

THE TIDINGS



LAKE MERRITT INSTITUTE

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“The Tidings” is an editorial newsletter. Posted opinions are not necessarily those of the City of Oakland

THIS ISSUE IS FOR THE BIRDS!



Hilary waits for birders at the national landmark bird sanctuary yard at the Rotary Nature Center.

Golden Gate Audubon Society volunteer Hilary Powers’ celebrated monthly bird walk column (since 2006) was accidentally left out of the June Tidings! Now, it is our pleasure to offer an issue focused on the birds of Lake Merritt.

In this issue, you will find Hilary’s columns for all three summer Fourth Wednesday Bird Walks. Her narrative and quantitative natural history notes on the species observed, their microhabitats, interactions, and behavior provide hands-down the most comprehensive record available to amateurs and professional naturalists interested in Lake Merritt birds. Besides that, she is an entertaining, gifted writer!

Hilary’s columns since 2006 can be viewed in past issues of The Tidings at lakemerrittinstitute.org. Hilary was recently the featured guest at Lakeside Chat #4, and you can view her presentation at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Seg7BEtPhzk>

AUDUBON BIRDWALKS AT THE LAKE: Join bird expert Hilary Powers any fourth Wednesday of the month for a free bird walk at the lake. Muster at the end of the Boat House parking lot near the geodesic dome cage at 9:30 a.m. for what are always fascinating introductions to lake birdlife.

What can YOU do to protect the birds at Lake Merritt? A healthy bird population depends on a healthy lake. YOU can join forces with other caring community members like you and become a member of **The Lake Merritt Institute (LMI)**. You can join our Clean Lake Program volunteers for weekly clean-ups (email Executive Director James Robinson at lmi@netwiz.net). You can make a tax-exempt charitable donation to LMI to support our work.

LMI removes tens of thousands of gallons of trash yearly that can entangle and sicken wildlife. We respond to illegal dumping of objects of all sizes including e-scooters, cars, needles and chemicals entering through storm drains. Visit lakemerrittinstitute.org to donate or join.

LMI in JUNE: 5460 gallons of trash were removed from the lake by staff and volunteers in June. Eight used hypodermic needles were removed. Total trash collected to date in 2021 is **29,450 gallons**.

LMI Director James Robinson hosted **113 volunteers**, attended 3 meetings and gave 1 presentation.

0.0 inches rain recorded recorded by LMI rain gauge

JUNE COLUMN: I'd Like to See a . . . at Lake Merritt

Birders have this game. When the day is going well – and more often when it's going badly – someone will announce “I'd like to see a [bird that's sort of possible but by no means guaranteed to show up]!” in a strong, directive voice, hoping that Someone Out There may be listening. Everyone chuckles and walks on – but if whatever-it-is shows up, which happens weirdly often, someone else will try again.

The fourth Wednesday of May was like that for the still-unofficial monthly bird walk at the lake. It started with the call for an Eared Grebe, one of the most gorgeous birds of North America at this season, decked out as it is in metallic plumage straight from the Craftsman's hand. They're almost certainly all well on their way to a breeding area by the 26th, but the lake was *very* thin of company. Acres and acres of water empty except for molting Canada Geese, assorted Mallards, and Western Gulls. So “I'd like to see an Eared Grebe about now!” was the most natural thing to say as we passed the islands, and on call, an Eared Grebe bobbed to the surface – probably the only one for miles around.



Eared Grebe; Photo by Lee Aurich

“I'd like to see a juvenile Black-crowned Night-Heron!” sez I, thinking back to the handsome gray, white, and black adult that had watched us from the bird paddock. And there in a bush on the end of an island sat a fine streaky brown youngster, conveniently perched a few feet below another adult for comparison. “How about a Green Heron?” Why yes, there-about a Green Heron, standing straight up against an island piling with the central cream panel on its chest lined up with the grain of the wood making it almost invisible. It took careful examination of every foot of the shoreline (for about the dozenth time) to find it.

