Ruhs traveled to Vietnam for three weeks to study the social impact that the war and Agent Orange had on its people. She spoke to numerous people and learned intimate details from family members who survived but contracted cancer, and she heard firsthand how detrimental the war was for the youngest victims — the babies born with multiple deformities.

Ruhs' inspiration for the Lake Merritt documentary derived from her fondness for the Lake. As a native San Franciscan, Ruhs loves living by the Lake as it provides opportunities for her to take frequent walks and explore the natural surroundings. As a frequent visitor to the Lake, Ruhs' thirst for more knowledge was piqued and she soon found herself researching the Institute, learning about storm drains and how to keep the Lake looking nice.

Aside from the Lake Merritt video, Ruhs has created short films that include a documentary on an entrepreneurial program that teaches girls about sewing and fashion and how to market and create businesses for themselves; she also created a film about homeless shelters and programs on homelessness.

Ruhs would like to do more short stories about the East Bay communities, the organizations and the people who call this area home.

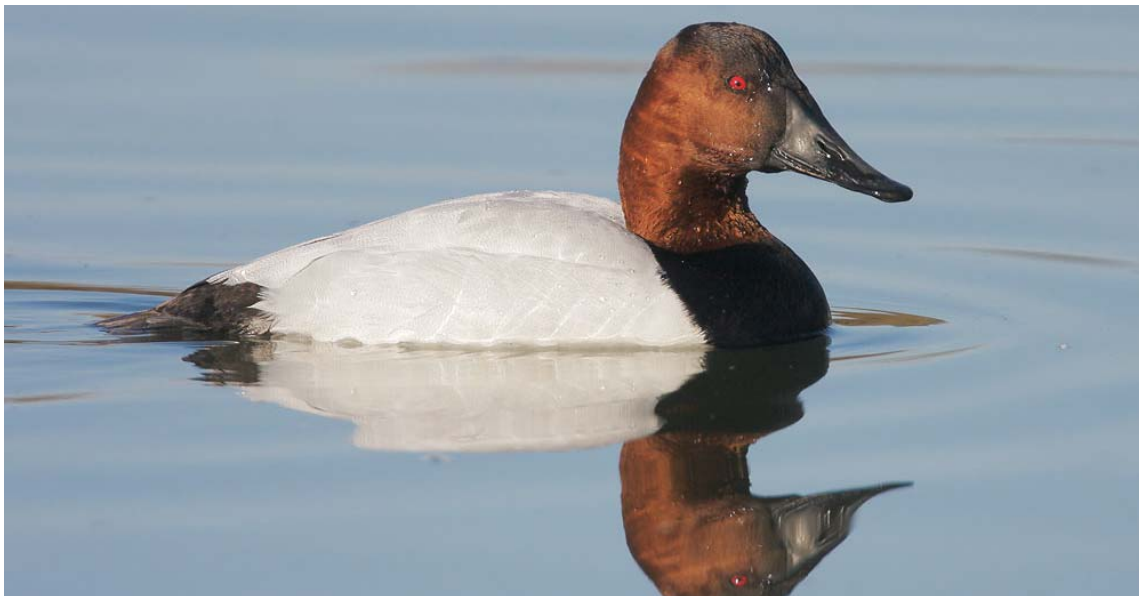
"I dream about being a documentary film producer. But I'm happy doing my little projects and if people see them, then that's great. If not, I'll still continue to do them no matter what."

You may watch the video by visiting her blog at this address: <http://oscopy.blogspot.com/>

Ducks Commonly Found at Lake Merritt During the Winter

By Lisa Meyers

During the winter months the Bay Area water habitats become a wonderful place to find wintering waterfowl. As the northernmost points of our continent freeze over for the winter, waterfowl (ducks, geese and swans) migrate south to spend their winter in more temperate environments. These environments include much of California and the lakes, bays and marshes found here. Lake Merritt offers the exact habitat these wintering species need and thus it becomes a great place for birders to come and see what has arrived for the season. On Saturday, January 17, Lisa Meyers led a birdwatching trip for the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory. In addition to the various waterfowl species that are currently here, the birders anticipated noticing the other families of birds that also make the Lake their home. Also noted were the resident birds that live in the area throughout the year.



Canvasback duck photographed by Tom Grey

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Tidings

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To contribute to the Lake
Merritt Institute, contact
us at
(510) 238-2290
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Common goldeneye duck photographed by Tom Grey

We're on the Web!

Visit us at:

www.lakemerrittinstitute.org

Contributors Wanted

Are you interested in writing and/or contributing articles to Tidings? If so, please send an e-mail and suggested topic ideas to Dr. Bailey at the Lake Merritt Institute: lmi@netwiz.net

Donations Needed

The Lake Merritt Institute is seeking donations, which help us to maintain the quality of the Lake. It's worth a tax write-off!

The Lake Merritt Institute
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