

# THE TIDINGS



LAKE MERRITT INSTITUTE

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SUMMER ISSUE (2)

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

## BOATING LAKE MERRITT



1 Andrew Alden: [Geology Blog](#)

What lessons can be learned from the history of Lake Merritt? How does Lake Merritt reflect the social and environmental issues facing Oakland and similar urban areas? These are questions explored in Brandon Jourdan’s documentary-in-the-making, “[Reflections of Lake Merritt](#).”

The film delves into the multifaceted issues surrounding our lake. It celebrates the beauty and diversity, but also addresses the profound social and environmental issues facing Oakland and similar urban areas globally. Through personal stories and historical context, the documentary aspires to provide valuable lessons and inspire meaningful dialogue about our collective future. The film is a

collaboration between filmmaker Brandon Jourdan and East Bay Yesterday’s Liam O’Donoghue. They are currently raising funds to complete the documentary. Rotary Nature Center Friends’ Lakeside Chats and the Camron Stanford House offer opportunities to meet with the director and discuss the project.

## Summer Events

Summer events at Lakeside Park are bringing more visitors to our lake, and sometimes, more trash - a call-to-arms for The Clean Lake Program at The Lake Merritt. Check out our events with our City and local non-profit partners on [Love Our Lake](#)!

[The Lake Merritt Institute](#) removes thousands of gallons of trash from the lake each year (see statistics below and on our [website](#)). A 501(c)3 non-profit charity, founded in 1992, LMI educates the public about urban runoff and involves them in solving that problem. Result: Trash and harmful chemicals are diverted from the lake and ocean each year that would otherwise increase the world ocean’s plastics crisis *and* Oakland’s regulatory liability for water quality.

LMI is funded by the City of Oakland and by donations from caring people like you. Help us preserve our beautiful and hard-working lake in the heart of downtown Oakland. **Join us!**



**JOIN US!**

**LMI in October 2024:** 6,690 gallons of trash were removed from the lake by LMI staff and volunteers in September 2024. That makes 54,000 gallons of trash that have been removed from the lake in 2024.\* In September, LMI staff hosted 167 volunteers, and removed 39 used hypodermic needles. 0 inches of rain were reported at OAK Int'l Airport

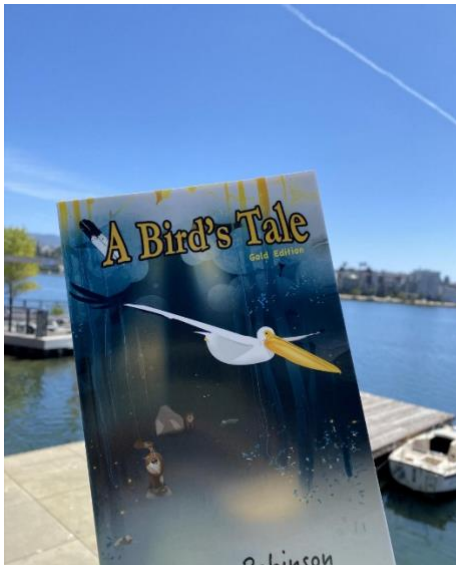
## THANK YOU TO ALL OF OUR VOLUNTEERS!

A big thank you to our dedicated weekly and new volunteers who came out to help us clean the Lake in July: the A-Team, Saturday crew, Clorox team, and OPRYD Inclusion Summer Camp.

Check out more news, volunteer recognition and photos on LMI's [social media blog](https://lakemerrittinstitute.org/blog) at <https://lakemerrittinstitute.org/blog>

## HANK

"HANK" is a short documentary by local filmmaker and journalist Kari Paul about an American white pelican who lives on Lake Merritt, her friends, and her uncertain future. Yes, Hank's pronouns are she/her.



*LMI Executive Director James Robinson wrote the book about it!*

The disabled rescue pelican has lived at the lake since 2004. She is a beloved mascot, an ardent advocate for the LMI Clean Lake Program, and an ambassador for all the Wildlife Refuge.

