

Machado Lake/Ken Malloy Harbor Regional Park/Wilmington Drain: October 2009 Update

by Martin Byhower

"What's happening at Ken Malloy?" I hear this question a lot. It's never an easy one to answer. Let me throw it back to you? What do YOU WANT to be happening there? That may be a bit easier.

If you want a green, friendly place to picnic, or a place for the kids to play in a new and safe outdoor play facility, or see some interesting birds, or play a round of inexpensive golf on the adjacent course, then you are already probably able to have your needs met (especially if you don't look too closely along the margins). However, if you want a thriving, healthy ecosystem, a clean, trash and pollution free environment in the lake and the Wilmington channel, top rate catch and release fishing, pleasant walking trails, a well maintained and safe camping facility for you and the kids, and abundant native wildlife, you will have to wait just a bit longer.

Let's try this another way; "Good News" vs. the "Less than Optimal News". On the positive side, progress is being made as we approach a date for breaking ground for the \$117 million Proposition O "MACHADO LAKE Ecosystem Rehabilitation Project and WILMINGTON DRAIN Multi-Use Project". After (no less than!) eight public stakeholder pre-planning meetings and an environmental permitting review meeting, it appears that virtually everyone is happy with the direction of the projects. The residents along the Wilmington Drain will see a low-impact, passive and restricted-use parkland area rather than a trashy, weedy, neglected channel adjacent to their homes. Mosquitoes and homeless people will be replaced by native vegetation and a quiet, streamside trail system that isolates visitors away from residences.

Machado Lake will be deeper, cooler, cleaner, aerated, and less choked by invasive vegetation. The water that enters it will be cleaner, and it will be pre-treated to remove trash and pollutants. Bike paths, walkways, parking, and amenities will be what one would expect in the fourth largest regional park in Los Angeles. Islands in the middle of the lake will support endangered shore and wetland bird species. Native waterfowl will replace pigeons, aggressive feral geese and vermin. Inaccessible areas that are currently full of trash and stagnant water, which are choked with weedy vegetation that serves as a cover for illegal activities, will become open, healthy, green spaces accessible to all. Fishing promontories as well as natural water filtering and purifying areas will add recreation and interest.

In the "less than optimal" news column, we have to wait a bit longer for the improvements. The Machado Lake work is proposed to begin in 2011 and take about two and a half years to complete. Wilmington Drain construction is proposed to begin in spring 2010 and take about one and a half years to complete. Meanwhile, we need to find solutions to existing problems, and we are at best, breaking even in that regard. On Sept. 19, about 150 students and community group volunteers came together on the 25th Annual Coastal Cleanup Day, and with the help of the LA City Recreation and Parks and Maintenance

Departments, removed about a ton of trash from the Park! Yesterday, a group of students from Chadwick and Rolling Hill Prep Schools joined forces, as they do every second Saturday of the month, and weeded, watered, and prepared for continued planting on the beautiful, native, and drought tolerant "Conlon Bluff" Coastal Sage Scrub Restoration site along the bike path to the south margin of the lake. The City is interested in acknowledging our site as a model for drought tolerant landscaping efforts now underway throughout the southland! Last weekend, the parents of the Chadwick student who helps coordinate the monthly restoration work hosted a classical music fundraiser that helped raise over \$6000 for the project!

While students and volunteers work to restore and improve the park, unfortunately, others still abuse it. Today, during the monthly (second Sunday) nature and bird walk that I lead at the park, we saw areas where illegal occupants recently carved trails into and thoroughly trashed areas in the willow forest southeast of the lake. Along the bike path, walk participants dodged illegal go-carts and off-road vehicles, which tear through the campground areas and rip up the lawns in the picnic areas. We saw a pair of freshly dumped pet house rabbits running through the habitat enhancement area, confused and frightened, but probably unaware of the fate they would likely meet-either starvation, disease, or predation. Despite the installation of some long needed fencing along Figueroa Place, which had been the entry point for many park abusers, much of the park is a neglected free-for all. Illegal dumping, tagging, occupancy, parking lot parties, and more occur on a near daily basis. Patrolling of the park has been much reduced with the cutbacks to the city Ranger Department. Most of the park visitors are families or couples out for a pleasant day of play, barbecuing and relaxation, but cutbacks to the LA city ranger program have left the park poorly patrolled, at best.

So, folks who live near or want to travel to visit the park can wait and hope for the Prop O improvements to solve many of the problems, or they can take action now. Please come down and visit the park. Most likely, you will have a pleasant experience, but if you see anything amiss, you can:

- Call the dispatch office at LA City General Services, 213-978-4670 and ask them to send a ranger out.
- If you should happen to see clearly illegal activity, call the LAPD Harbor Division (it may take patience to get through, but every complaint increases the chances of adequate patrolling.) Try calling 1-800-ASK-LAPD, and good luck!
- Contact the 15th Council District Office of Councilwoman Janice Hahn, and ask her to make the park a priority.
- Check out the PVSb Audubon website to learn about how you can get involved in park projects or come on field trips to the park (www.pvsb-audubon.org/)

KMHRP is a study in contrasts. Yesterday, I was walking around the lake after finishing up at the restoration site. I happened to look up, and there, staring me in the face, sitting on a post along the new bioswale near PCH and Vermont, was a kestrel, a small native falcon. Beautiful little raptors, kestrels are wild predators, and something just wasn't right. She swooped down to the ground, grabbed at something, then flew back to the perch. I walked away, but couldn't resist putting out my arm, and she immediately flew in and landed on it

(in the accompanying photo, you can see her on the head of one of my seventh grade students who attended the walk today!) At first, this seems exciting, and maybe a bit magical. But apparently, the bird has imprinted on humans, which is generally a dead end for wild species. Apparently, someone had somehow obtained and then dumped the bird, probably malnourished and underdeveloped, in the park several weeks back. Some of the persistent park residents/job seekers who still attempt to get pickup work in the lot on Vermont (despite the day labor site having been moved to the other side of the park) had "adopted" the bird. They had been buying baby mice and feeding them to the bird (supplemented with carne asada



and some attempts with live crayfish.) I was struck by the gentle good will and generosity shown by these less than fortunate folks who probably struggled for the dollars it takes to feed their "fal-**con**". Ultimately, KMHRP cannot provide a long term-home for them any more than they can provide one for the bird, which is probably now unable to fend for itself in the wild. There are many, many varied but compatible uses and activities at Harbor Park. I suspect you will be visiting there more often in the near future!

Note: just as I am sending off this article, I notice that a fire broke out at the park this afternoon, a few hours after I had left. It ate up about 20 acres of habitat on the south side of the park before firefighters could put it out. Usually these virtually annual occurrences are started by homeless folks or kids, but it could have been a dirt bike without spark arrestors...sigh