



Protecting Illinois' Rivers For People, Fish, and Wildlife

## A TROUBLED HISTORY OF MISSISSIPPI RIVER MANAGEMENT

*The Mississippi River will always have its own way, no engineering skill can persuade it to do otherwise.*

--Mark Twain

BY CECILY SMITH

The Mississippi River is epic: rich in geological, biological and cultural history, awesome in both beauty and force. During this spring's unprecedented Mississippi River flooding, we witnessed for the first time in history the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) activation of three major river control measures in response to a single flooding event. First was the blasting of the Bird's Point Levee on May 2, 2011 to divert the swollen river into the New Madrid Floodway. Within two weeks of this

dramatic action the river was diverted again by opening both the Bonnet Carre and Morganza Spillways. These diversions created a safe haven for some people and wildlife, but also resulted in devastating losses for many others.

Building floodways and spillways in the Mississippi River was a key component of the federal government's strategic response to 1927's deadly floods. Starting with the Flood Control Act of 1929, the Corps was authorized to construct a series of flood control projects in the Mississippi River. The resulting 29 locks and dams span hundreds of river miles; supplementing these massive structures are thousands of miles of channels, levees, and smaller flood control devices. The 1930s and

### IN THIS ISSUE //

Greetings from Glynnis .....	2
Annual Dinner .....	2
Flooding Problems Best Solved with Nature Protection .....	3
Sangamon River Wetlands Saved .....	4
Bag It Movie .....	4
Preserving Wildlife Habitat .....	5
River Steward Nominations .....	6
You Live in a Watershed .....	6

1940s were a glory period for the Corps, an opportune time for the agency to advance its water-control engineering projects, while reinforcing an organizational culture and rationale that manmade structures alone could conquer the "enemy" river. Yet it was also a time when one Corps official began to challenge the agency's assumptions on how to best manage large river systems. //continued on page 7//

*Prairie Rivers Network and our partners continue to block bad Corps of Engineers projects on the Mississippi River.*

*The President's budget request for FY 2012 provides NO funding for an unwise expansion of the locks and dams on the Upper Mississippi that would exacerbate problems at taxpayer expense.*

*Our 2010 "Big Price - Little Benefits" report on the lock and dam expansion has contributed to the debate; it was cited in a January 2011 Congressional Research Service policy report\* to Congress on the expansion and other federal waterways projects.*



Mississippi River with Wetlands

## GREETINGS FROM GLYNNIS

If you are part of our online community, you already know about the War on Water - a coordinated group of attacks on our nation's water laws that would destroy the Clean Water Act, gut the Environmental Protection Agency and set our nation back 40 years in clean water protection. I want to personally thank each of you who called your Senators and Representative in support of clean water. We will keep you updated through our website, Facebook, and e-news with new developments.

I am thrilled to announce that our guest speaker at our Annual Dinner this year will be Gene Karpinski, the president of the League of Conservation Voters. With this current attack on our water resources, it will be timely for our members to have an inside look at the D.C. culture

that has spawned this unprecedented anti-environment backlash. See below for more information on the dinner.

I am also happy to announce that we have two new staff members. Elliot Brinkman is leading our habitat conservation program and Robert Hirschfeld is organizing a coalition to prevent the spread of Asian carp.

If you are not already part of our online community, please go to [prairierivers.org](http://prairierivers.org) and sign up for RiverWeb, or follow us on Facebook. And check out [prairierivers.org/about/staff](http://prairierivers.org/about/staff) to read short bios on the new (and old) staff.

Sincerely,



## PRAIRIE RIVERS NETWORK ANNUAL DINNER - OCT 14

Save the date! Our Annual Dinner will be at the I Hotel and Conference Center in Champaign on Friday, **October 14th.**

Keynote Speaker: With the historic political gridlock in Washington, D.C., we are very lucky to have Gene Karpinski to speak to us about the implications of the federal government's current actions on environmental issues and public health. Gene will discuss the urgent



need for mobilization around local and regional environmental policies to protect clean water, air and lands for future generations.

Gene became president of the League of Conservation Voters (LCV) and the LCV Education Fund in 2006 and is himself an indefatigable exemplar of the LCV's mission to turn environmental values into national priorities.

Go to [prairierivers.org/dinner](http://prairierivers.org/dinner) for more information about Gene and additional Annual Dinner details.//

Invitations will be mailed to you in early August and available on our website.