The big question: What are our ethical responsibilities regarding Hank (but all urban wildlife at Lake Merritt)?

You can learn more about Hank's story and the questions and concerns about how to take care of her now and for the rest of her life by watching Lakeside Chat #45. Participating in the discussion are film maker Kari Paul, James Covell, Alex Harris, Steven Summers and Lyla Arum.

The recording is [here](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PhePOENSx0U): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PhePOENSx0U>

You can also sign a petition asking city officials to allow Hank to be fed fish supplied by the Oakland Zoo in the safety of the Rotary Nature Center bird yard. [Petition](#)

**“Lake Merritt Education and Scientific Monitoring”** – The California Department of Fish and Wildlife issued a Scientific Collector's Permit (SCP) to Rotary Nature Center Friends' co-chair Katie Noonan this month. The permit does *not* allow any killing or collecting of wildlife at the lake. It will allow designated educators to briefly hold and display algae, plankton, invertebrates and small unlisted fish to the public. Wildlife will be returned to the lake.

Individuals authorized on the permit include professional scientists, Rotary Nature Center Friends and Lake Merritt Institute members with backgrounds in science education and research. A professional study of the fish of Lake Merritt is planned under the permit. Noonan hopes that the permit will further “bring nature and people together” in the heart of downtown Oakland.

**WATER QUALITY MONITORING CONTINUES:** The Lake Merritt Institute sponsored the first LakeTech water quality monitoring buoy in the lake in September of 2022 right after the catastrophic fish kill. Now, the City of Oakland and regional agencies are monitoring water quality 24/7 and are exploring ways to detect and respond to harmful algal blooms (HABs). Hear all about it on this recording of [Eli Kersh's Lakeside Chat](#) on May 31<sup>st</sup>.

You can see current water quality results here:



<= QR's for City of Oakland Pilot Project results (black) and LakeTech Portal(blue) on the left.



QR for Eli Kersh's Chat (blue) at right =>

**Good News Again!!** – The California Water Quality Control Board tests cyanobacteria and harmful phytoplankton (both are kinds of algae) in Lake Merritt every month from May to November. Water samples collected in June, July and now August by Rotary Nature Center Friends indicated very low toxin levels below the threshold requiring advisories to be posted. Oakland's California Climate Action Corps Fellows and Miriam from LMI assisted in the monitoring. Thanks for the teamwork, all!

## CORMORANTS RETURN TO LAKE MERRITT

– by Hilary Powers, Golden Gate Bird Alliance Volunteer (June 26<sup>th</sup> walk)



But they never left, you say? True enough, but this time they've built nests! They haven't done that since 2021, so it was a pure delight when the scope landed on one ensconced in the top of the half-killed tree on the big island. Nobody in the bare tree that they loved to death years ago, but surely a good sign. "We've got a cormorant nest!" sez I to co-leader Lyla as she strolled up. "We've got thirteen," sez she. Huh what? Where? Mostly in the big tree at the corner of the playground, which they invaded for a season several years ago.

This is the worst sort of good news – it's grand to have these shining black birds growling softly in their nests again, but why *there*? If they return to that tree several years in a row, their droppings will kill it. Already, one of the benches near the tree is snow white and three others show varying levels of splatter – and this is a bird sanctuary, so we'll just have to cope.

Left: Cormorant nest, Photo by Johan Langwis, June 26, 2024



The day brought another happy return: a Green Heron prospected the whole rocky edge of the longest island, allowing good views for the dozen or so birders on the trip and lots of time for commentary: “But it’s not green!”



Double-crested Cormorant pair, Photo by Lyla Arum,  
June 9, 2024



“Whitened” bench, Photo by Hilary Powers,  
June 26, 2024

“I saw a green flash!” “It’s so tiny!” “I love the black topknot!” “Where is it?” “In the center of the scope view – looks all gray right now.” We hadn’t seen one on a walk since August 2022, though scattered reports from other times indicate they’re often just out of sight when we try to find them.



