

# the river REPORTER

## Stormwater Stories

July will be remembered in Chicago as the rainiest on record. Did you ever think about what happens to all of that water? Before human settlement, rainwater would percolate into the soils, recharge wetlands, and gradually recharge our rivers and streams. The water was generally clean and pure. Early visitors reported that much of the Skokie River had a sand and gravel bottom, as opposed to the silt-laden channel it is today. Because of the flat landscape, even large volumes of water from severe storm events moved slowly. In the spring, the Skokie River west of Winnetka (the current location of the Skokie Lagoons and the Chicago Botanic Gardens) would sometimes become a vast body of standing water nearly a mile wide in places. The view of this landscape in the evening, with the setting sun behind it, was considered one of the most beautiful vistas in the Chicago region.

Today, Chicago River water quality is poor partly due to the tremendous negative impact of stormwater runoff. Sandy-bottomed streams have turned into silt-laden ditches with vanishing habitat. Development in the watershed has replaced the vast majority of the green space, which used to “treat” rainwater, with parking lots, roads, and rooftops. Instead of slowly making its way to the river through a labyrinth of native plant root systems



River Day volunteers prepare the floodplain for the installation of native plants.

and soils that have evolved for centuries, a raindrop that falls in the Chicago River watershed today will probably land in an impervious area that has been paved and built over, increasing water runoff. Today’s raindrop won’t stop to recharge the wetlands that have been filled or drained, decreasing natural water storage areas, and will most likely pick up many pollutants on its way into a pipe for a quick ride to the River. Once this raindrop gets to the end of the pipe, it enters the river much faster and with more force than it would have in a watershed with more green space and natural buffers, eroding streambanks and depositing so much silt that it erases habitat and the insects, plants, and animals that depend on it.

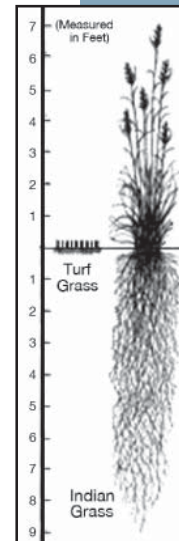
*Story continued on page 5...*

## Backyard Best Management Practices/ CREW: Be a Chicago River Eco-Warrior in Your Own Backyard

We all know that protecting clean water is important for our environment and for future generations. There are simple things you can do at home to help better manage stormwater. Improperly managed stormwater can flood basements, cause Combined Sewage Overflows (CSOs) in the Chicago River, and close beaches.

Here are two easy best management practices that can make a big impact:

1. Think native! Native plants have deeper root systems (3-10 feet, compared to turf grass’s 3-4 inches) that absorb rainwater, filter heavy metals such as cadmium and lead, and prevent soil erosion.
2. Install a rain barrel. You can install a low-cost rain barrel to collect rainwater which can then be used to water your new native garden. Think of all the water you’ll save!



Start taking action in your own backyard to make the Chicago River a better place. Sign the pledge found on our website, [www.chicagoriver.org/get\\_involved/volunteer/](http://www.chicagoriver.org/get_involved/volunteer/). Become a Chicago River Eco-Warrior today.



# What Gets You Excited About the Chicago River?

The snapping turtle photo I received Tuesday reminded me once again of why we do this work. Enormous and primordial, the turtle was spotted by Illinois EPA scientists on the North Branch of the Chicago River in July. It thrilled all of us here as well as our many Facebook friends who reposted and commented on it again and again.

That turtles exist in the Chicago River comes as a big surprise to many, but not to those of us who can see the magic. We know they are there. In fact, the Chicago River is chock full of wildlife. Muskrats and beavers abound. Nearly 70 fish species, including those prized for sport like largemouth bass, and over 60 species of birds, such as state endangered black-crowned night herons, call the river home. And, thrillingly, river otters are making a comeback. They are being tracked and studied by scientists throughout the system including the downtown portion of the river. An otter was spotted under the Jackson Street bridge while dining on common carp.

Thirty-two years ago when Friends was founded, it was unimaginable that one day we would have river otters in the Chicago River. The otter is the river's answer to terrestrial charismatic

mega-fauna like giant pandas and elephants. Its return to our urban river is a sign of life, restoration success, and, like the giant snapping turtle, evidence of the magic.

Yet while the river otter is a sign of success, it is also a call to action. Perhaps this is why otters and photos of giant snapping turtles capture our imagination. They invite us to reflect upon how the river has changed through the years. They renew our commitment to take action to improve water quality ensuring a brighter future not only for the river otters and turtles but also for people who call the Chicago River watershed home. They remind us that while the Chicago River has greatly improved, there is still so much left to do.

The Clean Water Act, local investment, and a regional commitment to doing better are what make sightings of river wildlife possible. To ensure that the magic continues, we all need to work together to advocate for water quality standards that support clean water and healthy fish... and river otters... and snapping turtles.

