



THE TIDINGS

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Spring Issue

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Yellow Slick on the Water? It's Not Sewage — It's Springtime Pollen

By James Robinson

Each year, as winter shifts toward spring, visitors to Lake Merritt sometimes spot a bright yellow film drifting across the water's surface. The sight can be unsettling. Is it sewage? Paint? Chemical runoff?

In most cases, the explanation is far less alarming: **it's pollen**. Acacia pollen grains are relatively large — about **30–70 micrometers in size** — and often appear in clustered groupings called **polyads**, containing 16 to 32 grains. Unlike many tree pollens that disperse widely on the wind, acacia pollen is **primarily transferred by bees**, which limits its constant presence in the air. However, during peak blooming season, fallen blossoms and localized air movement can still carry enough pollen into nearby water to create visible yellow streaks or slicks.

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Although the film can look artificial or even oily, it is a **natural and generally non-toxic occurrence**. These seasonal blooms do not typically pose a long-term threat to aquatic ecosystems and usually fade as flowering ends and weather conditions change.

Because several acacia trees line the lake's shoreline, pollen and flower debris have a direct path into the water each year. The result can be visually dramatic but short-lived.

So when a yellow sheen appears on the lake, there is usually little reason for alarm. More often than not, it is simply a seasonal signal — pollen marking the arrival of spring rather than evidence of pollution.

Sea Turtle Conservation Talk – Summary

By Paris Organist

Thanks to everyone who came out to the sea turtle talk! For those who missed it, here's a quick rundown:

Sea turtles are ancient marine reptiles that have existed for over 100 million years and play a critical role in maintaining healthy ocean ecosystems. Depending on the species, they help maintain seagrass beds, support coral reefs, and keep marine food webs in check.

I shared some of my own experiences working with the sea turtle conservation program in Mexico where we protect nesting beaches, monitor nests, and release hatchlings.

We also talked about the main threats sea turtles face today, including plastic pollution, climate change, and accidental capture in fisheries.

The work we do at lake Merritt truly helps save sea turtles off the California coast! We ran a quick calculation using the newly released wild life impact calculator. On a typical tuesday public clean up. The trash we remove has the potential to impact 17 sea turtles if left to float out to sea! Check your impact

here: <http://wildlifeimpactcalculator.org/>



A major takeaway is that small actions can have meaningful impacts. **Reducing plastic use**, supporting **sustainable seafood choices**, kitchen **composting**, and participating in **local environmental stewardship**—like the work being done at Lake Merritt—are all ways to contribute to healthier ecosystems both locally and globally.

If you would like to join a future Sea Turtle Volunteer Vacation, you can! No experience necessary! It's as easy as picking up trash :)

Thanks again for being part of the community and supporting environmental conservation.

Silvery Fair and No Glare at Lake Merritt

- by Hilary Powers, Golden Gate Bird Alliance Volunteer (February 25th Bird Walk)

The weather forecast for the 4th Wednesday of February was ominous enough that people were writing to ask if rain would cancel and if so, when they'd be notified. I repeated the listing's promise that the trip would run regardless, though it might not run very far if the weather was truly awful. As it turned out, the day was lovely – better than sunshine, with just enough overcast to turn the lake surface silver and easy to look at, and warm enough to make coats unneeded for most of the walk.

The day's first bird treasure was an old friend to most of the group: an American Coot showing off its fine lobed toes on the beach beside our gathering spot. That let me trot out my favorite line about the way those feet allow a coot to swim like a duck (toes cupped together into webs) or run like a chicken (toes spread wide) and so get the best of both worlds – leading to the unanswerable “So why don't all birds do that?” Well, er, ah, everything has advantages and disadvantages, there's no one best way . . . it's hard to make sense when there's no absolute sense to be made. . . .

We had Forster's Terns again, making further nonsense of last November's prediction that we wouldn't see them all winter even though some always stay in the Bay Area. This year, they're not only nearby, they're coming here to fish! With less competition than I'd have liked, but enough to make a cheerful scene – lots of Bufflehead and Ruddy Ducks (some well on the way to turning truly ruddy), lots of Double-crested Cormorants of all ages (none yet starting to refurbish last year's nests or pick out new spots), and one female Common Merganser who showed up a couple of times during the walk (once spotted by a new birder in the group, who asked, “What's that long bird swimming by the rocks?”) Co-leader Kat got a good photo of a lovely, long swimming merganser, but see if you can find a photo online of a close-up profile – they're not called “sawbills” for nothing!



Common Merganser, photo by Katharine W. Cook, February 25, 2026

One Northern Rough-winged Swallow was back; perhaps we'll see some breeding action in March. For the past few years they've nested in cracks in the rock walls of the lake, so it's always worth watching for a small brown-and-cream bird that flies straight at the wall and disappears smoothly, without a thump or a floating feather.

A flock of crows flew by overhead chasing a juvenile Red-shouldered Hawk (one of their – and our – favorite activities). We all tried tracking them with our binoculars to see how things would turn out, expecting the usual: hawk lands in tree and pretends to ignore crows; crows get bored and fly off looking for livelier prey. But this time, when we found a hawk in a tree, it was a Red-tailed Hawk, and there was another Red-tailed Hawk sitting next to it. Full of surprises, the birding world.

Several Nuttall's Woodpeckers enlivened the trees along Bellevue and across in Lakeside Park, and we saw both White-crowned and Golden-crowned Sparrows, along with several Dark-eyed Juncos. The crown of that part of the walk, though, was in the catalpa trees across from the Garden Center. We always pause across the street from those trees and speak mournfully about this being the place to see sapsuckers if we're going to see them at all, which we almost never do, but look at all those rows of holes they make – but wait! There, working its way up a trunk, was a Red-breasted Sapsucker, for the second month in a row! (Our first-ever February sighting, too.)



Red-breasted Sapsucker working its way up a trunk, photo by Katharine W. Cook, February 25, 2026

When we got into the garden, we sat under the big oak in the composting area and held out seeds for a while, but I decided we weren't getting any takers, said I was moving on, and headed over to the cement platform by the monkey-puzzle tree – where I turned to discover I was all alone. After sitting for a few minutes, I headed back to check on the delay, only to find the whole composting area jumping with birds – Scrub Jays and Oak Titmice ogling the humans from the branches and our resident Chestnut-backed Chickadees picking through the hand-held offerings. So I was the sacrifice – the one who leaves an empty birding site right before the birds show up – and could feel I'd done my job. Even if nobody followed me.

Ah well. Even with that minor irritation, it was a good day: 51 species of birds observed, well up from last year's 46, and comfortable and cheerful and bright, right and proper for Lake Merritt yet again.

EVENTS AT LAKE MERRITT



Saturday, April 18, 2026 9:30AM

Oakland's 32nd Annual Earth Day to celebrate our planet with a day filled with sustainability, community, and environmental action!

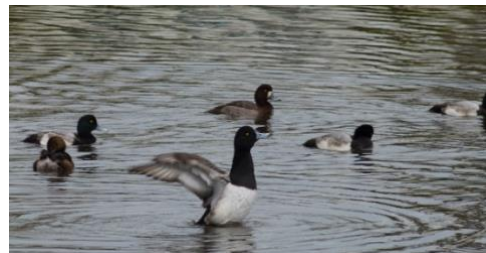
Join **Lake Merritt Institute** volunteers and honor our beautiful city with a lake cleanup.

Register online at: lakemerrittinstitute.org



Bird Walks at the Lake

Join Hilary Powers any fourth Wednesday of the month for a bird walk at the lake. Register at goldengatebirdalliance.org



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

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