Cormorants Colonize the Mainland at Lake Merritt

The Double-crested Cormorants nesting under the old Bay Bridge made quite a splash in local media this spring as the final demolition of the old eastern span took place. Bird-lovers, conservationists, local governments and especially CalTrans -- which is responsible under the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act—were anxious about the impact of this habitat loss on their species. Cormorants are not endangered, but are considered a “species of special concern” under the State Fish and Game Code. Laney professor and sea bird biologist Mark Rauzon calls them a sentinel species of the open-water bay (a species whose fortunes quickly indicate the ecosystem’s overall health).1

With relief and jubilation of all stakeholders, KPIX reported on May 22nd that the cormorants that had been made homeless by the destruction of the old bridge had finally resettled in the attractive “condos” designed for them by Rauzon under the new bridge – a total of 700 of the birds—and had begun nesting!2

Not to be outdone, the cormorants of Lake Merritt made their own move. In April, Adrian Cotter of Community for Lake Merritt noticed several birds building nests in the poplar trees above the playground adjacent to the Rotary Nature Center.3 They proceeded to lay eggs and begin to rear young. Stephanie Benavidez, Chief Naturalist of the Lake Merritt Wildlife Refuge, told LMI that this is the first year they have done so.

What is going on? Are the mainland-nesters part of the displaced bridge populations? (Possibly).4 Did they move because the island’s trees died from the cormorants’ acid feces, or the 2010 island revegetation was somehow botched? (No and no).5 Did the more aggressive cormorants displace herons and egrets that nested on the islands? (Maybe).6
Although some worry that the new colony may kill its tree, or that falling feces would make the playground unsanitary, Stephanie points out that proposed solutions won’t work – and the new cormorant colony provides urban Oaklanders with a unique opportunity to follow the lives of wildlife up-close – within the nation’s first Wildlife Refuge.

LMI removed 1640 lbs. trash removed from lake in May for 13,780 lbs. year-to-date
In MAY LMI hosted 6 volunteer groups*, and made 6 educational presentations (0.00” rain)
* Call LMI at 510-238-2290 to schedule one for your group.

City Welcomes New Watershed Analyst Adam Klein at OPW

LMI Director James Robinson, retired OPW employee Joel Peter and LMI board member Katie Noonan met Oakland Public Works new watershed analyst Adam Klein on a cloudy Thursday May 11th for a walk along the lake’s southwest shore and channel leading to the Bay. Adam brings to the City of Oakland 25 years of experience as a specialist in water resources managing projects and providing environmental consulting services to private sector, municipal and governmental agency clients. Adam began his new position in February after completing projects with FEMA. On our walk, he took a hands-on approach searching out and getting GPS coordinates for all the storm water outfalls along our route.

James showed off LMI’s You-Clean-It boxes and informed Adam of our regular scheduled Tuesday and Saturday volunteer clean-up teams (just show up at LMI Office at 10:30). We discussed the recent AMEC report on the impact of tide gate closures as we approached 7th St. flood control station. Water level charts show that in Jan-Mar 2017 the tide gates were closed 49% of the time. When the gates are closed, no tidal flushing occurs. Water in the lake stagnates and dissolved oxygen needed for aquatic organisms to survive plummets.

The Measure DD opening of channel constrictions at 12th and 10th streets should have increased tidal flushing from 17% to 38% of lake volume. However, approaching the flood control station, we saw that incoming tide was entering only through the north west tide gate. If this happens regularly, the benefits of the Measure DD upgrade to the channel will be almost negated. Adam will be working with the City and County to address Lake Merritt’s dissolved oxygen problems.
Oakland Public Works reported to City council on May 23rd that it will not meet the mandated target of the Stormwater Municipal Regional Permit of 70% trash reduction from 2009 baseline by July 1st. The City will have made only a 44.6% reduction, well below the required 70%. The goal is zero waste by 2022. The City could face fines of up to $10,000 per day for this violation. In a similar predicament in 2016, San Jose agreed to pay $100,000 over the next decade to settle a lawsuit by the nonprofit group BayKeeper for failing to reduce sewage and trash in violation of the Clean Water Act. So, the financial liability to the city is potentially real.

Most of Oakland’s trash enters the greater SF Bay by air and creeks near the Coliseum. But Lake Merritt (proper geographic name “the Merritt Lagoon/Estero”) is itself a fully functioning arm of the Bay estuary. Trash input from Glen Echo Creek, Trestle Glen Creek and the lake’s 62 storm drain outfalls is conveyed to the central Bay through the LM channel if not stopped.