*Margaret Frisbie  
Executive Director*



Large snapping turtle recently spotted in the Chicago River.  
Photo by Marie Sutor

## STAFF & BOARD

The River Reporter is published by Friends of the Chicago River, located at 28 E. Jackson Blvd., Suite 1800 Chicago, IL 60604-2272 Phone: (312) 939-0490 E-mail: friends@chicagoriver.org Web site: www.chicagoriver.org

Friends' mission is to preserve, protect and foster the vitality of the Chicago River for the plant, animal and human communities within its watershed.

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# The Water Quality Whirlwind Continues...

On a beautiful Sunday in May, Senators Dick Durbin and Mark Kirk, Congressman Mike Quigley and Attorney General Lisa Madigan joined Friends' executive director, Margaret Frisbie, on a water quality tour of the Chicago River. Spying herons, paddlers, and people holding signs that said "Save our river!" and "Make our children safe," Senator Durbin told the media to tell Chicago that "This is the President's hometown river. We can do better. Our generation needs to step in and clean up the Chicago River."



U.S. Senator Dick Durbin (on the far left) tours the Chicago River with Friends of the Chicago River. Photo by the Office of Dick Durbin

Those words and the positive disinfection vote taken June 7th by Metropolitan Water Reclamation District commissioners were major milestones in Friends' multi-year effort to improve water quality and to protect people and wildlife. Find out more at [www.chicagoriver.org](http://www.chicagoriver.org).

## RIFFLES & CURRENTS

### CANOES FOR A CAUSE

On July 9th, Friends' outstanding group of volunteer canoe guides led 160 paddlers in 80 canoes from Clark Park to Marina City in the first ever Leinenkugel's Canoes for a Cause canoe float on the Chicago River. Our partnership with the Jacob Leinenkugel Brewing Company is a great way to showcase the brewery's more than 140-year commitment to clean water and the great outdoors to the thousands of Leinie's fans in our watershed. In 2011, volunteers from Team Leinie's have cleaned the riverbank at River Day and paddled to show their support for a clean Chicago River.

### EPA – WATERSENSE PROGRAM

Earth may have about 70 percent of its surface covered by water, but less than 1 percent of it is available for human use. WaterSense, a USEPA partnership program, helps us all do our part to protect this critical and precious resource. It assists people to make decisions that save water with a product label system and tips for saving water around the house. Products carrying a WaterSense label will perform well, help save money, and encourage innovation

in manufacturing. WaterSense partners with manufacturers, retailers, distributors, and utilities to bring WaterSense-labeled products to the marketplace and make it easy to purchase high-performing, water-efficient products.

Since the program's inception in 2006, WaterSense has helped consumers save 125 billion gallons of water and over \$2 billion in water and energy bills. Explore WaterSense products and learn about the project partners at [www.epa.gov/watersense/about\\_us/what\\_is\\_ws.html](http://www.epa.gov/watersense/about_us/what_is_ws.html).

### MWRD HIRES NEW EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

On June 20th, David St. Pierre started as new executive director of the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD). St. Pierre, a licensed professional engineer, comes from Atlanta where he was deputy commissioner of drinking and wastewater utility operations since 2007. With a background which includes a deep understanding of sewage effluent disinfection practices and sound financial management, he comes prepared to lead the transition to disinfection at MWRD's Chicago-area sewage treatment plants.

Friends is excited about working with St. Pierre and developing strategies with the District that will continue to improve water quality, manage stormwater using green technologies, and eliminate CSOs (combined sewer overflows) while improving habitat and recreational opportunities.

### FRIENDS OF THE CHICAGO RIVER WINS "COOLEST THING" AWARD

Friends of the Chicago River is proud to announce that Friends of Downtown recently bestowed their "Coolest Thing" award on Friends of the Chicago River and Chicago River Canoe & Kayak at their annual awards event in May. In the company of such noteworthy projects as Pop-Up Art by the Chicago Loop Alliance and Best Commitment to Chicago (Groupon), Friends won "Coolest Thing" for providing Chicago River canoe trips during which people can see our spectacular world famous skyline and our Chicago River wildlife, including beavers, turtles and herons, up close.

You can see how cool it is to canoe with Friends by joining us for scheduled group trips or organizing one of your own with Friends. Contact Josh Yellin at (312) 939-0490, ext. 14, or [jyellin@chicagoriver.org](mailto: jyellin@chicagoriver.org) for more information.

# HIGH Water Marks

Friends of the Chicago River recognizes the generous contributions and support of members, donors, and program participants and partners at \$250 and above between March 2, 2011, and June 30, 2011.