Green heron, Photo by Johan Langwis,  
June 26, 2024



Cooper's Hawk, Photo by Johan Langwis,  
June 26, 2024

We headed over to the walled garden at the beginning of the walk (reversing our usual course, which reaches the garden at the end), pursuing a report that the park’s resident Cooper’s Hawks have their nest there this year, with *five* very young chicks in it. The babies stayed out of sight, but we did see one of the parents – probably the mother, since she looked so huge perched against the sky on the drooping top branches of a hemlock tree – standing guard over the whole garden. So where’s the nest? Not going to describe the location; too much attention might attract hungry eyes.



Last Western Grebe, Photo by Johan Langwis, June 26, 2024



Molting adult Canada Goose, Photo by Lyla Arum, June 5, 2024

A large group of Brown Pelicans were circling the lake and the islands when I arrived, raising hopes for the fish population. (The size of the fish population, that is, not its imminent fate.) We were sorry to see Hank-the-rescue-pelican swimming alone, which isn't so hopeful for her fishing success, but she picked up a friend or two later in the morning. Otherwise, the lake -surface was mostly occupied by assorted gulls and Mallards and Canada Geese – all the winter ducks were long gone, along with most of the grebes. No Pied-billed, no Eared or Horned, but we did see one last Western Grebe on its own down near the fountain.

For the Canada Geese, molt migration was well under way – lots of flight feathers on the ground and none on the crowds of visiting birds, making them look weirdly streamlined. The resident adult geese have also molted, which makes them resemble their own surviving youngsters, just on a larger scale. Unlike most birds, these geese do not have a special juvenile suit; when they switch from baby down to real feathers, their colors and patterns are what they'll wear for the rest of their lives.

It's molt season for Mallards too, though the lack of primary feathers isn't as obvious as with the geese. The drakes provide the main clue as to what's happening with them: they've lost their shining green head and neck feathers and most of their natty gray backs, settling into a uniform dull brown coat called "eclipse plumage" to weather the risky period when they can't fly. At a quick glance, it looks like all the lake's Mallards are female, but you can still tell the boys from the girls if you look at their bills. (Males have yellow bills and females orange mottled with some black, and this doesn't change with the season.)

Over all the lawns and lake surface, the air was abuzz with swallows. We see them for only a few months a year, in spring and early summer, but when they're here, they're here! Mostly Violet-green Swallows this time, flashing their white flanks as they turned and dipped on the hunt, but a few brown Northern Rough-winged Swallows were still among them. Another delight for the day: a Violet-green youngster was parked between a pair of dimly glowing Necklace-of-Lights bulbs, cheeping and fluttering its wings between parental feeding visits.

What with one attraction and another, we walked till almost 1 pm, well past the official noon finish time, counting 34 species in the process. That was up from the past couple of June trips, though well down from the several-year record of 38, set back in 2021. The tally doesn't really matter, of course; it just gives a sense of the kind of very good day we enjoyed this time at Lake Merritt, where every day is a good day of its own.

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# JULY BIRD WALK: AWESOME DAY at LAKE MERRITT

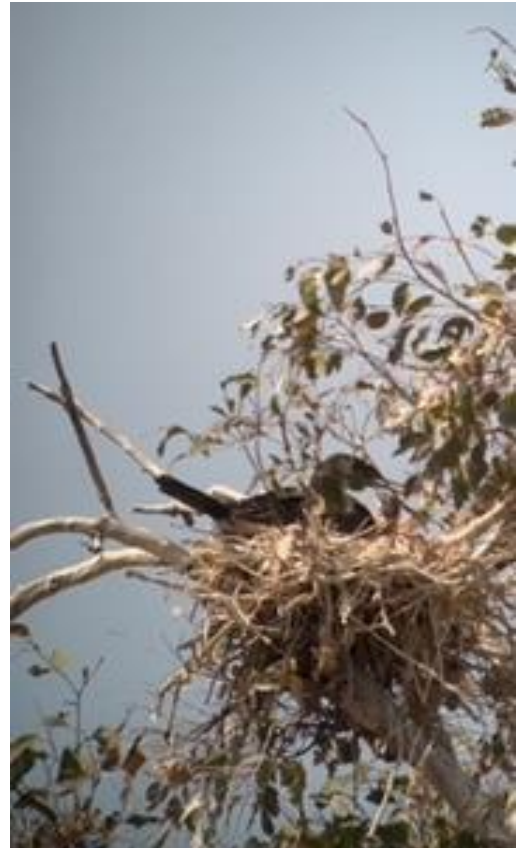
– by Hilary Powers, Golden Gate Bird Alliance Volunteer (July 24<sup>th</sup> Bird Walk)



