

THE TIDINGS



LAKE MERRITT INSTITUTE

568 Bellevue Ave., Oakland, CA 94610-5026; (510) 238-2290; lmi@netwiz.net; www.lakemerrittinstitute.org
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“The Tidings” is an editorial newsletter. Posted opinions are not necessarily those of the City of Oakland

OUR SUNNY SKIES - A CLIMATE CRISIS



Who has not enjoyed the warm, fair, lazy winter days of 2022 at Lake Merritt, just in time for the easing of public health restrictions? Unfortunately, the unseasonable balmy weather is a harbinger of climate change that shows no sign of slowing. The American West is experiencing its most severe megadrought in millennia and human activities intensify the natural climate trend.

Time to pay heed to the warnings by scientists to stop using fossil fuels and to protect remaining habitat for all species who are interconnected connected in Earth's biosphere.

Read in Los Angeles Times:

<https://apple.news/Adb3cvfINSmeY4FHgHJW-mQ>

[See Climate Central for more information and ideas for climate solutions.](#) Photo (left) by Lee Aurich.

IS TIME REALLY UP FOR THE ZERO TRASH MANDATE?

In 2009, the City of Oakland entered into an agreement with the California Regional Water Quality Control Board to reduce trash discharged into San Francisco Bay through storm drains and watercourses within its jurisdictions (like Lake Merritt). Trash discharges were to be reduced to zero over existing levels by July of the year 2022 (NPDES Permit No. CAS612008 issued by Order No. R2-2009-0074) and failure to comply would incur stiff daily fines.

The permit is reviewed every two years. It is up for revision now and a draft version could push the compliance deadline back to 2025. <https://www.oaklandca.gov/topics/clean-water-program-compliance>. However, according to a 2020-2021 report, the City of Oakland has more than met the zero-discharge goal with 78.4% reduction due to less trash and 25% achieved through credits or offsets (pg. 73 of the report).

And yet we continue to see unsightly shoreline trash and ecosystem-deterioration at Lake Merritt. Thank goodness for The Lake Merritt Institute's Clean Water Program volunteers who remove tens of thousands of gallons of trash each year! We need more storm drain filters, trash nets and public education to help them out.

LMI in FEBRUARY: 5880 gallons of trash removed from the lake by staff and volunteers in January.

Total trash collected so far in 2022 was **5880 gallons**

20 used hypodermic syringes were removed.

LMI Director James Robinson hosted **139 volunteers**, gave 1 presentations and attended 3 meetings.

0 inches of rain recorded recorded by LMI rain gauge

THANK YOU TO OUR JANUARY and FEBRUARY VOLUNTEERS! We appreciate your efforts and community spirit. Great Job! Volunteer groups: Achieve, Park Day School, Yoga Group and the LMI A-TEAM regulars. YOU can support the Lake Merritt Institute’s important work. Go to our [website](#) to find out how. More photos in this email edition of The Tidings.

LOVE YOUR LAKE!



Trash Talk – Message in a Bottle

by Dorothy Kimmel and Susan Campodonico

On a Tuesday morning in January Kevin, Susan, Christine, Laura, Ted and Dorothy were mucking about in the mud along the Southeast edge of the lake when Laura yelled, “Message in a bottle, I found a message in a bottle!” We scurried toward Laura and her catch. “I think this is the first time we have ever found a message in a bottle,” exclaimed Susan, bubbling over with excitement.

When we returned to our green U-Clean-It box we proceeded to open the Modelo beer bottle. The vessel was clearly prepared by someone who had envisioned a very long voyage. Tightly wrapped in industrial strength tape, we tugged and pried, finally managing to extricate the message. The handwritten note was dated Oakland, January 2022. Its voyage had most likely ended very close to where it had been launched.



Photo by Dorothy Kimmel

We listened curiously as Susan read the message aloud. It was from a very homesick 38-year-old man to his family in Puebla, Mexico. He hadn’t seen them since 2010, when he left home and came to Oakland. He wanted them to know that he was healthy despite Covid, missed them very much and was uncertain when he would be able to return for a visit. “It is very sad,” said Ted, “he has a desperate desire to communicate with his family.” The pain expressed in the message was palpable.