Dr. Bailey and LMI have advocated the use of trash nets (shown above left) in addition to the current trash barriers to trap it at the Glen Echo inlet. The County and City expressed concerns at the time that the resistance to flow caused by caused nets might increase flood damage in 100-500 year floods. But it would be possible to design nets on a frame that lifts up out of the flood plain during a 100-500 year storm, thus allowing use of this less expensive, but very effective technology without increasing flood risk. In view of the fines that might be levied it seems that 21st century technological solutions address the resistance concern. LMI would like to see the City re-visit the trash nests proposals.

Green Heron in the Garden by Lake Merritt–Hilary Powers – Golden Gate Audubon

Highlight of the May 4th-Wednesday Golden Gate Audubon walk - seen by only the last 10 or so of the 20-odd birders who started the trek - was an adult Green Heron fishing from the rocks in the garden lily pond: close enough to see every detail without binoculars and brilliant as a jeweled sculpture in the sun. It hooked its back claws into the steep slope of the stone and leaned out over the water from what surely looked like too far away to reach whatever it was hunting. Which turned out to be true. It plunged forward and fell into the water. And emerged with a fish. And did it all again, lean, splash, fish and all, before flying up and circling overhead and away.

In the island trees, the Double-crested Cormorant nests seemed to be on their second set of tenants. At any rate, the branches held a lot of adult-sized but pale not-quite-fledglings (and several full fledglings had made it to the floats in the
lake), but the nests displayed fuzzy black babies half their size or less. Mental snapshot: four nestlings shoulder to shoulder reaching up toward a pair of adults on the branch just over their heads - while the adults twined their necks together and one teased the other with a twig of green leaves.

The cormorants have overflowed the islands to a tree at the corner of the tot lot and are nesting happily - ignored by passers-by without the caution tape and respect-the-wildlife signs that were there a couple of weeks ago. With any luck, they won’t kill that tree (as they’ve done on the island) as the branches they’re using overhang the path instead of the roots. That makes that part of the path a good one to skirt, of course....

The lake itself was approaching summer quiet, reduced to Mallards and mutt ducks, a pair of American Coots, and a bunch of Canada Geese. Geese spread over the lawns as well, having arrived a couple of weeks early for the yearly molt migration. June and July are usually the peak months for that, as birds come in from miles around for a change of flight suit. Protected grass and a safe retreat is all they need to drop their primary feathers and grow their new ones, so anyone unwilling to pave the lawns and put a pool cover over the lake just has to groan and put up with the mess.

Only 32 species in all, but that included a young Cooper’s Hawk giving us the hairy eyeball from the nearest island, and some California Scrub Jays (not nearly as common at the lake as it looks like they ought to be), and 25 crows in a tight bunch on the ground near the corporation yard, jumping in old leaves, bouncing into walls and fences, and generally behaving like middle-schoolers at recess. Yet another good day at Lake Merritt, where every day is a very good day indeed.

**CLIMATE CORNER**

“**BOLD PLANS TO REDUCE CARBON / PROGRESS ON A CARBON FEE**”

-- A Guest Editorial by Dr. Richard Bailey

Because of the heat already absorbed by the oceans, and because the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide remains in the atmosphere for about a century, achieving zero carbon emissions (a monumental task in itself) will not be enough to stop and reverse our current planetary warming. How then, do we get out of this predicament?

The answer is to draw down (remove) carbon dioxide from the air. But how can that be done? When asked that question, even premier climate scientists had to pause before they answered. There has been, until now, no well thought out plan. Enter “**Drawdown;The Most Comprehensive Plan Ever Proposed to Reverse Global Warming**” created by Paul Hawken, a staff of sixteen, sixty one research fellows, nine essayists, and 12 members of the board of directors. Written in layman’s language, this book was published by Penguin books in 2017 and features a foreword by Tom Steyer.
COMING SOON (BUT HOPEFULLY NOT TOO LATE). Pressure is building on Congress to put a price on carbon. In California, the legislature recently passed AJR 43, which urges a national, revenue neutral carbon fee with a dividend. And, Senate Bill 775, now being considered, would upgrade California’s cap and trade system with the following improvements:

- All GHG emitters will pay a predictable and steadily rising price on carbon emissions.
- All California residents will receive a quarterly dividend check that will protect them from price increases.
- A border adjustment will protect jobs in California by discouraging businesses from relocating to where they can emit more CO2, and motivate other countries to adopt similar carbon pricing policies.
- The predictable price protects businesses and consumers from sudden and unpredictable spikes.
- This bill addresses some environmental justice concerns by requiring all polluters to pay and motivating real emissions reductions in the hardest hit communities.

