



Lake Merritt Institute

THE TIDINGS

VOLUME XXVII

February 2025

WINTER ISSUE

“The Tidings” is a publication of the Lake Merritt Institute, and is neither funded by, nor does it represent the opinions of the City of Oakland.

Rains Bring Trash—Lots of It!



by James Robinson

Where does all the trash in Lake Merritt come from during the rainy season? The answer lies in the storm drains. Lake Merritt has over 63 drains flowing into it, and when it rains, all the trash that has accumulated in those drains throughout the year gets flushed into the lake.

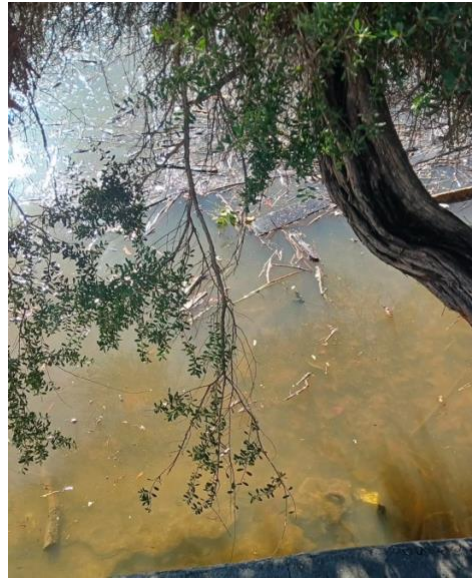
During heavy rainfall, Lake Merritt becomes inundated with debris—not just plastic and litter, but also pollutants like oil, paint, and runoff from the surrounding 7-square-mile area, stretching from downtown Oakland to the hills.

This is where the **Lake Merritt Institute** steps in. Our team strategically targets hotspot areas, collecting data and cleaning up pollution to track and mitigate its impact. However, we can't do it alone.

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



Before



After

The community plays a crucial role in keeping Lake Merritt clean. Schools, corporations, and volunteers help us through both donations and hands-on efforts. If you'd like to make a difference, we'd love to have you join us.

Lake Merritt Institute Clean Up Days

If you see rain in the forecast, you can expect more trash for us to pull out. Join the Lake Merritt Institute's public cleanup days every **Tuesday and Saturday at 10am!**

We meet at 568 Bellevue Ave and provide all the necessary supplies and safety training. Together, we can protect and preserve this vital ecosystem!

We're now scheduling Earth Day Cleanups for groups and classrooms to come out in **March, April, and May.** Our Spring dates are filling up quickly.

For more about our group cleanups and how to sponsor an Earth Day cleanup visit: <https://bit.ly/LMICLEANUP>

RAY OF HOPE SPOTLIGHT

In memory of Ray Perman



This month, we're proud to shine our Ray of Hope spotlight on our LMI team. At the heart of Lake Merritt's clean, beautiful shoreline is the hardworking **Lake Merritt Institute (LMI) team**—a group of dedicated individuals who make it all possible.

Rain or shine, they organize volunteer groups, collect vital data, and remove pollution from the lake, ensuring that Lake Merritt remains a thriving ecosystem. Their commitment goes beyond cleanup—they maintain equipment, educate students about the local environment, and connect every effort back to a simple question: **Why should we care about Lake Merritt?**

The truth is, the Lake Merritt Institute wouldn't run as smoothly without this passionate team. They greet volunteers with a smile, inspire future generations, and remind us all that a cleaner lake means a healthier community.

Let's take a moment to appreciate their incredible work.

Bird Flu Alert in the Bay Area

Caution: Cases of bird flu have been reported in the Bay Area. If you spot a dead bird, **do not touch or attempt to remove it.** Instead, please report the sighting to 311 or info@lakemerrittinstitute.org. Your vigilance helps protect public health and local wildlife.

Thank you LMI January Volunteers!

A big thank you to our dedicated weekly and new volunteers who came out last month to help us clean the lake:

- Weekly A-team
- MLK Day of Service volunteers
- Achieve HS students
- East Bay Innovation Academy HS
- Bishop O'Dowd students, and
- BuildOn students (*pictured right*)



LMI Cleanup Impact: January 2025 Report

8,130 gallons of pollution removed from lake by LMI staff and 211 volunteers. 27 hypodermic needles safely disposed.

In addition, we also hauled many bulky items out of the lake, including furniture, bikes, traffic and construction signs, and other random equipment.

Early Foggy Christmas at Lake Merritt - by Hilary Powers, Golden Gate Bird Alliance Volunteer (December 18th Bird Walk)

December's 4th-Wednesday Golden Gate Bird Alliance walk at Lake Merritt happened on the 3rd Wednesday this year, as always when the regular date falls on the 25th of that month (and all the leaders and a lot of the potential guests have other plans). Twenty well-informed birders still found their way to the meeting spot, on a weirdly shiny day: sunlit air full of thin fog, so everything we saw shimmered as though through a veil into another world.

Visibility was just good enough to make out the Red-breasted Merganser swimming west of the floats around the islands. A pre-holiday treat! That's one of the most decorative ducks to visit the lake, and we don't see them often – not since last January, and before that in December 2023. Most years, they don't show up at all.



Vista from the meeting spot (Photo by Peggy Rehm, December 18th, 2024)

Closer to the shore and thus easier to see, a little drama played out before us. A Glaucous-winged Gull (one of the regular rarities; we see a few of these big gray-wingtipped gulls every winter, but never more than one or two at a time) showed up near the dome cage. “Is that one acting as a sentry? It just chased that other gull away from us!” someone asked. “Probably just defending its place,” sez I, having no real idea, but that meant I was watching when the glaucous-wing swam to the shore, picked up a twig with a couple of large dead leaves hanging off of it, and proceeded to spend a few minutes walking around with it and shaking it about. Not trying to eat it, surely not considering it as nest material to be used a thousand miles away and six months in the future. So what? Pure play, perhaps (always a favorite guess for me).