As it turns out, the message in a bottle may be able to continue its voyage. When Susan recounted our team’s adventure to her Spanish teacher, he was immediately enthralled. In fact, he wants to be a part of the adventure. He is traveling to Mexico City soon, and offered to deliver the message to the address in Puebla. Stay tune, there may be a second leg to this journey.

RIDDLE: What did the bottle say to the message? Answer at end of the Tidings.

MILESTONES:

On March 17th 2017, the Rotary Nature Center was closed by Oakland Parks, Recreation (& Youth Development) “for deep cleaning.” Five years later, the building has remained closed and the exhibits gone. This summer, however, the nature center will be the home to Junior Art and Science Summer Camps. It will be wonderful to hear the voices of children excited about nature inside the building again. Too long coming.

On March 18th, 2020, Oakland celebrated the 150th Anniversary of the Lake Merritt Wildlife Refuge the first in the nation with light pole banners and a big banner at the entrance to Lakeside Park. This year, The Lake Merritt Institute funded a new banner (at right) proclaiming the 152nd year of wildlife refuge.



February Column: **Big Day for the Northerns at Lake Merritt**

– by Hilary Powers – Golden Gate Audubon



Northern Flicker; Photo by Lyla Arum

There's just something about a hummingbird hen. . . neatly couched in a lichen-covered nest. . . almost invisible. . . a living scrap of frozen motion. . . And the three-dozen-odd birders who joined Golden Gate Audubon on the 4th Wednesday this January encountered two such wonders – what joy –

But I'm getting ahead of myself. It was an amazing walk from the get-go. Someone spotted a Northern Flicker before our opening welcome, and the whole group streamed off to see it. Not a desperately rare bird for the Bay Area, but only the third of these ant-eating brown woodpeckers to have graced our walk. Then we spotted a Northern Mockingbird for the second time ever (the first being last month), and a fine male Northern Shoveler drifted his decorative way past one of the islands (another

rare-for-us sighting, another second trip in a row).

We saw an American White Pelican right at the beginning, too, and happily counted it. One white pelican sitting or swimming at the lake isn't usually countable, as Hank-the-Rescue-Bird can be hard to recognize, and she (yes, she) doesn't count because she isn't here voluntarily. Normally it takes two so you can count the other one – but this bird flew over our heads, a solitary pterodactyl wannabe, making its non-rescue status clear. (Hank did show up later, gliding regally across the lake, left wing slightly off-kilter to prove her identity.)

Then, after four straight months without a glimpse, a Green Heron winged past to lose itself among the islands. I called out, only to learn that half the group had enjoyed watching it perch on one of the floats before we left the meeting area – and nobody told me about it! Gnrrr. But I and the dozen or so people who made it to the garden got wonderful looks later: an adult Green Heron tucked-up under the cement overhang in the turtle pool, step-gliding back and forth and snatching little silvery fish out of the water one after another.

While the first Green Heron was on the floats, I'd been busy nattering about the Red-tailed Hawk perched on the bare island tree. Lots to say: redtail (band of dots across the stomach), juvenile (tail not red), probably male (smallish, though that call is risky for a solo bird). I swore off declaring ID based on size the day I mistook a hummingbird for a crow, but that tree is an old friend; its branches gave me a yardstick. With birds of prey, size says more about sex than age – they're all as big as they're going to get before they learn to fly, but males run lots smaller than females.

In front of the Rotary Nature Center, for the first time this season, both Greater and Lesser Scaup came near enough to talk about telling them apart. The inch and a half length difference just doesn't do it, and their plumage is almost identical. *GR*reater Scaup do tend to have a *GR*een shine to their heads while Lesser have purple, which is a great mnemonic but doesn't always work: in some lights the colors reverse. With the birds right by our feet, however, we could see that a Greater has more black at the tip of his blue beak, and a Lesser usually looks like he just removed his baseball cap, leaving a little divot across the back of his head. (All these birds were black-gray-white males. The brown scaup hens are even harder to tell apart; I usually go by the company they keep – and they tend to keep it farther away from human eyes.)