Both Great and Snowy Egrets prowled the shallows between the dome cage and the island as twenty or so birders assembled for the July 4<sup>th</sup>-Wednesday Golden Gate Bird Alliance walk. We see snowies almost every trip, but the greats have been missing a lot lately. It was good to have a chance to compare them and trot out the old “yellow beak, black feet Great, black beak yellow feet Snowy” tagline. We also saw three Forster’s Terns sitting on a float and two Caspian Terns soaring past, looking for things to snatch with their cocktail-frankfurter beaks, making us hope for a tern trifecta – but no yellow-legged Least Terns put in an appearance. And to add to the opening salvo of joy, a pair (or could it have been a trio?) of Belted Kingfishers swooped around the islands, their metallic rattling flight calls tracing their path for the first time in several months.

At left: A Great Egret (photo by Johan Langewis, July 24, 2024)

The Double-crested Cormorants have settled into some serious chick-raising, both in their island tree and in the corner of the playground. The babies are old enough to show their snaky black heads above their nest rims, easy to find now I know what to look for. (I spent years missing them, looking for bronze or golden down and not realizing that they’re



At right: A Double-crested Cormorant parent and chicks in their nest (photo by Johan Langewis, July 24, 2024)

as dark as their parents; they don’t turn pale until they put on their first full set of feathers.) They have built no nests at all in the tree they killed on the island, formerly their favorite home; not sure why. Perhaps it has lost too many of its small branches and they can’t anchor a nest securely up there anymore.

On the lawns, the molt migration was winding down. A few dozen Canada Geese remained, looking so tailored and elegant you’d hardly notice their lack of flight feathers. Several sleek and apparently female Mallards – our only year-round ducks – joined them, their skulking-male nature revealed only by their yellow bills. Waterfowl in general have a weird molt pattern, losing their whole flight suit at once instead of replacing a couple of big feathers at a time so they can keep flying, but male Mallards take this to extremes. They replace all their feathers in early summer, flight suit and body and all, and then replace the body feathers again in a couple of months so they’re bright and shiny and at their most attractive as the next year’s pair bonds start to form in the fall.

In the garden, the five new Cooper's Hawks have fledged, and four of them were hanging around together, terrorizing the small-bird population, playing hawkish games, and screaming for their parents to come and bring takeout. (We can hope the fifth has dispersed, heading off to adventures in this world and not the next.) We sat for a while under the oak at the composting area, normally a prime chickadee-feeding area, but the youngsters were all perched here and there in the branches (one with a good meal under claw), and unsurprisingly no other birds were within sight or sound.

**At right: Juvenile Cooper's Hawk (photo by Johan Langewis, July 24, 2024)**

We encountered them again in the central redwood grove near their nest, one of them with another big meal and the others darting about. A squawk and a splash drew us out to one of the lily ponds, where an adult Black-crowned Night-Heron had been poised on a rock as though placed there to show the metal heron dipping figures what a statue is supposed to look like. No longer smooth and shining silver, the night-heron sat hunched back in the greenery, a mass of soaked feather dreadlocks drooping in thick clumps from head to tail, each so deep at the base that it almost looked like there was no room for a bird inside them.



