

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

THE SEASON OF PLANKTON MEETS THE SEASON OF ALGAE

It’s summer at Lake Merritt. Lake walkers eyed the growing fringe of brilliant green algae along the shore (see arrow at right) with understandable nervousness. After all, a harmful algal bloom (HAB) last August 22nd devastated fish and most other aquatic life appearing to sterilize the lake. Could the algae we see now be a return of the HAB?

Not likely, thankfully. Algal mats have occurred in the lake every year at least since the 1960’s. As the physical elements of the ecosystem interact with biological imperatives of reproduction, migration, senescence and decomposition predictable dramatic changes occur. In 2002, Dr. Richard Bailey described the predictable seasonal changes in water quality, birds, fish, trash, plants and plankton over a year in an essay called “A Year in the Life of Lake Merritt.” The essay can be found on the [LMI website](#) and is well worth reading.

Warmer temperatures in May and June usually kick off the Season of Algae. That’s when the city calls in an algae “harvester” to remove the excess algal matter and haul it to the dump. It’s about due! In the fall, the temperature drops, the algae die and sink releasing bad odors and consuming oxygen as they decompose.



Lake Merritt algae have come under closer scrutiny this year by the city and the Lake Merritt Institute’s water quality monitoring buoys. The buoys track the vital signs of plankton growth and ecosystem health. Regional Waterboards is taking samples of lake water every month with the help of [Rotary Nature Center Friends](#), joined by Oakland Climate Action Corps and Miriam Valesco of LMI.

California State labs analysis of water samples collected on May and June did not detect toxins from cyanobacteria or other HABs of concern at or above the levels that require warnings to be posted at the lake. Good news **for now**.

Above, Kristina Yoshida of Waterboards explains the protocol and paperwork to Miriam Velasco of LMI.

LMI in JUNE 2023: 6900 gallons of trash were removed from the lake by staff and volunteers in May. 33,060 gallons have been removed to date in 2023.

LMI Executive Director James Robinson hosted 251 volunteers, attended 8 meetings and gave 2 presentations.

25 used syringes were removed.

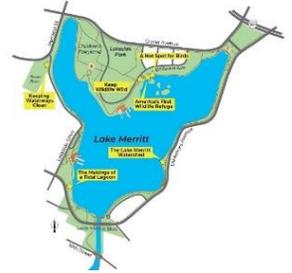
0.0 inches of rain were recorded by the LMI rain gauge in May

THANK YOU TO ALL OF OUR MAY AND JUNE VOLUNTEERS! See photos of Earth Day celebrations and other LMI events in The Tidings. Become a [supporter](#) and receive our digital newsletter every month.

Love Our Lake!



Measure DD Interpretive Signs—
Another way to help: The Lake Merritt Institute’s gofundme campaign could improve capabilities to remove trash from the Lake, create islands of adequate oxygen when lake-wide conditions decline, increase staffing for social media and maintenance, monitor water quality and help Oakland prevent a fish kill rather than respond to one.



See all the Measure DD interpretive signs on the [map](https://www.oaklandca.gov/topics/lake-merritt-interpretive-signs) above:

You are encouraged to donate here:

<https://www.gofundme.com/f/help-save-lake-merritt-and-lake-merritt-institute>

Community Water Quality Report - Thank you RNCF Volunteers, Piedmont Scouts, OWRC! (Oakland Women’s Rowing Club OWRC)

Water quality was **IN THE CLEAR** at the LAKE CENTER on Juneteenth (June 17th). Thank you to Piedmont Scouts and [Rotary Nature Center Friends](#) for testing!

Depth 2.6 meters

Water Clarity >2.6 meters (Very clear but normal for this season)

Temperature: 22 degrees Celsius at the top/21.5 degrees at the bottom (71.6 degrees Fahrenheit/70.7 deg Fahrenheit) Normal for this time of year

Salinity 21.5 parts per thousand (ppt) top/21.5 ppt bottom)

pH: 7.5 top Nitrate: 0.5 (top) Nitrite: 0 (top)
Phosphate: 0 (top)

Dissolved Oxygen 7.86 parts per million (ppm) at the top and 7.99 ppm on bottom. (Meets EPA standard).



Top square is top water, bottom square in at bottom. Green = dissolved oxygen >5 ppm. Red = <4 ppm



Katie Noonan and Andy Young (LMI Board President) monitor water quality.)

Several Brown Pelicans cruised over the Embarcadero arm of the lake, diving and coming up with satisfactory beak-loads of something worth flying up and diving again for more – a show well worth the trip all by itself. These were all adults and so not brown at all; they have gray backs and white heads and other colorful bits. In past years we've had juveniles (which really are brown) to show up the difference, but not this time.

One lone lorn Clark's Grebe swam among the pelicans – a treat and a surprise. Clark's Grebes are flashier than their near-identical cousins the Western Grebes, more white, lighter gray, brighter gold beaks, and we haven't seen one on a 4th-Wednesday walk since February 2021 (and never before in May), and no other grebes of any sort showed up for this trip. Besides, it's always fun to have a chance to croak out the difference between their calls – one syllable for Claaarghkk's and two for Weghst-rrrn.