Our stroll down the lake brought us most of the regular winter crew: both males and females of Canvasback, Greater and Lesser Scaup, and Common Goldeneye, along with all three of the small grebes (Eared, Horned, and Pied-billed, which aren’t differentiated by sex). We also saw adult Black-crowned Night-Herons as well as juveniles for a change, and lots of White Pelicans (but no Browns).

And we found one long-absent friend: a Short-billed Gull, last seen here under its former name, Mew Gull, back in December 2011. They really are *short* billed – almost more like pigeons than gulls – but I still prefer the old name as their heads have a kittenish look and their calls do have a mewing sound. Overall, they look a lot like Ring-billed Gulls (now there’s a name I can get behind!) but a bit smaller, with rounder heads and much daintier bills in proportion.



Heading back up the lake, we found the day’s most hoped-for birds: a Barrow’s Goldeneye pair swimming together by one of the islands. The drake was instantly recognizable by the deep crescent moon mark on each cheek and the heavy black and white ladders along his upper sides (where his cousin Common Goldeneye would have a full moon and spidery ladders set in a great deal of white). The hen – besides being identified on the “she’s with him” principle – had the proper clear gold bill with black tip of her species, instead of the black with gold tip of the female Common Goldeneye. The two species have subtly different silhouettes too, but beyond my powers of description; you just have to see enough of each to recognize the overall feel.

as we get at least a glimpse of these elegant ladder-backed creatures almost every month. But they’re generally doing the woodpecker thing, working their way along tree trunks and branches, often on the far side or obscured by foliage. This bird – a bright female, all black and white and showing no wear on her feathers – was alternating between the thin topmost twigs of her tree with nothing but sky behind her, and she spent several minutes there, providing views from all sides.

We turned away from the goldeneyes for our best-ever sighting of a Nuttall’s Woodpecker – and that’s saying a lot, showing no wear on her feathers – was alternating between the thin topmost twigs of her tree with nothing but sky behind her, and she spent several minutes there, providing views from all sides.

The group split on the way to the garden, with the second half captured by a Red-breasted Nuthatch on one of the pines beside the Rotary Nature Center – a seldom-seen winter prize. It was prowling around the trunk almost at eye level and stayed there for several minutes, practically in arm’s reach, allowing many in the faster-moving group a chance to scurry back and see it.

Over by the lawn bowling club, those with better vision than mine enjoyed the sight of a large flock of Greater White-fronted Geese flying high overhead. Me, I never managed to find them, but there was much happy

commentary as they twinkled on their way, and later we learned that another local expert had observed the same flock from a different angle, confirming the identification.

Crows – about their usual business – chased a juvenile Cooper’s Hawk past us after we left the lawn bowling club, which was a bit of a surprise for me, as I’d thought this year’s whole clutch of nestlings had headed off in search of territories of their own. But perhaps this was an outsider looking for a home, not one of “ours” and not yet evicted by the resident pair.

Pausing for the pair of catalpa trees across from the garden center, we found a single Cedar Waxwing – an unusual sight; these elegant masked berry-hunters usually come in flocks – but not the sapsucker we were seeking. Those two trees are the park’s sapsucker hotel; we almost never see them anywhere else, and the many horizontal rows of little holes in the bark testify to their fondness for the spot. (And there almost certainly *was* a sapsucker there when we were looking; we just didn’t cross the street and peer up properly at all sides. A day or so later, co-leader Lyla – who couldn’t join us on this walk – led me over to point one out, assuring me it had been there for well over a week.)

The garden itself yielded both crowned sparrows, some frustrated chickadees (no Lyla, no black oil sunflower seed), and assorted other small delights, and the remainder of the group dispersed happily enough – though not so happy as the one birder who stuck it out to the very end and could also enjoy the Spotted Sandpiper prowling the beach near the meeting point. All told, we observed 51 species of birds. That set a new several-year record, beating 2023’s 50, and made for a truly satisfying end to the 2024 cycle of walks at Lake Merritt, where every day is a day well spent.

BIRD WALKS AT THE LAKE: Join Hilary Powers any fourth Wednesday of the month for a bird walk at the lake. Muster at the boulder classroom next to the Boat House parking lot at 9:30 am 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 at goldengatebirdalliance.org searching for the next monthly bird walk, link [HERE](#).

LMI Early Bird Renewal

Renew your support early to keep the momentum going.

This year, with anticipated budget cuts and environmental programs being among the first to be defunded, your support is more vital than ever to help us continue our mission:

- Sustain our youth education and stewardship programs for underserved students
- Remove trash pollution from the lake **five days a week, year-round, rain or shine**
- Advocate for long-term solutions to protect the health of Lake Merritt

Every donation, no matter the size, helps our mission. **All donations are tax-deductible**

- ◆ Donate online: www.lakemerrittinstitute.org
- ◆ Or mail a check to:

Lake Merritt Institute
568 Bellevue Avenue
Oakland, CA 94610



At **Lake Merritt Institute**, we would like to acknowledge that Lake Merritt is known as **Huchium**, the unceded and ancestral territory of the [Lisjan Ohlone People](#). As stewards of this unique wildlife refuge, we encourage our community to join us in continuing to learn more at sogoreate-landtrust.org.

For questions and comments please email us at info@lakemerrittinstitute.org

“The Tidings” is published by the Lake Merritt Institute (LMI) entirely with private funding donated to LMI, and not with funds from the City of Oakland. LMI is a California State non-profit corporation since 1992; IRS Code 501(c)(3); EIN 94-3214160