



Lake Merritt Institute

THE TIDINGS

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Winter ISSUE

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A Glimmer of Silver: Rare Salmon Sighted in Lake Merritt.



by James Robinson

On December 3, the early morning quiet of Oakland’s Lake Merritt was interrupted by a rare sight that left even seasoned environmentalists in awe. While conducting their routine cleanup, staff from the Lake Merritt Institute—a nonprofit dedicated to improving the water quality of the urban lagoon—spotted three lifeless salmon shimmering near the water’s edge. Moments later, two live salmon darted through the lake’s shallows. This marked the first salmon sighting in Lake Merritt since 2021, sparking a wave of curiosity and a deeper reflection on the resilience of nature.

Echoes of an Ancient Journey. To understand the significance of the salmon’s return, I turned to Dr. Richard Bailey, a marine biologist who has spent years studying the history and ecology of Lake Merritt. In an article reflecting on the event, Dr. Bailey traced the story of salmon in the area back to pre-colonial times.

“Historically, salmon likely swam into what is now Lake Merritt and further upstream into creeks draining from the hills,” he wrote. “There may have been gravel-bottomed areas suitable for spawning in those days, but today, most of these creeks are buried beneath storm drains, making such journeys nearly impossible.”

For the full article of *The Tidings* in color, visit <https://lakemerrittinstitute.org/tidings>

Dr. Bailey explained that modern-day Lake Merritt, a tidal estuary connected to the San Francisco Bay, is often saline and lacks the freshwater and gravel necessary for successful salmon spawning. The three dead salmon were likely attempting to spawn but succumbed to the challenges of the urban ecosystem.

A Mix of Factors Behind the Sighting. The presence of live salmon, however, hints at a fascinating set of possibilities. According to Dr. Bailey, these fish could be "strays"—salmon that veered off their usual migration routes, possibly drawn by environmental changes. “While most salmon return to the stream where they were hatched, a small percentage stray and explore new areas. This can sometimes help colonize new habitats,” he explained.fdsa

Dr. Bailey also pointed to a significant change in Lake Merritt’s hydrology: the removal of the tunnels at the lake’s outlet in 2013, which were replaced by an open channel. “If those tunnels were a deterrent to spawning salmon, their removal might be why we are seeing them here now,” he noted.

The identification of the fish as Chinook salmon by researcher and LMI board member Katie Noonan confirmed their origins as an anadromous species, capable of surviving both in freshwater and saltwater environments.

Challenges and Opportunities. Despite the excitement, Dr. Bailey highlighted the hurdles that salmon face in urban waterways like Lake Merritt. Pollution, low oxygen levels, and a lack of suitable spawning habitats remain significant obstacles. The sighting, however, is a testament to both the salmon’s resilience and the incremental progress in urban environmental restoration.

Dr. Bailey noted that other cities, such as those in Marin County, have successfully renovated creeks by adding gravel and natural structures to encourage salmon nesting. While such efforts could potentially be applied to Lake Merritt’s Glen Echo Creek, he acknowledged the financial and logistical challenges involved, especially given Oakland’s ongoing struggles with funding and infrastructure.

A Call to Action. The sighting of salmon in Lake Merritt serves as a poignant reminder of what’s possible when nature is given a chance to thrive. Organizations like the Lake Merritt Institute continue to play a crucial role, addressing issues such as urban runoff and excessive trash, while also fostering awareness and advocacy for the lake’s ecosystem.

Dr. Bailey’s reflections carry a hopeful yet cautionary tone: “The salmon still carry on with an ancient journey, even in places like Lake Merritt. But ensuring their survival requires commitment—from reducing pollution to rethinking how we coexist with the waterways that sustain life.”

For now, the return of salmon to Lake Merritt is a story of resilience—a fleeting yet powerful reminder of nature’s tenacity in even the most unlikely of places.

For more content from Dr. Bailey please visit <https://www.facebook.com/p/Lake-Merritt-Commons-61554247913101/>

RAY OF HOPE SPOTLIGHT

In memory of Ray Perman



This month, our *Ray of Hope* spotlight shines on St Paul students for their environmental activism. They let their voice be heard with presentations on why we should take care of the Lake Merritt and the importance of reopening the Rotary Nature Center.

'Tis the Season for Giving!

This holiday season, we hope you'll consider donating to LMI. Your support helps us continue our work in keeping Lake Merritt clean and beautiful. Plus, all donations are tax-deductible! Here's how your contribution helps:

- Expands educational programs for underserved youth, including volunteer lake cleanups and science-based curriculum.
- Provides science test kits and bilingual materials to make stewardship accessible for all.
- Strengthens ongoing efforts to keep Lake Merritt clean, safe, and thriving year-round.

Donate online on the LMI website (lakemerrittinstitute.org) or send a check to:

Lake Merritt Institute

568 Bellevue Ave., Oakland, CA 94610



LMI is a California State non-profit corporation; IRS Code 501(c)(3): EIN 94-3214160

LMI Clean Up Days

Join the Lake Merritt Institute's public cleanup days **every Tuesday and Saturday at 10 am!** We meet at 568 Bellevue Ave and provide all the necessary supplies and safety training. It's a great way to connect with the community and help protect Oakland's beloved lake.

For teams, classrooms, and groups, email us at info@lakemerrittinstitute.org to schedule.

For the full article of *The Tidings* in color, visit <https://lakemerrittinstitute.org/tidings>

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 November:

The A-Team, Saturday Volunteers, Oakland Tech High School, Northgate students, Achieve High school, November Project Running Group, Bishop O'Dowd High School, Bellarmine College Preparatory, and Women of Ichor system.