## prairieriversnetwork

...strives to protect the rivers and streams of Illinois and to promote the lasting health and beauty of watershed communities.

By providing information, sound science, and hands-on assistance, Prairie Rivers Network helps individuals and community groups become effective river conservation leaders.

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## FLOODING PROBLEMS BEST SOLVED WITH NATURE PROTECTION

BY STACY JAMES

Tales of eroding streambanks and increased flooding have become all too familiar across Illinois. People are literally losing their land and livelihoods to water. As the spring rains fall and streams surge, we should turn our attention to solutions that work with nature instead of fighting the same old losing battle.

Flooding and property damage are both an urban and a rural problem. Finger pointing does little good and indeed we are all to blame. But we can help each other by implementing affordable solutions on our own properties and supporting community initiatives.

In urban areas, impermeable surfaces such as roads and rooftops shed most of the snow and rain that falls. Because of this impaired ability to soak water into the ground, almost half of urban stormwater drains into storm drains which then discharge into local streams. As urban areas develop, streams become less able to handle all the water and widen with the increased flow.

Fortunately, it is possible to design urban areas so that more water soaks into the ground where it falls. Instead of traditional pavement, porous pavement can be used in many instances. And instead of directing gutter downspouts onto driveways or drains, roof water can be diverted into rain gardens and rain barrels. Just planting more trees can reduce flooding by intercepting rain before it hits the ground. Examples of these types of green infrastructure can be found dotted across the landscape and are becoming more and more popular.

In rural areas, there is far more exposed soil to absorb snow and rain. However, most agricultural fields contain a network of underground pipes that drain the land so that crops can grow. Like urban storm sewers, these pipes or tiles discharge into nearby ditches and streams, and the flow out of the pipes can be substantial after storms. Despite this engineering, some fields rarely produce a good crop because of flooding. Such fields are therefore better suited to serve as floodwater storage and infiltration areas.

A state program called Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) actually pays farmers to return flooded areas to nature along the Kaskaskia River and its tributaries. The program targets wetlands and sensitive land that is prone to erosion or located in the 100-year floodplain. CREP focuses on these areas because getting them out of agricultural production can produce disproportionate benefits for natural resources. Fields that frequently flood or require significant chemical inputs to be productive are ideal for CREP.

The Kaskaskia River originates in Champaign County and flows south until it joins the Mississippi River south of St. Louis. The Kaskaskia is Illinois' second largest river system and drains approximately 10% of the state. Many people hope this program will reduce the flooding and streambank erosion problems that plague the river along its over 300-mile course.

Restoring the land to trees and grasses has a number of benefits. Land located along rivers can store floodwater and infiltrate it into the ground so that downstream flooding is less. Pesticides, fertilizers, oils, and other pollution that

*Prairie Rivers Network is working to promote farmer enrollment in CREP and working lands programs like Environmental Quality Incentive Program and Conservation Stewardship Program.*

gets washed into rivers during storms can get filtered out by wetlands that receive floodwater. Wildlife and fish quickly respond to habitat restoration projects.

CREP is administered by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, with the help of county Soil & Water Conservation Districts. CREP Coordinators have been hired to promote the program and work with applicants. Applications are being accepted now and should be submitted as soon as possible given the popularity of the program and limited budget.

Instead of prolonging our antiquated ethic that water is a nuisance that must be piped away, we should find innovative ways to use stormwater to our benefit. Water is a valuable resource that can be harvested for economic gain. Nature protection in strategic areas represents a smart investment that benefits ourselves and future generations. Such stewardship will not only reduce flooding but will also recharge drinking water supplies such as the Mahomet Aquifer. In these difficult times of limited resources and seemingly limitless needs, initiatives like CREP and green infrastructure provide a tremendous opportunity for positive change.//

*This article was originally published on May 1, 2011, and is reproduced here by permission of The News-Gazette, Inc.*

## SANGAMON RIVER WETLANDS SAVED

Prairie Rivers Network Works With Water Commission to Preserve Wetlands

BY KIM KNOWLES

As reported in our Spring 2011 newsletter, the villages of Chatham and New Berlin are building a drinking water plant in the Sangamon River Valley. Because we were concerned about the new plant causing increased sediment pollution in the Sangamon River, we asked the South Sangamon Water Commission to incorporate innovative green infrastructure features in the plant design to help prevent sediment and other pollution from running into the river. The Commission readily agreed.

