

Oakland adopts strict building rules to save birds

Strict rules try to prevent crashes by regulating glass and antennas, restricting use of lights overnight



Carlos Avila Gonzalez, The Chronicle

A gull flies by a building near Lake Merritt in Oakland, which wants to prevent birds from hitting structures.

By Carolyn Jones

July 8, 2013

Oakland's feathered friends have a new reason to sing. The city has become one of the most bird-friendly places in North America.

Oakland joined San Francisco and Toronto in adopting strict building regulations to deter birds from fatally smacking into windows. From now on, according to the rules, all new buildings near water or parks must have either opaque or etched glass, minimal rooftop antennas and lights out after 10 p.m. unless they are necessary.

"I think it's wonderful. Why can't all cities in North America do this? It's a no-brainer," said John Sterling, a Woodland ornithologist who formerly worked for the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center. "We've seen that this really does work."

Up to a billion birds a year die from flying into buildings, wind turbines, electrical towers and other structures, according to the American Bird Conservancy. Migrating birds are attracted to light, especially at night, but, as virtually everyone with a plate-glass window already knows, they can't see glass. The idea is to prevent that heart-wrenching and all too familiar "thunk" of a robin as it slams full-speed into the building.

Oakland's planning and zoning departments adopted bird-friendly requirements in 2008 but agreed to beef them up last month at the request of the Golden Gate Audubon Society. San Francisco adopted its requirements in 2011.

"Oakland is unique in that Lake Merritt - a major bird refuge - is adjacent to the high-rises downtown," said Heather Klein, an Oakland senior planner who wrote the new rules. "We looked for ways that birds and buildings can coexist."

Little opposition

Oakland has about 50 buildings taller than eight stories, most clustered between the lake, hills and Oakland Estuary, all of which are popular avian hangouts. Thousands of herons, ducks, pelicans,

SAN FRANCISCO SHUTTERS
INTERIOR & EXTERIOR SHUTTERS
MILLED & MADE IN CALIFORNIA

- ANY STYLE CUSTOM SHUTTERS
- REPAIRING & REFINISHING AVAILABLE

50% OFF
OFFER ENDS 7/31/13

SHOWROOMS IN BURLINGAME & SANTA CLARA
800-535-8357

www.sfshutters.com

The advertisement features a photograph of a window with green shutters on either side, set against a light-colored wall.

geese, gulls and songbirds fill the skies, and waters, at the center of the city.

"We do pride ourselves on having the country's smartest birds, but even they sometimes fly into buildings," said the city's zoning manager, Scott Miller. "We know development can have an impact, so we wanted to do what we can."

The new guidelines invoked little opposition, even though they could add thousands of dollars to the cost of a project. Bird-friendly glass can cost 25 percent more than regular glass, architect Douglas Burnham said.



Carlos Avila Gonzalez, The Chronicle

A white pelican sits on the shore of the Rotary Nature Center at Lake Merritt.

Burnham, who's designed numerous buildings in San Francisco and Oakland, said clients have never complained about the requirements.

"It's not onerous," he said. "It costs a little more, but it's the right thing to do. If we know how to make a situation better, we should."

In Toronto, the first major city to adopt bird-friendly development standards, the program has been a

success, according to Kelly Snow, an environmental policy planner for that city and the author of its regulations.

"There are fewer dead birds," he said. "Also, there has not been much pushback. I think people have found the (glass treatment) is pretty innocuous."

Keep cats inside

No one knows how many birds have been saved in Toronto since it adopted the regulations in 2010, but - in combination with other environmentally friendly standards the city has adopted - the overall impact has been significant, Snow said.

Bird-safe buildings are a great step, but cities, and the public, should take further steps to help birds, said Mike Lynes, director of Golden Gate Audubon. Residents and businesses should shut off lights at night during migration season, he said, and parks and yards should have plenty of shrubbery and a variety of native and fruit trees.



Carlos Avila Gonzalez, The Chronicle

A double-crested cormorant lands at Lake Merritt in Oakland, which has added bird protections.

Cats are probably the biggest problem, though. The wily felines kill three times the number of birds that buildings do, according to the experts. Lynes and other bird lovers would like residents to keep their cats inside and bring strays to a local animal shelter.

Carolyn Jones is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. E-mail:
carolynjones@sfgate.com



HEARST *newspapers*

© 2013 Hearst Communications Inc.