



THE TIDINGS

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Summer Issue

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City of Oakland Moves Forward with Lake Merritt Healthy Lake Initiative

By James Robinson

Lake Merritt is the focus of a new City of Oakland effort to better understand and address water-quality problems, including excessive algae growth and low dissolved oxygen levels that can threaten fish and other aquatic life.

The City's water-quality work began with harmful algal bloom planning in 2022. Since then, the City has worked with the Lake Merritt Institute, consultants, lake users, advocates, and local experts. The City has also installed equipment designed to increase oxygen levels in areas of the lake where oxygen can become critically low.

In January 2026, the City replaced a hypolimnetic oxygenation system with a diffused aeration system. The City continues to evaluate how oxygenation and other approaches can improve conditions in the lake. It has also obtained a permit allowing the use of a hydrogen peroxide solution during an emergency harmful algal bloom, although the City reports that this treatment has not yet been needed.

The next phase is the **Lake Merritt Healthy Lake Initiative**, supported by \$959,757 in congressionally directed funding. Implementation is expected to begin in fall 2026. The project is intended to develop additional strategies to address excessive algae growth and low dissolved oxygen while protecting aquatic life and reducing the risk of future fish kills.



Photo of Lake Merritt birds by Kathleen Nay

The initiative will focus on three main areas. First, the City will develop and implement a monitoring plan and evaluate monitoring results and other available data. Second, the City is considering a study to determine the

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dissolved oxygen levels needed to support aquatic life in Lake Merritt. Finally, the City will evaluate potential ways to manage dissolved oxygen and, if recommended and feasible, install aeration, oxygenation, or other management systems. The effectiveness of any installation will then be evaluated.

The overall goal is to move toward a **science-based, long-term approach to managing Lake Merritt's water quality**. By better understanding the lake's conditions, determining the needs of its aquatic life, and evaluating which management strategies are effective, the City hopes to improve the health of the lake and better protect the fish, wildlife, and community that depend on it.

Special Gatherings at Lake Merritt

by Hilary Powers, Golden Gate Bird Alliance Volunteer (Summer Bird Walk)

This June, it was good to rejoin the 4th-Wednesday walk (after skipping a month for the first time in years, in favor of dealing with the piles of boxes and misplaced furniture that filled my new home), even though I was expecting a small group and little to talk about in this typically quiet month. Wrong on both counts! Instead, 25 birders gathered with my co-leader Peggy and me, and we were all immediately treated to the sight of a Caspian Tern – no, make that *two* Caspian Terns – the largest terns in the world, cruising around the islands and splashing down to snag little fish with their cocktail-frank-sized beaks.

Out on one of the floats, two Brown Pelicans posed back to back, showing off the dramatic differences between adult and juvenile plumage. (Only the juveniles are actually brown; the adults have gray backs, black breasts, and white necks and heads.) We saw lots of American White Pelicans too, perched on their favorite island and swimming about in small groups.

We also saw lots of Double-crested Cormorants of all ages, except for nestlings. Cormorant nests were still visible in both the playground tree and the one on the island where they've been busy the last few years, but they were silent and apparently empty – no croaking grunts, no extra whitewash nearby. Dunno why they've moved their nurseries again and hope they return – to the islands, at any rate; those playground nests were not good neighbors for the juvenile humans.



Crows crowded the air, occasionally streaming off in pursuit of something – we could never tell quite what. But one big black bird sat quietly on a branch, fluffed up and ignoring the others, and just as I called out that this was not a crow at all, it was a real-for-real Common Raven, it was joined by another: equally big, equally shaggy, with an equally pickaxe-heavy bill taking up most of its face. They sat there side by side, trading off gentle head nibbles for as long as we watched, the picture of domestic bliss.

And lots of domesticity was on view in the trees along Bellevue. Several snags held rows of baby swallows perched shoulder to shoulder and cheeping for parents to come and feed them – our Northern Rough-winged Swallows seem to have had a banner year. We also saw several Violet-green Swallows, and one Cliff Swallow darted through the hungry flock.