Shortly thereafter, we learned that the Commission was planning to construct well fields, water pipelines and access roads within a mature forested wetland in the Sangamon River floodplain in order to supply water to the new plant. As proposed, the construction would have damaged the wetlands. Forested wetlands like these are invaluable, because they perform a variety of vital environmental

functions such as storing floodwaters, filtering pollution and providing habitat for fish and wildlife. Once destroyed, they are difficult to replace, as it takes many years for a forest to mature. Historically, wetland destruction has occurred at alarming rates. Illinois has lost more than 85% of its original wetland acreage.

Prairie Rivers Network joined with the Illinois Chapter of the Sierra Club to prevent the destruction of these important wetlands. We wrote a letter of objection and also asked the South Sangamon Water Commission to build its well fields outside of the forested wetland. In response to our objections, the Commission worked with its consultants to find a new location that avoided the wetlands entirely. We are grateful to the Commission for its willingness to be both innovative and adaptable in reducing water pollution and in preserving Illinois wetlands. //

## YOU ARE INVITED TO

A SPECIAL MOVIE EVENT - *bag it*

Prairie Rivers Network is happy to invite our members and friends to a special showing of *bag it*.

*bag it* started as a documentary about plastic bags and evolved into a wholesale investigation into plastics and their effect on our waterways, oceans, and even our bodies.

**When:** September 20, 2011 at 7:00 pm

**Where:** Art Theater , 126 W. Church St., Champaign

**Tickets:** \$10 and are available at Champaign Surplus, Common Ground Food Co-Op, and Prairie Rivers Network

Prairie Rivers Network would like to give a very special thanks to **Champaign Surplus** and **Common Ground Food Co-Op** for sponsoring this event.

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Questions & event information:  
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**bag it**  
is your life too plastic?

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## PRESERVING WILDLIFE HABITAT FOR THE PROTECTION OF ILLINOIS RIVERS

Prairie Rivers Network Works with Local Agencies and Citizens to Finalize Action Plan that Will Advance Vermilion River Conservation

BY ELLIOT BRINKMAN

Prairie Rivers Network, in partnership with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, has completed a plan to protect wildlife in the Vermilion River Conservation Opportunity Area. These efforts have also resulted in the formation of a grassroots group—the Vermilion River Wildlife Conservation Partnership—dedicated to the protection of wildlife habitat. The finalization of the plan and the formation of the Partnership mean that wildlife conservation projects along the Vermilion River in East-Central Illinois should result in more funding for wildlife conservation projects. There will also be more coordination among nearby projects with shared regional goals, improving the effectiveness of wildlife protection and restoration efforts.

The Vermilion River Conservation Opportunity Area has been identified by the Department of Natural Resources as an area that warrants special wildlife and habitat protection efforts because of the relatively healthy natural resources there, and due to the presence of people and groups with an interest in protecting those resources. It covers over 790,000 acres in Champaign, Vermilion, Ford, Iroquois, and Edgar counties, and encompasses the Middle Fork, North Fork, and Salt Fork of the Vermilion River. The Area is home to over 162 animals listed as “Species in Greatest Need of Conservation” in the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan.

In 2010, Prairie Rivers Network and the Department of Natural Resources hosted three meetings that brought together partners to discuss how wildlife protection goals and objectives could be implemented along the Vermilion River. We used information from these meetings to develop a wildlife conservation plan for the Vermilion River Conservation Opportunity Area. The plan identifies four major goals to guide conservation efforts:

- improving outreach to landowners,
- improving the quality of aquatic habitat,
- increasing the amount and improving the quality of terrestrial habitat, and
- controlling invasive plant species.



Baby Bald Eagle in Nest Along Middle Fork

Finalizing the Vermilion River Conservation Opportunity Area Wildlife Action Plan marks a significant step in the protection of wildlife habitat along the river and its tributaries. The Plan supplements the more general goals of the statewide Wildlife Action Plan as it incorporates specific conservation priorities and actions agreed upon by local stakeholders. The Plan not only reflects the shared goals agreed upon by partners, but also serves as a practical tool for developing funding proposals for habitat conservation projects. To ensure the needs of individuals and organizations implementing conservation projects are continually being met, the Plan will be updated annually.