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The Siragusa Foundation  
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Union League Boys and Girls Club  
Windy City Rollers

We apologize if any names have been omitted, misspelled, or otherwise incorrectly listed. Please contact us at (312) 939-0490, ext. 10, or friends@chicagoriver.org so that we can correct our records.

## 6th Annual Big Fish Ball a Whopper of a Success

Four hundred supporters of Friends of the Chicago River gathered alongside the river at the Merchandise Mart on June 8th for the 6th annual Big Fish Ball, raising over \$210,000 on behalf of the river. Guests were treated to delectable outdoor dining: hors d'oeuvres and watermelon mojitos, dinner and a giant plate of chocolate nachos by Phil Stefani Signature Events. The event also featured river animals – a coyote, wolf pups, a skunk, a woodchuck and a barred owl; a river-inspired performance by Opera-Matic on fish bicycles; the Chicago River Blue Awards for excellence in river-edge development as well as congratulatory remarks by Governor Pat Quinn.

Honorary Co-Chair Governor Patrick Quinn lauded "I am pleased to once again support and serve as an Honorary Co-Chair for the Big Fish Ball to benefit the continued revitalization of the river. This is a great benefit for Friends of the Chicago River and their tireless efforts to foster, protect, educate and reinvigorate one of our best natural resources. I am pleased to play a part." Christopher Kennedy of the Merchandise Mart joined the Governor as the evening's other Honorary Co-chair.



Illinois Governor Pat Quinn speaks at the 2011 Big Fish Ball.

140 guests then joined Gala Chair, Jackie Loewe, and Board President, Craig Coit, on an after-party river cruise generously provided by Shoreline Sightseeing and featuring a fabulous Boom Entertainment DJ. Guests enjoyed an hour-ride on the gorgeous night-lit downtown stretch of the Chicago River to a fireworks show at Navy Pier.

Friends truly appreciate all the sponsors, ticket and raffle chance buyers as well as the Friends Board of

Directors and Gala Committee who made the event such a success. Sponsors for the evening included Roseworldwide, Aon, Crain's Chicago Business, General Iron, Shoreline Sightseeing, Kirkland & Ellis, Merchandise Mart Properties, Boom Entertainment and Ozinga. Visit the Big Fish Ball page on Friends website to see photos from the evening and to read more about the Big Fish Ball.

# The 2011 Blue Ribbon Awards

Friends congratulates the winners of the 2nd annual Chicago River Blue: Blue Ribbon Awards. Presented at the Big Fish Ball, the Blue Ribbon Awards honor the work of developers, designers, municipalities and others for their creative approaches to river-sensitive design along the Chicago and Calumet rivers and their tributaries. In its second year, the Friends' program recognizes those who strive for the ideal in sustainable design for humans (public access), water (hydrology) and wildlife (ecology). This year, five award recipients were chosen by an independent jury of professionals and community leaders.

In addition to the amazing work being done along the Chicago and Calumet Rivers, improving the health of our waterways requires efforts made beyond the banks. In 2012, Friends will expand Chicago River Blue and the Blue Ribbon Awards to encourage and showcase innovative and sustainable projects throughout the watershed. To learn how you can apply for an award or to support Chicago River Blue, check out our website at [www.chicagoriver.org](http://www.chicagoriver.org).



Blue Ribbon Award winners, Lake Riverdale Sustainable Master Plan. Left to right: Margaret Frisbie; Reggie Greenwood, South Suburban Mayors and Managers Association; Lance Thies, Julie Gilbert, and Joel Baldin of Hitchcock Design Group.

## 2011 Award Recipients

### Blue Ribbon Award:

Lake Riverdale Sustainable Master Plan, Riverdale, Blue Island & Calumet Park, South Suburban Mayors and Managers Association

### Silver Ribbon Award:

Riverbank Restoration, Chicago Riverbank Neighbors

### Green Ribbon Awards:

Loyola Academy Munz Campus: Landfill to Living Laboratory, Wilmette  
Loyola Academy

Harms Woods Wetland and Stream Restoration Project, Glenview  
Friends of the Forest Preserves

Ping Tom Park: North River Edge Development, Chicago  
Chicago Park District

## ...Story continued from page 1

Without changes in traditional development patterns and an effort to protect the remaining green space for water storage, the negative impacts of stormwater runoff are only expected to worsen as the development in the watershed continues and the effects of climate change intensify. It is important to note that protecting and increasing green space in the

community has proven to provide many positive benefits. In addition to providing areas for recreation, green space can be used to manage water quality and flood problems. It is an integral part of the landscape restoration movement, providing habitat for native plants and animals. It also has intangible aesthetic value. Lastly, the benefits of green space directly relate to a community's quality of life.