Common Raven pair, photo by Elise Youssoufian, June 25, 2026,

The lawns held a strong scattering of Canada Geese in eclipse plumage (that is, without flight feathers but otherwise wearing their natty brown suits and white chinstraps) – looking like a big flock, though they numbered only a few dozen rather than the thousands that gathered here every summer a decade ago to repair their wings on the peaceful lawns. There's been no news of a population crash, so I can hope they've simply found some other place to scatter their droppings.

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One couple lounged at the edge of the lake with a half-grown gosling between them, at that truly awkward stage where gray down and brown adult plumage seem to fight for territory, quite possibly the only survivor of all the season's hatchlings. (Canada Geese have never had much success breeding at the lake, what with all the raccoons and dogs and hawks happy to drop in for lunch, though I've heard them blamed for the crowds.)

The Mallard drakes were in eclipse too, having exchanged their shining green heads and handsome gray backs for softly speckled brown and tan outfits almost exactly like their females' – but I saw only three of them, all hiding too deep in shaded water to make it worthwhile to talk about the phenomenon. I kept expecting more of them to swim round a corner, but nada, so the topic didn't come up.

The other tree birds were mostly least in sight. We did spot a few chickadees and titmice (though none came to take the seeds on offer), and one Song Sparrow, which provided a check mark to fill in the last empty month on their row in my historical-sightings table. But no Bushtits, no other native sparrows except for California Towhees, no warblers, no juncos, though all were probably hiding in the area.

All told, we counted 33 species – about normal for June in recent years, except for the wild 42 total reached in 2025. And when you come right down to it, you're mostly looking at one bird at a time, and sheer numbers don't make memories the way notable incidents and individuals do.

So this was once again a special day – like every day at Lake Merritt, special in its own way.

BIRD WALKS AT THE LAKE: Join Hilary Powers any fourth Wednesday of the month for a bird walk at the lake. Muster at the rock-strewn point of shore beside the Boat House parking lot 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.

END OF SUMMER EVENTS AT LAKE MERRITT

LMI Public Cleanups

Join Lake Merritt Institute volunteers to help keep our beautiful lake clean.

- Public cleanups are held every Tuesday and Saturday at 10 AM
- **Creek to Bay Day** is Saturday, September 19, 2026 9:30AM

Register online at lakemerrittinstitute.org



Saturday, August 29th Grand Lake Farmers Market

Stop by to say hello to LMI volunteers at Grand Lake Farmers market. We will have our latest local artist bird postcard for you to collect!



Bird Walks at Lake Merritt

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



LMI Summer Recap

Lake Chalet Box Update

Thank you, neighbors! A big thank you to everyone near and far, those who gave publicly and anonymously, for helping us replace our Lake Chalet cleanup box. Thanks to your quick response, our weekly Tuesday volunteers were able to get back to cleaning with supplies fully restocked. We truly appreciate your support in keeping interruptions to our cleanup schedule to a minimum. LMI, the wildlife, and our community thank you!



Thank you to Safari West for inviting and hosting LMI at your latest Conservation Dinner Series. We're grateful for the opportunity to connect with others who share our commitment to conservation.



We are looking for a new Board Member!

Lake Merritt Institute is seeking a dedicated community member to join our Board. A science background would be highly considered. Interested? Please reach out with your cover letter to info@lakemerrittinstitute.org.

Support Our Back-to-School Program

Your support this season will help us continue our **Watershed Field Trip Program** for local students during the 2026–2027 school year.

Last school year, thanks to community contributions, we were able to expand the program and host **13 field trips**. Demand continued to grow, and your support allowed us to welcome every school that reached out without having to turn anyone away. We want to continue meeting that need this year, and we can only sustain the program with your support.

Together, we can cultivate future stewards of Lake Merritt.

Donate today at www.lakemerrittinstitute.org



LAKE MERRITT
OAKLAND, CA

Lake Merritt Snowy Egret perched on driftwood. Block print by local artist Evelyn Gutierrez.

For sponsorships, questions, or comments please email us at info@lakemerrittinstitute.org.

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