Anna's Hummingbird; Photo by Lee Aurich

Lakeside Park had its own charms. Most notable: a young Red-shouldered Hawk on the waist-high fence around the bowling green ignored us as we circled it softly, practically close enough to count feathers. That made it possible to discuss why this slim brown bird of prey was not the slim brown bird of prey seen on the island tree: the streaking covered the whole breast and stomach rather than leaving clear cream above and below a band, the white spots on the back were more numerous, and the head was lighter-built. (Oddness just noted, looking at Sibley's *Guide to Birds* [aka *the big Sibley*] and replaying the recollection: this looked like an *eastern* Red-shouldered Hawk and not our western one. Much less rust and more brown, and the chest pattern was even, not streaky above and barred below. There's the joy and mystery of birding. . . .)

The garden contributed definite sightings of a Hutton's Vireo and a Ruby-crowned Kinglet: both palm-sized, active warm-gray birds with two white bars on each wing and a bit of white around the eye, famously hard to tell apart. Besides the vireo's fraction of an inch extra length, the main difference is in behavior: a vireo moves a lot, but it goes from one place to another efficiently, whereas a kinglet moves a lot more and it flutters – much more wing than seems at all reasonable to get from here to there six inches away. "If you got a good look, it was probably a vireo!" is my catch-phrase for these little guys. (Nemmind the ruby crown; it hides, and nine times out of ten there's no crimson among the gray head feathers no matter which one you've got.)

And so to the end of another lovely morning in Lake Merritt's near-unbroken string of lovely mornings. . . .

*** **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 geodesic bird cage near the Nature Center at 9:30 a.m. for what are always fascinating introductions to lake birdlife.

March Column: **Life and Death at Lake Merritt**

– by Hilary Powers – Golden Gate Audubon



Eared Grebe; Tony Iwane; iNaturalist

The largest flock of Eared Grebes I've ever seen at Lake Merritt greeted the 30-odd birders gathered for the February edition of the Golden Gate Audubon 4th-Wednesday trip. The birders had to walk a bit, though, as the birds were hiding in a swath of sun glare up the lake to our right – invisible until someone wandered toward them and spread the word. These little guys usually show up as singletons or pairs; perhaps as many as four or five individuals in the same general area – but no one expects to see a couple of dozen of them swimming back and forth together in their winter gray dust-bunny suits. (Not after they put on their party clothes in the spring, either; I've read of lakes where the water shimmers with them, all copper and steel and gold and practically shoulder to shoulder, but not this one.)

Our man had gone over there to get a look at a Great Blue Heron perching in solitary splendor just around the curve of one of the islands – always a sight worth pursuing, and the more so that morning, as the islands were otherwise singularly thin of company: no Green Herons along the riprap and none of the half-dozen or so Black-crowned Night-Herons we expect to see on the rocks or in the bushes. The water around the islands was busy with winter ducks – both sorts of scaup, plus Canvasbacks and Buffleheads and Ruddy Ducks and Common Goldeneyes, with a few of the latter sitting up on the floats and offering rarely-seen views of their undersides – but the islands were deserted.

When we strolled around the bird paddock to the Rotary Nature Center, a Spotted Sandpiper was picking its way among the rocks on the paddock shore. “You can tell it’s a Spotted Sandpiper because it has no spots at all!” says I to general amusement, adding that it will have black spots on its breast (currently pure white) in May and maybe June. (It does have a never-fail ID marker in the way it pumps its tail up and down like an oil derrick when it walks, but the name doesn’t help.)

“Steller’s Jay! Steller’s Jay!” someone called, dragging the group away from the sandpiper. Such beauty, all deep blue blending to black like a flying sapphire, almost never seen this far from the Oakland hills: a real treasure. But what was this one doing? Attacking the nest an Anna’s Hummingbird had hidden among the upright cones of the big tree beside the nature center door. Attacking and attacking, dodging the mother hummingbird’s attempts to drive it off and ignoring human attempts to clap and startle it away. We couldn’t see how the story ended, but it seems to have turned out badly; a later visit revealed the nest cup intact but with a swath of white feathers hanging off one side like a blanket tossed off a bed, and no sign of the mother bird or the two nestlings that had sheltered there.