“We never see House Sparrows anymore!” “No, it's a pity the way their numbers seem to be declining, but I'd – ah! Like that cock sparrow on top of the New Zealand Tea, and I think there's a female among the branches!” “I'd like to see a California Scrub Jay,” someone tried, but the Monkey Puzzle tree in the garden didn't oblige (as it often would). The request hung fire till we were out the bottom of the garden and looking across toward the Lake Chalet, when two of them chased each other through the bushes and buzzed us close overhead. (Photo Wikipedia) Similarly, we'd tried calling for a Caspian Tern – that gull-sized fish-diver with its comically huge red beak – several times with no luck, but at the last moment one cruised past as we were heading back through the Boat House parking lot at the end of the trip.

The Great Egret didn't really count toward the game as no one had ventured to speak for it, but we were happy to observe one anyway, strolling along almost belly-deep and fishing in front of the island. We hadn't seen one here since last December and didn't expect to do so before July; they're common enough in summer and fall but haven't shown up for a May walk since 2017.

The day brought other surprises uncalled for. Most notably, a Ruddy Duck paddled through the area east of the islands: a male in adult nonbreeding plumage (which should have been abandoned for russet glory in March), appearing for the first May walk in my records. In addition, Tree Swallows joined the expected Violet-green and Northern Rough-winged flocks skimming the water around the islands, and a bunch of crows treed a young Red-tailed Hawk over the bird paddock. To top it off, a pair of Brown-headed Cowbirds fossicked through the grass near the back garden gate, accompanied by what was probably a youngster learning the Way of the Cowbird after leaving its unsuspecting foster parents.

We had the regular seasonal treats as well. Two pairs of Double-crested Cormorants are breeding in the big bare tree on the island this year (giving the smaller tree in front another year to recover from impending death-by-dropping), and assorted Snowy Egrets strolled through the shallow waters. Across Bellevue in the park, the

Western Bluebirds, Chestnut-backed Chickadees, and Oak Titmice were tending youngsters, with the titmice providing a particularly endearing show as we sat in the shade near the main garden composting area. And that game really worked! Our success wasn't just imagination: we wound up recording 37 species – the highest May count in the decade-plus I've been tracking numbers in these reports. Last year's count was 33; the prior record, set in 2016, was 36, and it was often nearer 30 or even below. So, the variety made up for the somewhat scary drop in numbers of individuals, and we once again spent a very good day at Lake Merritt, where every day competes for the title of Best Day Ever....

JULY COLUMN: Quiet Day at Lake Merritt



Brown Pelicans and Cormorants; Kerstin Fermin

At the start, it looked like being *really* quiet, with the two leaders and one regular so consistent and so well-informed that he amounts to a third leader standing around and looking at one another, some assorted gulls, a few molt-grounded Canada Geese, and the tiny Double-crested Cormorant colony till well after the 9:30 formal start. Eventually, though, another seven birders joined us for yet another unofficial, unsponsored not-really-Golden-Gate-Audubon 4th Wednesday trip. (I was hoping to call it the *last* unofficial trip, but while GGAS lifted most pandemic-era restrictions as of July 1, it still requires pre-registration to discover secret starting locations – and that doesn't work for us after a decade and a half in more or less the same spot.)

To begin, several American White Pelicans cruised in, one landing about 10 feet offshore beside me while I was trying to get the scope focused on a pair at the far side of the lake. “Well, you can count that one!” Ruth (my co-leader) said, noting that the usual deal with white pelicans at the lake is that if there's only one, you should assume it's Hank-the-rescue-bird, who isn't here voluntarily and thus isn't countable by American Birding Association standards. But Hank can't fly, so if a pelican glides down out of the sky, it's clear to list.

Several Brown Pelicans showed up too, for the first time since last November (not *with* the white ones; they live too differently for that, but in the same area.) We had one adult and several youngsters with their chins just beginning to molt from mouse-brown to white, making them look a bit like they were wearing Canada Goose masks.