Counter to the rest of the one-of-that, few-of-those, where-are-the-others pattern of the day, we found lots of American Robins wherever we went. They can show up any time of year, but usually only one or two in a morning. This time, they were everywhere, enough to register the differences between the bright orange breasts and black heads of the males and the altogether blander females, which are easy enough to see and describe if you know what you're looking for but even easier to lose track of in the general similarity if you don't. A pair of Red-tailed Hawks displayed together over the garden, wheeling and turning in an elegant sky dance. Pure joy in the air, and educational too – for this species, males and females differ only in size, and size is fiendishly hard to call without something for comparison. Here, the male was easily recognized as a petite companion for his great lady, each of them exactly right for what they were.

A single Bushtit bounced from branch to branch, hunting and gathering tiny bugs and bug eggs to take back to its nest. How could we be sure of its purpose? It was alone, and Bushtits are *never* alone unless they're got a clutch and a co-parent tucked away somewhere; once the babies fledge, it's back to the flock: perhaps 10 or so, perhaps as many as 40 birds that will spend the rest of the year together.

All told, we saw 33 species of birds on this trip – the smallest May since 2020, besides being down 10 from April and almost 20 from March, but all full of stories of their own. That made it yet another good day at Lake Merritt, like every day at Lake Merritt, as long as you're dressed for it....

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. This trip happens rain or shine. It is free but advance registration is requested by Golden Gate Audubon. Use this link below.

<https://goldengateaudubon.app.neoncrm.com/np/clients/goldengateaudubon/event.jsp?event=10813>

TT Editor's note: The duck ponds were built in the 1920's and are a national landmark. They supply fresh water for migratory birds which cannot drink the brackish water at Lake Merritt. The fresh water is important to all of the birds in maintaining their feathers.

California Least Terns at Lake Merritt!

The **California Least Tern** (*Sternula antillarum browni*) is an endangered subspecies of least tern that breeds primarily in bays of the Pacific Ocean within a very limited range of Southern California, in San Francisco Bay and in northern regions of Mexico. At Lake Merritt, they have been making spectacular dives near the bird islands, catching small fish and feeding to other birds (courtship feeding?). Enjoy them before they leave. They are migratory visitors at Lake Merritt. They depend on a healthy lake ecosystem that supports fish. Thank you to Lyla Arum for photos and keeping an eye on them.



CLIMATE CORNER:

WHAT IF ...?

An editorial by Dr. Richard Bailey

What if the smelly, algae filled lake that existed a few short decades ago came back?

What if algae harvesting ceased due to lack of funding or shortages of staff, and polluted street runoff continued unabated?

What if the EBMUD wastewater plant continued to discharge high levels of nutrients into the Bay which is connected to the channel which leads to Lake Merritt? What if toxic algal blooms became common?

What if the Lake (which has not been dredged since the '90's) continued to get shallower, allowing toxic sediments to build up?

What if zero oxygen and masses of dead fish became routine?



Adjacent to the waters, what if the recent spate of arson events in Lakeside Park continued?

What if homeless camps took over more of Lakeside Park? What if the Nature Center stayed closed?

What if people stopped coming to Lake venues because they did not feel safe?

What if all this led to businesses closing and going elsewhere?

What if city staff shortages continue, and city budgets continue to shrink?

This is not “what if?” This is happening.



Photo credits: Junior Center fire -Helen Hutchison; 12th St. Bridge fire – Peggy Rehm; Boating Center Arson – Darwin BondGraham, Oaklandside <https://oaklandside.org/2021/10/14/arson-lake-merritt-sailboat-house-uptick-vandalism-break-ins/>

What have similar cities with similar problems and similar parks done?

Atlanta, Georgia, is a city with a population of about 496,000 people; Oakland has 450,000. Both cities have large, diverse BIPIOC populations. Piedmont Park includes 200 acres in downtown Atlanta; Lakeside Park includes 125 acres in downtown Oakland. Both parks offer very similar opportunities for recreation, venue, dining, gardening, tours, education, etc. Atlanta also suffers from crime and homeless issues.

In Atlanta, a Conservancy contributes to 95% of daily operations in Piedmont Park, has invested over 66 million dollars since 1989, and requires 5 million dollars in donations annually to manage and enhance the park,

its programs, and serve residents from all across the city, but in 2022, only \$219,000 came from the city government. Major donors included Home Depot and Kaiser. In New York City, the Central Park Conservancy is entrusted with the complete day-to-day care, and has over 300 Conservancy employees to tend to the Park's complex maintenance, restoration, and architectural needs. These private, nonprofit conservancies are common in many areas.

How does the Piedmont Park Conservancy Operate?

Staff for the Piedmont Park Conservancy include 4 in administration, 5 in education and programs, 4 in venue rentals and events, 7 in marketing / development, and 6 in operations. The board of directors includes 11 officers and members of the Executive Committee, and 23 general directors. Ex-Officio members include the Mayor, City Parks Commissioner, and President of the city council. Four members are appointed, including a local council member. The park has 4 rental venues for weddings, corporate events, film shoots, etc. There are 5 food and beverage concession areas, and push-cart vendors. Events and organizations include a weekly walking club, homeschool days, trivia nights, a bike club, gardening classes, farmers market, guided history tours, a swimming pool, Storytime for kids, and a naturalist hour.