Could the Turkey Vulture circling overhead have been attracted by the tragedy? Not likely, though that’s another bird that almost never puts in an appearance over Lake Merritt – this was our first since 2020, and one of only a dozen sightings in all the months since 2009. The proper predator count also included juvenile Red-shouldered and Red-tailed Hawks, quite possibly the same individuals reported for the past three months; it looks like they’ve found a Good Place and they’re sticking to it. Why are birds of prey such a delight when predation evokes horror? Everybody’s gotta eat....

Several of the Ruddy Ducks in the rafts between the islands and El Embarcadero were well on their way into their russet breeding plumage, and I was scoping for a good example to show off when I froze. Waitaminute – that scaup has a black back! That ain’t a scaup at all.... That’s a male Tufted Duck! We had a duck back in October and a drake was reported in the Laney channel a couple of months ago, but we haven’t reported a drake here since 2014. (That one had been a regular since 2010; hope this bird follows suit. Why does it matter? Tufted Ducks don’t belong on this flyway – they’re an Asian species that occasionally gets blown off course, and birders always want to see anyone outside its normal range.)

Continuing the feast-or-famine pattern, we found only one Pied-billed Grebe on the lake rather than the couple dozen scattered individuals usual at this season. We also had only one Bushtit, magically appearing to check out a tree in the Sensory Garden right after I complained that we’d missed them entirely. Reports-from-the-walk-home gave us the American Robins and Black-crowned Night-Herons (the latter entirely missing from the main walk, not just the first scan of the islands), and also the rarely seen Hermit Thrush.

Adding in the extras brought the day’s count up to 49 species – a bit above average for the month, though below the recent max (52 in 2020). Even with (or perhaps because of) the emotional roller-coaster, it was yet another amazing morning at Lake Merritt, where every day....

Don’t Miss Lakeside Chat #17 with Hilary: Friday April 1st 7-8 pm on zoom, free



Join Hilary Powers, a volunteer with Golden Gate Audubon, as she takes us to some of her favorite birding spots at Lake Merritt. As Hilary says, Lake Merritt always has something new and strange to offer, so every day at Lake Merritt is a good day to be there – even virtually.

REGISTER HERE:

https://hilarypowers_virtualbirdwalk_lakemerritt-2022.eventbrite.com

Hosted online by you by [Rotary Nature Center Friends](https://sites.google.com/view/rotary-nature-center-friends/home) (<https://sites.google.com/view/rotary-nature-center-friends/home>)

Community Water Quality Report – Drought Returns, Tide Gates Open (mostly)



ACHIEVE high school students and Tony Bald, RNCF and LMI.

Photo by Rotary Nature Center Friends

Water quality was measured January 15th at the Lake Merritt Boating Center dock by students from ACHIEVE at 10:00 a.m. led by Tony Bald.

Depth 1.70 meters; Water Clarity 97 centimeters (Secchi Depth) slightly turbid

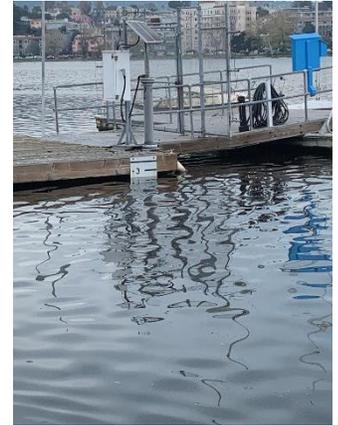
Temperature: 8 degrees Celsius (degC) at the top (46 deg Fahrenheit)/8 degrees Celsius at the bottom (46 deg Fahrenheit) NORMAL for season

Salinity 27 parts per thousand (ppt) top/29 ppt bottom)

pH: 7 at the top/7.5 at the bottom NORMAL

Dissolved Oxygen 10 parts per million (ppm) at the top/6 ppm at the bottom. (Meets EPA standards).

Tide Gate Status - Gates were open. Good for water quality; Water level at 2.75 feet at the dock (See photo at right).



THE CLIMATE CORNER: OUR FUTURE?

A guest editorial by Dr. Richard Bailey

We experienced the extreme climate of 2021 (see the December issue for details), but what will this year bring? The future cannot be seen except dimly, as if through a cloudy glass. But this much is known, and you can bet the house on these predictions.