**Above: The Black-crowned Night-Heron shortly before the disaster (see yellow arrow; photo by Hilary Powers, July 24, 2024)**

the bright orange flash of an Allen's Hummingbird – a creature not spotted on any walk since March 2018. But Chestnut-backed Chickadees soon started following co-leader Lyla around, recognizing her as a probable source of food. She shelled unsalted peanuts and handed them around, and the whole small flock accepted our group as the lesser of a half-dozen evils, swooping in to pick nuts from hands much more eagerly than usual. Life is tough for small birds in the garden these days, which transformed what is usually a fleeting rare blessing into a long and busy session.

The walk officially ends at noon, but it was well after 1 pm by the time I left the garden, mind buzzing with rich



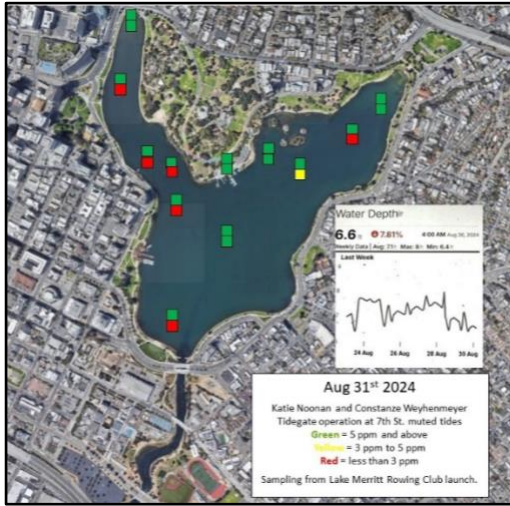
Night-herons spend their lives in the water, plunging after fish and frogs and baby ducks, and they do not get wet.\* They stay sleek and smooth. This one was wet. Soaked and dripping wet, evidence of unseen drama: to the night-heron on the rock, enter a swooping hawk, talons first. With a desperate cry, the night-heron plunges off the rock, landing all wrong, legs and wings askew. Water forces its way in everywhere, breaking the interlocking feather surface and penetrating to the skin. Such misery, and the end of the tale unknown. Did the night-heron dry off (it was a warm day) and groom its plumage back to usefulness? Did the Cooperling (or a parent) return for another try? We went on our way, too appalled to wait, or even to capture a photograph of the moment.

We did get our chickadee-feeding fix in, well off to one side of the hawks' redwood grove. A Brown Creeper working up the bark of one of the trees drew us into the area, along with









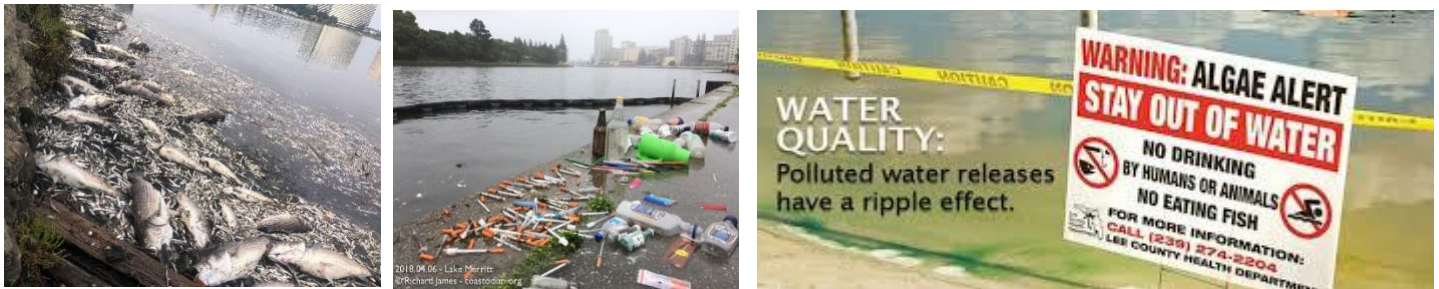
**Above:** Whiteboard showing Kids for the Bay students' water quality results using simple tools on August 1<sup>st</sup> 2024.