The air over the water and the grassy fields was full of swallows – not a surprise (June is a peak month for swallows) but still a treat. Besides the Northern Rough-wings that breed here and the Violet-greens we see most often, we had several swallow-tailed Barn Swallows swooping and diving and picking bugs out of the air with their tiny tweezer-like beaks. (Odd how everyone knows what “swallow-tailed” means, even though most of the swallows around here have straight or slightly notched tails rather than the eponymous deep forks.)

Probably the most endearing sight of the day was a Dark-eyed Junco perched on a bare branch, feathers puffed out so far it was the size and shape of a softball – needing only a bit of snow on the bark to look like a holiday illustration. Second place went to the Bewick's Wrens in the garden, bouncing and squeaking through the oaks with kids chasing their parents and fluttering their wings in FEED ME mode every time they came in for a landing. Meanwhile, several families of Western Bluebirds were foraging together amiably on the lawns. For some reason, young bluebirds seem content to hang out near their parents while finding food for themselves instead of trying to browbeat their elders into providing it.

Right at the corner of Perkins and Bellevue, an adult Cooper's Hawk perched against the sky in a skein of bare branches, almost straight overhead, seeming to glow from within. Dunno if it was an unusually pale bird or if the angle of the light on the breast leached out the pink, but it took a while to find enough field marks to be sure of what we were seeing.

Last month's I-want-to-see-a- game got a quick reprise as we were walking back up the lake toward the crossing to Lakeside Park. Someone called for a Great Blue Heron and someone else for a Red-tailed Hawk (two of the most likely of the not-yet-seen birds) and I racked my brain for another really good prospect. "I want a Great Egret," I said firmly, studying the island. "Like that one?" Ruth laughed, pointing up to where an egret cruised overhead, looking as always like a galleon under sail. None of the other requests were granted, but the game isn't magic – it just feels like it when you win.

It looked like we were going to have another cootless month, but very late in the morning, one American Coot swam out from behind an island. "Oh, good – you can report that!" someone said. "Nah," sez I, "No-coots is news. I'll have to say I was expecting not to see one, which is just weird...."

Including the coot (and not including the beautiful new domestic ducklings, one black and the other silver gray), we counted 38 species in and near the lake – the most for the month since 2018. The weather was a delight, especially considering the dreadful heat looming over much of the West, and all told we spent another very good day at Lake Merritt, where every day is well worth spending....

AUGUST: Light Fascination at Lake Merritt

A dozen birders joined the 4th-Wednesday walk at Lake Merritt in July – the first time the trip had been on the Golden Gate Audubon calendar since February 2020 – and no one was disappointed in the avian turnout. The species count was only 30 (lowest since 2017's 29), but it included a really good look at the almost-never-seen Spotted Sandpiper, pumping its tail happily along the bird paddock beach, plus several Brown Pelicans of assorted ages (missing last year) lounging on the floats, and a never-before-reported Warbling Vireo in the garden. A Belted Kingfisher – tempting to call it *the* Belted Kingfisher, as it was an orange-belted female, which is what we almost always see when we see one at all – appeared for the first time since last August, and we saw



Spotted Sandpiper, Wikipedia

all five of the local herons: Great Blue, Green, Black-crowned Night-Heron, and both Great and Snowy Egrets.

American White Pelicans were out in force, along with more juvenile Double-crested Cormorants than were likely to have hatched in the two active nests we had this year. Not as many as it looked at first glance, though – "Are those *all* cormorants?" someone asked, gaping at the top of the bare island tree, which was black with birds. Well, no, though there were a couple of young cormorants up there, looking around anxiously at the American Crows perched one or two per twig on every available spot. The crows didn't stay long, taking off in a dark cloud – probably to go look for the local Cooper's Hawk so as to pursue their regular business of making life awful for it.

A whole flock of Mallards swam in front of the Rotary Nature Center, all mottled brown from head to tail. "How many of those are boys?" I asked. Most of them, it turned out. High summer is when Mallards lose their flight feathers, grounding them for a month or so until the new set grows in. So in what would be called a clever trick had they done it on purpose rather than having successfully uneaten ancestors, the drakes also lose their flashy green head plumage, their natty gray jackets, and their curly duck-tail tail coverts, and they swim around as neat and well camouflaged as females. (The technical term for that is "as ducks" – unlike "man" and "dog" and some other creatures, the generic term here stands for the female rather than the male.) Anyway, they're still easy enough to spot once you know to look at the bill, which is a uniform greenish yellow rather than mottled orange and black.