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



Paris, takes a rest on a chair he removed from the lake! Thank you!

LMI in NOV 2024: 7,110 gallons of trash were removed from the lake by LMI staff and volunteers in November 2024. That makes **69,300 gallons** of trash that have been removed from the lake in 2024*
In November, LMI staff hosted 150 volunteers, and removed 24 used hypodermic needles.

Tracking Lake Merritt's Water Health: A Look at Dissolved Oxygen



The LakeTech Buoys continuously monitor Lake Merritt's water quality, providing critical data to help protect its ecosystem.

Dissolved oxygen (D.O.) levels are a key indicator of the lake's health. When levels fall below 5 mg/L, aquatic species face serious risks.

LMI actively combats this issue by removing trash, which helps reduce the demand for dissolved oxygen and supports a healthier environment for the lake's wildlife.

Photo at left: LakeTech Buoy Station #2

Slow Start to Fall at Lake Merritt

– by Hilary Powers, Golden Gate Bird Alliance Volunteer (October 23rd Bird Walk)

October's 4th Wednesday was lovely, more like early summer than early fall, and just warm enough to make it pleasant to seek a bit of shade. So the 25+ birders who gathered for the walk had no problem ceding the lakeside to the chattering flock of Saint Paul's School 3rd-graders who arrived, binoculars in hand, for a birding tour of their own. Most of us withdrew to the trees shading the parking lot while co-leader Lyla launched into an impromptu account of the current moment and the status of her darling, Hank-the-rescue-pelican, who was crouched on her island and searching the sky instead of showing up for her fish. (Later, I'm told, when a few friends had joined her and Lyla returned after the walk, Hank did cruise over for her snack.)

The view was still good, looking out over the heads of the children toward the islands. Lots of Brown Pelicans were perched or strolling around there again, mostly white-headed adults, but not so many as to crowd stragglers

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into the treetops. Two of them were bowing to each other – first on shore and later while swimming together – in a charming courtship display, something we almost never glimpse around here. (Their West Coast breeding colonies are in Chanel Islands National Park, offshore from Santa Barbara; in the Bay Area, their minds are usually on the serious business of snarfing enough fish to build up their strength for the next nesting trip south.) Also near the islands, we found a fair-sized flock of Ruddy Ducks, just flown in from the Dakotas and southern Canada and all resolutely not-ruddy at this season – the first of the winter migrants to arrive from any distance.

Once again, no adult Black-crowned Night-Herons were hanging around the islands or the shoreline. Lots of streaky brown juveniles perched in the island bushes and prowled along the riprap, and we did find one “teenager” (likely a bit over two years old in clock time) in shades of smooth taupe – what I’d guess to be the last molt before donning adult plumage.

Above them, perched on a pine branch, was what would – had it only been brown instead of gray – have looked like the world’s biggest corn dog: a Great Blue Heron standing straight-legged with all its other appendages tucked into a tight cylinder. “How can you tell what that is?” “It couldn’t be anything else around here – nobody has that much leg and that much flexibility!”

At right: Young juvenile Black-crowned Night Heron perching in the bushes on the islands

(photo by Lyla Arum, October 23rd, 2024)



We headed down the lake toward El Embarcadero, hoping for more winter migrants but seeing only more Ruddy Ducks and some Pied-billed Grebes and American Coots, chasing the report of a young Greater White-fronted Goose that had been reported near the fountain. Nope – but we did have the chance to advise would-be watchers that “white-fronted” geese are mostly brown, with the least little band of white above the bill, which this one probably wouldn’t have since it was said to be a juvenile and they don’t develop the mark until they molt into adult plumage. Even frustrations can enhance your day when you’re birding!

Returning to the nature center area via the oaks along Bellevue (“That one’s a cork oak, and so’s that, and that, and yes, they really do make wine corks out of that gnarly bark!”) and encountering a few fall warblers, we paused by one tree with *three* Nuttall’s Woodpeckers! We usually hear these little ladder-backed guys before we see them, because they sound off like someone blowing a police whistle as softly as possible just as they take flight. Here they were all fossicking happily among the branches.

Before winding up in the Palmery to enjoy some feedable chickadees, who still seemed happy to see us even though the last two members of the Cooper’s Hawk clutch weren’t there to harass them, we found both local jays. The smooth-headed blue and gray California Scrub Jays are almost always around, but it’s a rare treat to encounter one of the crested Steller’s Jays (dark blue and black), which mostly stay up in the hills. All told, we saw only 38 species, the lowest October total in several years, but this was the earliest walk (and almost the earliest it could be, the 23rd rather than the 22nd), which makes a difference in migration season – but not to our enjoyment of Lake Merritt, where every bird is a treat and numbers remain unknown till after the fact.

*****BIRD WALKS AT THE LAKE:** Join Hilary Powers any fourth Wednesday of the month for a bird walk at the lake. Muster at the end of the Boat House parking lot nearest the geodesic dome at 9:30 a.m. for what are always fascinating introductions to local bird life. This trip happens rain or shine. It is free but Golden Gate Bird

Alliance asks for advance registration on their website.

Register for the next monthly bird walk:

<https://goldengatebirdalliance.app.neoncrm.com/np/clients/goldengatebirdalliance/event.jsp?event=15228>

To read our full Tidings article, in color, please visit

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To align with our environmental goals, we're reducing the number of pages in the printed version of *The Tidings*. The email version, however, will remain full-length and in color.

**Lake Merritt Institute would like to acknowledge that Lake Merritt is known as Huchiun,
the unceded and ancestral territory of the [Lisjan Ohlone People](#).**

Please direct questions and comments to info@lakemerrittinstitute.org

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