**At left:** On August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2024 between 10 am to 1 pm, 12 spots were tested for dissolved oxygen and other water quality parameters. This map shows data recorded using a calibrated Waterboards sonde. Boat transportation was provided by the Lake Merritt Rowing Club. Thank you to LMRC and to Dr. Constanze Weyhenmeyer for helping with water - testing. 24/7 monitoring buoys showed that DO concentrations vary considerably throughout the day.

## WATER QUALITY IMPROVEMENTS REMAIN BEYOND THE HORIZON

An Editorial by Richard L. Bailey

It has long been known that Lake Merritt suffers from repeated episodes of extremely low oxygen (which created a dead lake in 2022), urban runoff trash (including used needles) and the need for dredging to control algal blooms.



Despite this awareness, solutions have moved at a snail's pace, and are not likely to accelerate much in the future. For example, funding from Measure DD, Series D bonds is now being planned, but does not include funds for:

- Storm drain filters, which are needed to meet a 2025 deadline of 100% reduction in trash loads by June 30, 2025
- dredging to keep the lake deep enough to prevent sunlight from reaching the bottom and growing algae
- aeration / oxygenation devices to prevent another massive fish kill and get removed from the federal impaired waters list.

Instead, Series D funds have been proposed for:

- Rotary Nature Center to Geodesic Dome path improvements (\$4,495,000)
- Children's playground at Rotary Nature Center upgrade (\$2,063,880)
- Beach to Sailboat House path improvements (\$2,073,600)
- Sailboat house rental facilities improvement assessment and implementation (\$13,182,750)
- East 18<sup>th</sup> St. Pier improvements (\$729,000)
- Shade trees for Lake Merritt Amphitheater (\$1,404,000)

Total: \$23,948,230.

This is not to say that the proposed projects may not be needed. But somewhere in this \$23,948,230 proposed expenditure, can no money be found for water quality?

Apparently not. City budgets are inadequate; political will is insufficient; and while individual donations continue to flow, large corporate funding is missing in action.

Our only hope seems to reside in possible government grants and eventual success of the Lake Merritt Conservancy in attracting dollars that will let the waters live. But it will likely take another fish kill, completion of the 4 year TMDL project,

or legal action to enforce the Clean Water Act to jar enough money loose to make a difference.

Meanwhile, back at the lake, algae wait and respond to temperature / nutrient levels that determine how much water they will invade, hypodermic needles collect in storm drains and wait for the first flush of rainfall to carry them to outfall 54, and sediment slowly lifts the lake bottom into the photic zone.



And the snail crawls on.

2 Image by kuritafsheen77

## **GUEST ESSAY:**

## **PARTICIPATORY**

An editorial by Dr. Richard Bailey

Participatory: Characterized by or involving participation. Especially: providing opportunities for individuals.

Thousands of people enjoy Lake Merritt every day, but how many participate in deliberations regarding its waters, its use, its health, and even its future? It could be said that not enough do take part in the discussions, decisions and financial allocations that determine what the lake looks like: Healthy or dead; clear or full of nuisance levels of algae; controlled by law breakers or safe; clean or littered; noisy or quiet; beautiful or a homeless camp? For example:

How will you, the public, be able to participate in the process to deal with the 2022 fish kill?



The Fish Kill: In 2022, Lake Merritt died. Oxygen levels were zero from top to bottom, and from storm drain outfalls to the channel. Except for primitive life forms, all life in the water perished.

The data: Since that horrible time, more data on oxygen has been gathered than in the previous twenty years. Three continuously recording buoys were installed, and the 24/7 information is currently posted on the internet. In addition, spatial monitoring by Rotary Nature Center Friends for water quality and plankton increased. In the future, two additional monitoring buoys will be installed, monthly grab samples of nutrients will be collected and analyzed, and The San Francisco Estuary Institute will assist in water quality monitoring in 2025. A continuously monitoring nitrogen sensor may be included next year.



The analysis: In May, 2023, eight months after the deadliest event in recent Lake history, a chronicle “*Lake Merritt Fall 2022 Water Quality and Fish Kill Observations*” of the event was published by the Water Board (1). In May, 2024, the Water Board began a four year long process to determine how to prevent another kill, and deal with the Lake’s long standing water problems (see the Lake Merritt Commons Facebook page for details). A Technical Advisory Committee will be convened to do data analysis in 2026.