As usual in July, the only grebes around were Pied-billed, but one was strange enough to evoke a "What's *that*?" These are normally stocky oval birds holding their heads close to their bodies like little football players about to ram into something. They just don't stand straight up on their tails in the water, long long neck stretched up as far again, and point a streamlined beak at the sky. But there he (she?) was, with black-banded white beak and black

throat stripe suddenly vivid instead of almost unnoticeable. They don't breed here at the lake and no other grebe was nearby, but this one surely looked to be thinking about it.

The lawn along Bellevue outside the park was jumping with House Finches of all ages and Western Bluebirds ditto, and Anna's Hummingbirds buzzed through the oaks. Though we saw no Bushtits and no robins or sparrows, and no coots at all on or near the lake, it was hard even to notice the absent with so much going on around us.

But the day's runaway most notable event had nothing to do with the birds. We've all seen butterflies dancing and flying spirals around each other – happy signs of mating and new life to come, and who cares what the caterpillars do to the garden? But interspecies relationships are rare – nonexistent, I'd have said. So when a Monarch butterfly and a Tiger Swallowtail spent what felt like several minutes circling and chasing one another around the garden, I watched slack-jawed.

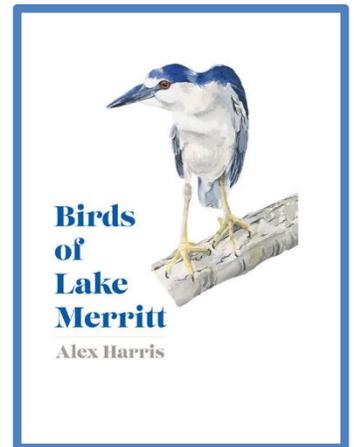
A very good day all round! Yet another in Lake Merritt's unbroken string of very good days....

Check out the new book by Alex Harris, Birds of Lake Merritt!

The Tidings Editor loved Mr. Harris' online presentation at the Oakland Public Library. This is a worthy contribution to the natural history literature of our lake in the tradition of Paul Covel. Beautiful paintings, lyrical well-researched historical narrative.

Review: "I've always known Lake Merritt as a great place to look for birds, not knowing that it was originally designated as a bird sanctuary over 150 years ago—the first wildlife refuge in the country! This charming book is the perfect introduction to the lake and its birds, and it's sure to give you a new appreciation of both." **DAVID ALLEN SIBLEY**, author of *What It's Like to Be a Bird*

Published by Heyday Books. You can find more information and where you can purchase at <https://www.birdsoflakemerritt.com/>



Sad News: Fish & Wildlife Mortality Report Filed. Rowing Club staff found a dead American White Pelican in early August. They contacted local birders who were able to make a report to CA Fish & Wildlife. It is not known what killed the bird, but there were signs of trauma and possible puncture wounds. Injuries from fishing gear have also been common. Keeping records is key to protecting birds in the refuge. If you find dead or injured wildlife at the lake, contact **OAK 311**. See The Tidings (May 2021) for more details.

CLIMATE CORNER: WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?

A guest editorial by Dr. Richard Bailey

We all know, or should know, what is causing the climate emergency that is now impacting planet earth. Massive use of fossil fuels, over harvesting of forests, unsustainable agriculture, and too many of us on a finite planet have forced greenhouse gases to reach levels higher than since the dawn of mankind. The consequent changes in temperature have activated numerous planet-wide climate feedback loops (ice cap melt, loss of the Amazon Forest, carbon loss from soils, etc.) thus further accelerating the warming, and all the disasters associated with it. So why, after we named ourselves *Homo sapiens* (which means *wise humans* in Latin) have we allowed this to happen? I saw the answer in a letter to the editor of a small, local newspaper in southern Oregon recently. Using my automatic copyrighting machine (I don't think the author would mind) I hereby relate some of the words therein. The letter began with saying that if you want the current climate disasters to continue, vote for a particular political party; ____; (you can fill in the blanks). Unfortunately, it is true.