Highly likely

Levels of greenhouse gasses (especially carbon dioxide and methane) will continue to rise. Carbon levels will change seasonally, but end up more than 2 parts per million higher than a year ago. This inexorable, accelerating change has been happening for decades, driven by our collective addiction to fossil fuels. This is perhaps the single most important long-term predictor of the extreme weather and consequent fires, smoke, drought, flooding, billion-dollar damage bills, sea level rise and acidification, and climate related immigration. And up it goes.

Sea level rise will continue. Heat already absorbed by the oceans will continue to melt both the Antarctic and Arctic ice caps, as well as mountain glaciers which are providing shrinking water supplies. It is slow, but steady, and cannot be stopped. You cannot cool the ocean.

There will be more extreme weather. No one know where it will hit next, but it is rather guaranteed that this year's headlines will eventually include such terms as:

- derecho (A derecho is a widespread, long-lived, straight-line wind storm that is associated with a fast-moving group of severe thunderstorms known as a mesoscale convective system. Derechos can cause hurricanic or tornadic-force winds, actual tornadoes, heavy rains, and flash floods. [Wikipedia](#)), and

- bomb cyclone (a large, intense midlatitude storm that has low pressure at its center, weather fronts and an array of associated weather, from blizzards to severe thunderstorms to heavy precipitation. It becomes a bomb when its central pressure decreases very quickly - <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/what-is-a-bomb-cyclone/>).



Left: July 10, 2008 in Hampshire, Illinois. Credit: Brittney Misialek

Right: A bomb cyclone on Jan. 4, 2017. Credit: [NASA/CIRA](#)

What Else?

Will there be fires in the western states and Canada? It's just a matter of when and where. Our current and ongoing drought (which recent rains were not enough to break), insect driven tree die offs, power lines succumbing to high winds, and extreme high temperatures will guarantee that.

Coming soon to a neighborhood in California, summer, fall, winter or spring.



Creative Commons



USDA Forest Service

Disturbing? Yes. Preventable? In the long term, yes; but only if we stop using fossil fuels by about 2030, and if we lower carbon levels in the air from 412 to 350. Some say it cannot be done. They would have said the same thing about the internet 20 years ago.

Continued use of fossil fuels at current rates will make these aforesaid predictions seem mild. Our best hope is to convince recalcitrant politicians, (we know who they are) to put a small, but steadily rising fee on fossil fuel mining, drilling and exporting, and give that money back to those now suffering most from the photos you see above, and are least able to avoid it. Dozens of nations have done so, and they are beginning to use border carbon adjustments which will drive up the cost of our imports if we don't embrace our own price on carbon.

It's our choice. Price carbon, or carbon prices us.

TIME TO MAKE A CHARITABLE DONATION TO THE LAKE MERRITT INSTITUTE

The Lake Merritt Institute is a 501(c)3 non-profit charity, founded in 1992. We educate the public about urban runoff and involve them in solving that problem. Result: Volunteers remove [thousands of gallons](#) of trash each year that would otherwise increase the world ocean's plastics crisis *and* Oakland's regulatory liability for water quality. You can pick up a membership application at our Farmer's Market table, or download it at lakemerrittinstitute.org.



Do you want to help the community and get regular exercise? -- CLEAN THE LAKE! Contact LMI's Executive Director James Robinson at lmi@netwiz.net or call the LMI office at (510) 238-2290 and leave a message. James will arrange for your training in safety protocols by an experienced A-Team volunteer.

If you would like to bring a group of volunteers or use the U-Clean-It stations independently, contact James at lmi@netwiz.net and leave a message so that he can explain our public health policy for volunteering and assist you in proper training to participate in the Clean Lake Program.



At left: Executive Director James Robinson presents Alfredo Sanchez with an Award for Commitment and Dedication on behalf of The Lake Merritt Institute, and an Amazon gift certificate.

Alfredo has worked for LMI for 3 years, and his diligence, creativity and ability to work with people are legendary.

Thank you, Alfredo!

ANSWER to RIDDLE ON Page 2: I wish you were

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

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