The plans: Starting this year, the Water Board will create an Advance Restoration Plan. The City of Oakland will develop and implement a lake management plan in 2026, a Water Board staff report will be written in 2027, and a final report in 2028.

The decisions: At each step along the way in this process, decisions will be made. How will the public be able to make their thoughts and preferences known during this process? Will there be open forums, easily available and frequent? Will people be able to vote on their preferences as they did in December, 1993 (2)? Or will decisions be made without describing alternatives, and then presented to us fait accompli as “this is what we are going to do?” These decisions are important, because they can impact funding.

Funding: If you were John or Jane Doe, or a foundation that made grants, and wanted to contribute financially to solving Lake Merritt’s water problems, wouldn’t you want to know how the money was going to be used? Wouldn’t you want to know how the decisions were made, and what the choices were? Obviously, the answer is yes.

Given state and local government budget deficits, these sources of funds are very likely to be inadequate. Likewise, previous Go Fund Me campaigns have not raised anywhere near the amount of money needed. If we are to fix our lake, improvements will need to be funded by large corporations and wealthy individuals.

Participation: We need more than one or two stakeholder meetings for this four year process. We need more than generalized summaries at Measure DD coalition meetings. We need more than comments at a Public Works Committee meeting or on a City Council edict. The City of Oakland needs a frequent forum where various strategies to get Lake Merritt off the federal list of impaired bodies of water can be discussed, and straw polls cast.

Where Can You Participate? Rotary Nature Center Friends hosted a public event in May (recording link above), and may sponsor more later this year. In addition, oxygen levels and comments on the TMDL process are posted at the Lake Merritt Commons Facebook page. And, we have heard that a forum to discuss how to use funds (including the recent one million dollar federal grant) will be sponsored by the city in July.

Hopefully the city and nonprofits such as the Lake Merritt Institute, Rotary Nature Center Friends, the Lake Merritt Conservancy, Lake Merritt Advocates, Lake Merritt Breakfast Club, (and a dozen or more other groups) will continue to sponsor public events where you and I can learn what is being proposed, and make our thoughts known.

This is our Lake. Who will jump in and participate? Who knows, you might become as famous as a European climate star.



[C.Suthorn / cc-by-sa-4.0 / commons.wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:C.Suthorn)

1) [https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/sanfranciscobay/water\\_issues/programs/water\\_quality.html](https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/sanfranciscobay/water_issues/programs/water_quality.html)

2) See essay #40 (Forum Discusses Improving Lake Merritt) in “*Focus on Lake Merritt*”, Terra Productions, 2024. 218 pages. ISBN: 978-0-9890592-2-0 to be published in June.

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/FOCUS-LAKE-MERRITT-natural-resource/dp/0989059227>

#### REFERENCES:

(3) [Love Our Lake](#) Calendar: sponsored by Children’s Fairyland, Oakland Museum of California (OMCA), and the Oakland Public Library – who have joined forces with Visit Oakland, the Oakland Parks & Recreation Foundation, and the Oakland Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce

(4) <https://www.sfestuary.org/soe2024program/>

(5) Neap tides: Seven days after a spring tide, the sun and moon are at right angles to each other. When this happens, the bulge of the ocean caused by the sun partially cancels out the bulge of the ocean caused by the moon. This produces moderate tides known as **neap tides**, meaning that high tides are a little lower and low tides are a little higher than average. Neap tides occur during the first and third quarter moon, when the moon appears "half full." <https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/springtide.html>

(6) <https://www.mercurynews.com/2024/05/29/pelicans-are-starving-we-might-know-why/>

(7) <https://oaklandside.org/2024/05/29/state-of-the-estuary-conference-harmful-algal-blooms/>

**Please direct questions and comments to The Tidings Editor, James Robinson, [info@lakemerrittinstitute.org](mailto:info@lakemerrittinstitute.org).**

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