(1) Climate deniers comprise 52 percent of House ____; and 60 percent of Senate ____

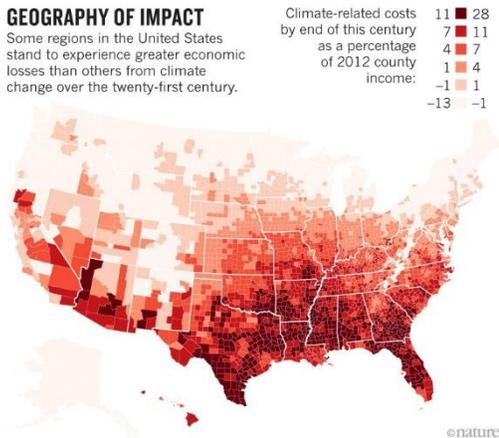
(<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/green/news/2021/03/30/497685/climate-deniers-117th-congress/>).

(2) Given our political system, that is easily enough to block legislation to deal with climate change. And block it they have. Although the Obama administration controlled both houses of Congress, a national cap and

trade bill that would have begun limiting carbon emissions could not pass. Other climate related bills passed by one party have since been similarly obstructed by - you guessed right, ____.

- (3) Particularly intriguing is the statistic that 76% of the other party believe that unchecked global warming will hurt them personally at least a moderate amount, but only 26% of ____ believe the same (<https://www.rff.org/publications/reports/climateinsights2020-partisan-divide/>).
- Only 41% of ____ favor the federal government charging a fee for carbon emissions - versus 81% of the other party that are in favor (2). Note here that as long as fossil fuels are cheap, people will continue to use them, so this position prevents the best economic tool that could be used to lower greenhouse gas levels.

These words are not intended to vilify all _____. That would be a foolish mistake because there are some who realize that human induced climate change is an urgent issue that must be dealt with. But if climate disasters are to be controlled, it must be understood how our system of government is implicit in what is happening. It is no secret that our nation is badly divided, on climate and a number of other issues. The naturally inquisitive among us further ask why some groups of people band together in opposition to scientifically determined truths. The key word is “together.” Staying true to group beliefs often overrides other considerations, such as “is it really happening?” and the peer reviewed positions of experts that have devoted their lives to studying such issues. It becomes an us versus them issue, but that is a formula for discord, not accomplishment.



Unfortunately, our current climate path causes more damage to those least able to afford it (thus increasing the economic inequality – environmental justice divide) and to rural regions where many ____ live, thus further dividing our nation. Agricultural losses, drought, and forest fires all impact rural, less populated areas more so than urban areas. “The bulk of the economic burden resulting from climate change in the United States this century will fall on ____ strongholds where politicians have traditionally opposed policies to curb greenhouse gases” (<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-00327-2>).

Graphic at left: M. Muro et al. (2017) Science 356, 1362–1369.

What will happen next? Will ____ and others continue to deny climate reality and obstruct change? Or will increasing climate damage cause people to abandon tribal beliefs and elect leaders that can solve the issue? We are at a crossroads.

One solution out of this mess is the Citizens’ Climate Lobby (CCL) approach, which is to charge the wealthy fossil fuel companies an increasing fee on the carbon emissions of their products, and give that money in equal shares to everyone with a social security number with perhaps some of the money going for job retraining. Lower emissions; check. Economic incentives to be more efficient; check. Social justice; check. Reduced damages, including ____ areas; check. A border adjustment tax would prevent loss of production overseas, and strongly encourage a global carbon pollution fee. Canada has a very similar approach, which has survived an election and court challenge. The European Union will be voting on parts of this approach soon. Americans of all parties, I hope you follow.

As CCL leader Peter Joseph said, “Time’s up.”

Please direct questions and comments to The Tidings Editor, Katie Noonan, at ktnoon@aol.com.

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