So even if Congress does not act, California may. Details are at: [http://calfact.org/sb775-talking-points/](http://calfact.org/sb775-talking-points/)

SALUTE OUR MAY VOLUNTEERS!

LMI thanks Turner Construction, Park Day Middle School, Joaquin Miller Elementary School, Harambe Group, Lincoln Elementary School, St. Paul’s School (every Wednesday!), and the regular A-Team volunteers and everyday people of Oakland who helped clean our lake.

* Call LMI at 510-238-2290 to schedule a clean-up event for your school, business or group.

HAPPENINGS AROUND THE LAKE – June 19th-25th is Pollinator Awareness Week

THE URBAN WILDLIFE FESTIVAL / Pollinator Palooza
Learn about the local wildlife in our Urban jungle & how you can help them Thrive!
Lakeside Park - OPEN TO THE PUBLIC Sunday, June 25 at 10:00 AM - 2:00 PM PDT

The Tidings looks much better in color than in black and white hard copy! Also, links and footnotes often fit only in the digital version. Email us at lmi@netwiz.net if you would prefer a digital newsletter.

Do you know of a location that could use a few copies of the newsletter, The Tidings? Help LMI get the message out. Please let us know by emailing me (Katie Noonan) at ktnoon@aol.com. Please include name and address of location.

EDITOR: Katie Noonan—"The Tidings" is published by the Lake Merritt Institute (LMI) entirely with private funding donated to LMI, and not with funds from the City of Oakland. To contribute to LMI, use PayPal at the LMI website (lakemerrittinstitute.org) or send a check to: Lake Merritt Institute, 568 Bellevue Ave., Oakland, CA 94610-5026. LMI is a California State non-profit corporation; IRS Code 501(c)(3): EIN 94-3214160

Comments and contributed articles are welcome. Please feel free to contact me directly: “ktnoon@gmail.com”
NOTES
Many thanks to the Mark Rauzon, Stephanie Benavidez, the Golden Gate Audubon Society, especially Ilana Cindy Margulis, Hilary Powers and Ruth Tobey and to Lee Aurich and Joel Peter for information about cormorants and the history of the LM colony.

1https://baynature.org/article/old-bay-bridge-comes-will-cormorants-nest-go/

See also http://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/Bay-Bridge-bird-colony-settles-in-on-new-span-11160676.php

3A cormorant shift. Adrian Cotter.
https://communityforlakemerritt.org/
Lee Aurich, pers. comm.; Stephanie Benavidez, pers. comm.

4Mark Rauzon pers. comm. Hilary Powers, however, believes that they are likely a spill-over from the island.

5Stephanie Benavidez, pers. comm.
In fact, the departure of the egrets predated the revegetation by two years (SFPRBO) and the thicket of thornless blackberry visible in the raccoon pictures were intentionally left during the project.

6Adrian Cotter, pers. comm.

7,8Cormorants are survivors. Chopping down the nest tree will only prompt them to move to another. Cormorants are protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Culling them would require a special permit, and more would likely move in. It is easier to move the playground than to move the birds. And besides, they are on protected land in the Lake Merritt Wildlife Refuge.—based on conversation with Stephanie.

92014-2015 Lake Merritt Water Quality Monitoring Report made public by the City Public Works Department in July 2016. The study conducted by AMEC Foster Wheeler focused specifically on conditions affecting DO (dissolved oxygen) in the lake -- a critical factor, the lack of which landed Lake Merritt on the State Water Quality Board (303d list) in 2006 as an “impaired water body”.


11Several Tidings issues and our website urged use of the nets (Dr. Richard Bailey, pers. comm.) :

- https://www.lakemerrittinstitute.org/newsletters/01_10_tidings.pdf
- http://lakemerrittinstitute.org/newsletters/06_11_tidings.pdf
- https://www.lakemerrittinstitute.org/newsletters/10_11_tidings.pdf
- https://www.lakemerrittinstitute.org/newsletters/12_11_tidings.pdf
- https://www.lakemerrittinstitute.org/newsletters/02_13_tidings.pdf