What could a Lake Merritt Conservancy do for Lake Merritt and all of Oakland?

The basics of a conservancy already exist in Lakeside Park, but need to be brought together under a private, nonprofit umbrella organization to work collectively, expand operations, and provide staff and funding above and beyond what the City of Oakland already contributes. Such an organization would supplement, not replace city funding throughout Oakland. By enhancing programs that serve all of Oakland, it could expand opportunities to the entire city. Such a Conservancy must serve everyone if it is to flourish.

For example, free transportation to Lake Merritt could be provided for users of educational programs, infrastructure to prevent harmful algal blooms and fish kills could be funded and installed, centralized legal, development, public relations and social media services could be offered to stakeholders such as the Garden Center, Nature Center, Boating Center, and Fairyland. A dog park could be created. After school programs could be started and expanded. Daytime park ambassadors and night time security could be established. The list goes on and on.

Funding could come from endowments, corporations, federal and state programs, and grants from foundations. But the elephant is this proposal is not funding; it is the support of Oakland citizens, and political will. Oakland proposed spending 382 million in federal and state infrastructure money for new stadium / city complex which the A's seem not to want. How about using some of that as seed money for a Lake Merritt Conservancy?

Would the East Bay Community Foundation, the Kaiser Foundation, Clorox, the Sierra Club, and individuals with endowments be interested?

The Essex at Lake Merritt's Community Action Committee is actively developing a perspective on how a Conservancy could benefit the Lake community and its many and varied stakeholders. If you are interested in participating in the process, please contact Bob Redman, Essex Community Action Committee Chair, at essexcac@gmail.com.



The point is, the city is short of staff, and funding. A Conservancy can provide both while embracing existing needs, and new programs. This conversation will continue. Watch for a Lake wide event promoting such a Conservancy this summer or fall at Lakeside Park.

A Letter to The Tidings Editor from Rotary Nature Center Naturalist 1961-1993

What has really been a disaster about the Naturalist Program at the Rotary Nature Center is a no-lesser concern about the wild bird status at The Lake Merritt Wildlife Refuge, and for the domestic geese issue for that matter. Having the birds at Lake Merritt is at the heart of what the Lake Merritt Refuge is all about--what the Duck Pond and the Duck Yard and The Nature Center is all about. It used to be what the Naturalist Program feeding program was all about. The site is known as a National Federal Landmark [with plaque with that designation] as the first wildlife refuge as a protected sanctuary for wild birds.

I was employed by the City in 1961 on Paul Covell's naturalist staff, and Paul, with Director William Mott, had already established a quality plan to "Bring Nature and the People Together," and I was happy to fit right in, as an animal/bird keeper at first. The highlight of the day was an advertised, official feeding of the birds at 3:30 every day. That included milo grain--not scratch corn--fed first at the lakeside to attract migratory birds resting on the lake if it was winter, and milo also at the freshwater duck pond for waterfowl in general, that has always included mallard ducks. It was the greatest show in Oakland! Hundreds of people and thousands of birds! A bird feeder spreading milo amid that great flock of birds while Paul or another Naturalist spoke to the crowd on a portable public address system. The P.A. was also hooked up inside the Nature Center for on-the-spot lectures to groups all day long.



This commemorative plaque was stolen during the pandemic.

If some other bird had been recruited as part of the show, food was provided for it. We acquired Hector and Helen the white pelicans in the 1960's, brought to the lake from the colony at Pyramid Lake, Nevada, by the Fish and Wildlife Department, as an attraction for city folks who had never seen one. They were slightly pinioned to keep them at the lake, and became the most photographed pelicans in the world! Their popularity became terrific, and they flourished. We bought flounder and cut it up for them. Each ate about two pounds a day and were fed at 3:30, putting on quite a show for the crowd. The duo continued into the mid 1980's when Hector became entangled in a loose rope near the log boom and drowned. Helen continued on until after I retired in 1993, and then died about 1995. Stephanie had an elaborate funeral for him and then buried him on the largest island. I have been detained and have not seen the new "Hank," but it has no doubt similarities of H and H. We had switched to feeding them smelt, bought in blocks at the fish market. They did some fishing on their own when schools of herring and anchovy spawned in the lake, but the coming of white pelicans in the summer is something new as I only saw a few strays that might stay for a day.

This is just a sampling of the past, but I'm really concerned if the lack of proper attention to the birds and the nature program is neglected and the original purpose of it all becomes lost to the joy of bird lovers, photographers, students, naturalists, people, and lovers of the wild and free.

-- Rex Burress, Naturalist at the Rotary Nature Center , from 1962 – 1992 passed away in 2019

On May 23, 1963, the Lake Merritt Wild Duck Refuge was deemed to be eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. The actual application for registration was submitted in 1977, and the Refuge was finally listed in 1983 (https://localwiki.org/oakland/Lake_Merritt_Wild_Duck_Refuge).

Note from the Editor: Some July news and data have been delayed and will be forthcoming in August.

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

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