While developing the Wildlife Action Plan for the Vermilion River Conservation Opportunity Area, local citizens decided to form the Vermilion River Wildlife Conservation Partnership. The Partnership will work to coordinate planning efforts and implement the strategies identified in the Plan by identifying and supporting critical wildlife conservation projects within the Conservation Opportunity Area. The Partnership will also work to promote a shared vision for wildlife conservation among agencies and citizen conservationists.

Anyone interested in local wildlife conservation efforts is welcome to participate in the Vermilion River Wildlife Conservation Partnership; contact Elliot Brinkman (217/344-2371, [ebrinkman@prairierivers.org](mailto:ebrinkman@prairierivers.org)). The Partnership offers a great opportunity get involved and meet others who are working to protect wildlife. Through this collaborative effort, we can enhance our ability to improve and preserve an invaluable resource, the Vermilion River. //

## DO YOU KNOW A RIVER STEWARD WHO DESERVES RECOGNITION?

Do you know a volunteer who is working hard to protect the state's rivers and streams? Help celebrate and elevate their important work by nominating them for our 7th annual River Steward Award.

There are many dedicated citizen volunteers around our state that spend countless hours working to protect Illinois' rivers. They educate us; they do the legwork; they speak the unpopular truths; they go above and beyond.

Prairie Rivers Network wants to recognize and celebrate these river stewards, share their victories and inspire other river advocates around the state.

The award will be presented at our Annual Dinner on October 14, 2011.

Go to [prairierivers.org](http://prairierivers.org) for nomination guidelines. Deadline for nomination is September 9th.//

### RIVER STEWARD AWARD WINNERS

Kathy Andria - 2010  
 Gary Mechanic - 2009  
 Joyce Blumenshine - 2008  
 Mary Pat Holtschlag - 2007  
 Fran Caffee - 2006  
 Jan Holder - 2005

## REMEMBER: YOU LIVE IN A WATERSHED!

BY ALISON MEANOR AND CECILY SMITH

Whether "watershed planning" is a foreign concept to you, or you have been actively preserving the health of Illinois watersheds for years, we guarantee that you will discover something new on our **For Watershed Groups** webpages:

[prairierivers.org/for-watershed-groups](http://prairierivers.org/for-watershed-groups)

What *is* a watershed? What is meant by watershed planning? Browse through **Watersheds 101** to find out. What do watershed groups do? Visit **Illinois Watershed Groups** for links to some of the most active groups in our state.

**Tools, Manuals, Websites, and Maps** will get you well on your way to taking an active role in protecting your watershed. Do you know which watershed you live in? Is there a watershed group in your area? Find out through on-line databases. Are you already active in your watershed? Download free tools and manuals that will assist you at all levels. Would you like to get involved? Visit **Partners and Volunteer Networks** for links to groups like Illinois RiverWatch Network and the Volunteer Lake Monitoring Program.

View presentations from our **Workshops on Watershed Capacity Building**. Learn tips on grant writing to receive funding for your projects. Get advice on conducting outreach campaigns. Follow step-by-step tutorials to find



free on-line data. Read our Final Report to learn more about how Prairie Rivers Network has supported watershed groups.

Remember: we all live in a watershed, we all have a direct impact on the health of our rivers, and there are tools available to help each of us make a difference!//

*Prairie Rivers Network would like to thank Alison Meanor for all of her great work with watershed capacity building, and we wish her the best of luck at Parkland College as she continues on to new endeavors.*

## A TROUBLED HISTORY OF MISSISSIPPI RIVER MANAGEMENT *continued from page 1*

Krista Dykema Cheramie's essay "The Scale of Nature: Modeling the Mississippi" tells the story of the Corps' Major Eugene Reybold, who questioned whether the agency's practice of building isolated structures in the Mississippi River really "fixed" the problem of repeated flooding. For Reybold, an effective solution must account for the fact that the Mississippi River is a large-scale, dynamic natural system. In the early 1940s, Major Reybold successfully advocated for the construction of a large-scale model of the Mississippi that would allow engineers literally to see the river as a dynamic system, flowing through, and interconnected with, multiple and varied natural areas. Years in the making, the 200-acre model was used from the early 1950s until 1971, when computer programs took over as the new method for modeling water flows.

