

A dried-up lake in Golden Gate Park has been restored — and will soon reopen

By Sam Whiting, Reporter June 9, 2024



A bench created from the trunk of a tree sits nearby Middle Lake in Golden Gate Park on Wednesday, June 5. The lake's rehabilitation after being dried up for many years is nearly complete, with its reopening planned for this summer.

Lea Suzuki/The Chronicle

For 30 or 40 years, the Chain of Lakes at the western end of San Francisco's Golden Gate Park has been missing its crucial center link.

Called simply Middle Lake, it is part of the three-lake chain dug out in 1899 and filled by a natural source, an underlying aquifer.

It took about a century for Middle Lake to give way to seepage, silt, invasive species, algae blooms, and drought until it finally dried up and became a wildland for kids to build forts on.

But it has now been reclaimed in a \$7.1 million capital project that has created a glistening blue lake 7-feet deep with a clay bottom dropping down another 18 inches to ensure the water stays there.



Golden Gate Park's Middle Lake, which has been dried up for decades, is now 7-feet deep with a clay bottom after undergoing a rehabilitation project.
Lea Suzuki/The Chronicle

The lake — which is 85,000 square feet and kidney-shaped like a swimming pool at one end and keyhole-shaped with mysterious islands and inlets at the other — is suddenly viewable from Chain of Lakes Drive, the main transverse at the 43rd Avenue entrance.

“We’ve been anticipating it for a while. When will it open?” asked Mission District resident Mike Gustenson, as he pressed up against the fences on a hot Wednesday afternoon. “It’s going to be a great use of an underutilized area.”

The answer to Gustenson’s question, as supplied by project manager Alex Schuknecht, is midsummer, though there will not be a ceremony beyond the removal of the fence.

Overseen by the Recreation and Park Department, the project covers 14 acres and is the largest landscape and renovation project to take place in Golden Gate Park since the Beach Chalet Soccer Fields were redone in 2015.

The Middle Lake Rehabilitation Project has been funded mainly by a 2012 park bond approved by voters. Construction has taken 18 months under a design team led by civil engineering firm Woodard & Curran and landscape architect Cheryl Barton, in a joint effort with Interstice Architects.



A view of the long-dried-up Middle Lake in Golden Gate Park before its recent rehabilitation.
Courtesy of San Francisco Recreation and Park Department

At the outset, in January 2023, “you could hardly tell it was a lake by walking by,” said Schuknecht. “It had dried out and was a wild area. There have been complaints about it since the 1980s.”

There may have been complaints about it in the 1880s, too, back when the lower end of the park was a mosquito swamp in the sand dunes. Park Superintendent

John McLaren came up with the concept of turning the swamp into a series of connected lakes with water flowing south to north. Horse-drawn wagons hauled away the dirt.

To create Middle Lake, 25,000 cubic yards of material was excavated and hauled away.



Poppies and other flowers bloom around the perimeter of Middle Lake in early June.
Lea Suzuki/The Chronicle

The cavity was then filled with fresh water from the aquifer, pumped in by power of the windmills at the west end of the park. But the clay lining in use at that time did not hold water. The oldest in the chain, North Lake on the Richmond District side, was rebuilt in 2004. South Lake, the newest and smallest of the lakes, on the Sunset District side, is still holding water but is overgrown. It will also be restored when funds become available.

Of the three, Middle Lake commands the marquee position with its central location in between John F. Kennedy Drive and Little Speedway Meadow, with frontage on Chain of Lakes Drive.

When the project began in January 2023, the first thing to go was a coyote den.

Then 11,500 cubic yards of dirt were hauled away, along with 77 trees, mostly eucalyptus. The eucalyptus have been replaced by oaks and 10,000 plants have been placed on the lakeside. Poppy and lupine seeds were scattered in the spring and have already bloomed, drawing bees and birds.



An aerial view of Middle Lake shows the cascade from the casting pools snaking into it. Courtesy of San Francisco Recreation and Park Department

Some 350 species are expected. A family of geese with four goslings has homesteaded one of the islands.

“It’s already a place that is drawing wildlife,” said Phil Ginsburg, the Rec and Park Department general manager. “It’s going to draw people as well — bird-watchers, walkers, picnickers and families who want to explore nature together.

Wedding parties also will be coming, as soon as the permits staff signs off on it. A promontory overlook is being touted as “Wedding Meadow,” with a flat lawn waiting for white plastic folding chairs.

During quiet moments in the ceremony, those attending will be able to hear the faint music of water cascading down through a rocky creek, a major feature of the renovation.



Water flows over rocks in the newly constructed cascade that runs from the casting pools to Middle Lake in Golden Gate Park on Wednesday, June 5.
Lea Suzuki/The Chronicle

That rushing water has the illusion of flowing naturally from the fly-casting pools above and to the east of Middle Lake. That historic cascade has also been rebuilt with an Americans with Disabilities Act-compliant footpath added to meander 800 feet from the Golden Gate Angling & Casting Club down Middle Lake. The water in the creek will keep the lake full. The system was engineered to provide drops and pools that make the gurgling natural.

“The sound of the cascade is my favorite part,” said Schuknecht. His second favorite part is the visual element of river rock that ties it all together. The rock rims the lake and separates it from a footpath that runs half a mile around the perimeter and connects to the path alongside the cascade.

“When we turned it on and watched the water flow down, that was the most exciting part of the project,” he said. “It looks like the Yuba River.”