

FALL 2024/WINTER 2025

# Descanso

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## WHAT ABOUT THE BIRDS?

# It's for the birds

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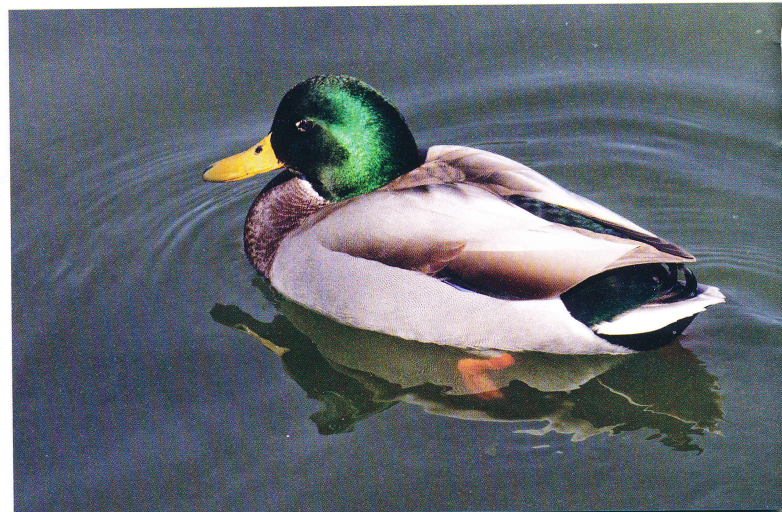
David Weeshoff is standing at the bird observation station just as he has for more than 17 years. He's looking at the lake and talking to visitors who wander by. When he spots a bird, he offers his binoculars for a look. The visitors marvel at ducks making their way across the lake and phoebes swooping close to the water, trying to get a bug meal.

Today, a pair of large unusual blackish ducks are on the lake. "Where did they come from?" Weeshoff, Vice President of the Pasadena Audubon Society, asks. The mallard hybrids are a mystery. Weeshoff explains that various hybrids occur, and perhaps these two are part Muscovy duck that met somewhere and then ended up in our lake at Descanso. To Weeshoff, this displays the importance of having a healthy lake in the garden.

The story of the lake at Descanso is a story of water. As the water sources have changed and the amount of water in the lake has fluctuated, the birds that visit have done the same.

Weeshoff tells the story, starting with when he began observing at Descanso in the 1970s. At that time, the lake had ample water, and the birds were abundant. Wading birds, including herons and egrets, could be found on the shore, catching frogs and fish. Migratory birds, like the Canadian geese and a variety of ducks, moved through seasonally. The habitat also supported nesting birds.

All that changed over the years as the lake infrastructure failed. By 2019, the water level, along with higher temperatures and drought changed the lake. It became almost stagnant and,





*Photographer David Weeshoff has captured many birds on the lake including, from top left, the bushtit, oak titmouse, mallard, and a great egret with a snowy egret.*



in recent months, covered in duckweed and algae. The water levels ebbed and rose, and the birds started disappearing.

“That’s just the way of birds,” Weeshoff says. “They go to where the habitat supports them.”

One of the most common questions about the lake restoration is: What will happen to the birds? The answer is that they have been leaving for a long time. When construction begins, they will relocate. And they will slowly return, in abundance, when the lake project is completed.

The new lake project includes a consistent and reliable water source through stormwater capture. Even in a drought year, we can capture up to 13 acre feet of stormwater. Aquatic life, such as native fish, insects, and plants that support birds and other animals, will return. There will be ample food

foraging areas and floating wetlands that can serve as nesting sites, shelter, and breeding grounds. There will also be places where migratory birds can rest and replenish their energy before continuing their journey.

The lake project is slated to begin by the end of this year, with the draining of the water, and will be completed by 2027. The birds will begin arriving soon after.

“They will come back,” says Weeshoff, “if you build it, they will come.” 🌈