While Major Reybold's initiative resulted in better water flow modeling for Mississippi River projects, it took several more decades for the Corps to consider the devastating environmental impacts resulting from the drastic flow changes of its water control and navigation structures. In 1986, the U.S. Congress declared its intent to recognize the Upper Mississippi River system as a "nationally significant ecosystem." That year Congress also authorized the Corps' Environmental Management Program to design and build restoration projects. To date, 53 habitat restoration projects have been completed on over 95,000 acres. These projects improve river health and improve our understanding of the best methods for restoring and maintaining the health of large river ecosystems. Partners with the Corps include the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Geological Survey and a number of state conservation and natural resource management agencies.

With all of these restoration achievements, the barge shipping industry continues to lobby Congress to eliminate the Environmental Management Program while pressing for funding to double the size of seven locks on the

Mississippi River. Navigation interests claim these expanded locks are needed to decrease barge travel time. Prairie Rivers Network's 2010 report "Big Price – Little Benefit"\* argues that building additional or expanded locks amounts to an undesirable trade off: guaranteed large-scale environmental damage (such as increased sediment on the river bottom and destruction of river bank habitats) for the unproven economic "benefits" of constructing major locks that are not needed or justified.

Many experts and, fortunately for now, the U.S. Congress also question the accuracy of the shipping industry's "supporting" information for additional and expanded locks. For several years, Congress has refused to provide funding for constructing new or expanded locks on the Mississippi. Prairie Rivers Network is working to ensure that effective restoration projects are supported, and that future river management policy and practice is based on the unique ecology and processes of this majestic and dynamic river.

As thousands of U.S. citizens, including Illinois residents, are now dealing with the traumatic aftermath of this spring's devastating Mississippi River floods, we must ensure the Corps follows the spirit of Major Reybold's warning from decades ago: the first question the Corps must ask is not "What will we build here?" but "What will the river allow us to build here?"

\* Prairie Rivers Network and other members of the Nicollet Island Coalition produced the "Big Price - Little Benefit" report, which can be downloaded at [prairierivers.org/resources/downloads](http://prairierivers.org/resources/downloads).

CRS report cites "Big Price - Little Benefit" on pg 15: [http://www.cq.com/graphics/crsreports/R41430\\_2011-01-20.pdf//](http://www.cq.com/graphics/crsreports/R41430_2011-01-20.pdf//)

*Does your business or group want to sponsor Prairie Rivers Network's Annual Dinner?  
Go to [prairierivers.org/dinner](http://prairierivers.org/dinner) for more details or call Steph at 217/344-2371*



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# UPCOMING EVENTS//



**KATYDIDS AND CRICKETS NATURE  
 WALK WITH DAVID EADES**  
 Saturday, August 27th - 5:30 to 9:30 pm  
 Busey Woods at Anita Purvis Nature Ctr.  
 1505 N. Broadway, Urbana, IL 61801  
 Registration required - [prairierivers.org/events](http://prairierivers.org/events)

**BAG-IT MOVIE**  
 Tuesday, September 20 - 7:00 pm  
 Art Theater  
 126 W. Church St., Champaign, IL, 61820  
 Tickets on sale at Prairie Rivers Network,  
 Champaign Surplus, and CGFC

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 300 S. Broadway Suite 166, Urbana, IL 61801  
[commonground.coop](http://commonground.coop)  
 Round-up for Prairie Rivers Network when  
 you shop at CGFC during the month of  
 September.

**PRAIRIE RIVERS NETWORK  
 ANNUAL DINNER**  
 Friday, October 14  
 I Hotel and Conference Center  
 1900 South First St, Champaign, IL

FOR MORE DETAILS ON THESE AND OTHER EVENTS VISIT US AT:  
[PRAIRIERIVERS.ORG/EVENTS](http://PRAIRIERIVERS.ORG/EVENTS)

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Prairie Rivers Network is participating in Schnucks' Customer Card Program.

If you are already using a Schnucks card for Fuel Rewards, you may register that card to also earn money for Prairie Rivers Network by calling (800) 931-6258.

Our group ID is 500024645.

If you don't already have a Schnuck's Customer/eScript card, pick one up at participating locations. Present the card every time you shop and Schnucks contributes a percentage of your monthly purchase amount to Prairie Rivers.



Prairie Rivers Network is the Illinois Affiliate of the National Wildlife Federation.

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