Environmentally-friendly land development and management practices that deal with rainwater where it lands, rather than putting it in a pipe and rushing it to the river, will prevent watershed degradation by maintaining stream quality, reducing runoff and protecting natural resources as we move into the future. In addition to employing innovative techniques that can prevent future declines, green infrastructure such as permeable paving and bio-swales can be used in large public projects to improve

water quality and reduce flooding. While the Chicago River will probably never be restored to what it once was, opportunities for restoring wetlands, naturalizing the riverbanks, reducing the pollution that flows into the river and reestablishing river and upland habitat abound in the watershed. Recreational land and water trails connect people to the river, making the community a more vibrant place. A healthy river will improve the quality of life for all watershed residents.

Success in restoring the watershed and improving the health of the river will depend on how well the people that live in the Chicago River watershed interact with the river and manage their activities that affect the watershed. Awareness of your watershed and the impacts of stormwater runoff is the first step in changing behavioral patterns to enact positive change for the future of the Chicago River.



Volunteers from HSBC create a rain garden to capture downspout runoff.

# Friends' Interns and Teachers Delve Deep into the Chicago River

In July, two of Friends' interns and quite a few teachers from Chicago and elsewhere gathered to participate in the Rivers Curriculum Workshop. The workshop is taught every July, and is a comprehensive four-day workshop, presented in partnership with the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum and DePaul University's Department of Environmental Science and Studies. The experience is inquiry-based and hands-on. We explored four different river sites, getting muddy and wet as we conducted real-world experiments in river chemistry and biology.

Lauren Bauknecht (pictured in foreground with the nets) and Mariah Slone (on far right) are both college students and interns with Friends of the Chicago River. Lauren goes to North Park University. Her experiences in the workshop will benefit her and her students when she student teaches at Schurz High School this spring. Mariah is a student at DePaul University, majoring in environmental science.



Exploration is the key to understanding a river. Participants get ready to sample macroinvertebrates during the Rivers Curriculum workshop.

## river LIFE

If you've seen a blackbird in Illinois, you've likely seen the red-winged blackbird, a common inhabitant of our local wetlands. They are easily recognized as a black bird with a splash of red on either wing. Substitute a flash of yellow and you've got another local resident, the male yellow-headed blackbird.

They are moderately-sized black birds, brightly colored with white wing-patches and black masks on a golden-yellow head. Females are smaller than males and have brownish-black bodies, no wing-bars, and yellowish-brown heads. Unfortunately, their "song" doesn't match their pretty feathers. Rather than a lovely trill, this blackbird sounds more like a rusty gate swinging in the wind.

The yellow-headed blackbird is resident of marshy areas throughout western North America, particularly in the central prairie regions. Illinois is well within their summer nesting area. They are particularly fond of cattail marshes, especially in large wetlands with open water. Yellow-headed blackbirds migrate south to Mexico every winter.

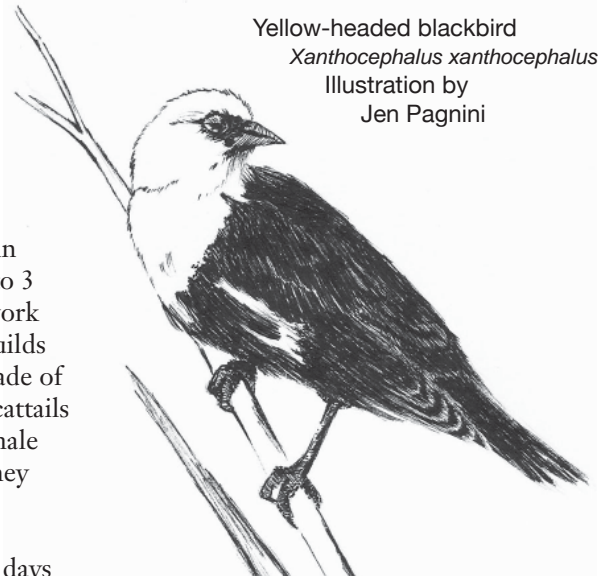
Yellow-headed blackbirds breed in colonies. Each male will have 2 to 3 mates. Females do most of the work raising the chicks. The female builds the nest, which is an open cup made of leaves and grass, and lashes it to cattails growing over the water. The female typically lays 3 to 5 eggs which they incubate for about 12 days.

The young leave the nest 9 to 12 days after hatching, but stay nearby until they can fly. They rely on their mother to feed them for a few days after they fledge. They like eating insects and seeds, which are abundant in their marshy habitat.

The main enemy of the yellow-headed blackbird is the marsh wren (surprisingly, it's a much smaller bird). The wren competes for nesting space and will attack the blackbird's eggs and young. Crows and grackles also raid the nests to feed on the eggs and young.

Yellow-headed blackbirds are common throughout their range. Major threats include agricultural pesticides and loss of habitat.

Yellow-headed blackbird  
*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*  
Illustration by  
Jen Pagnini



### BLACKBIRD FACTS

- A group of blackbirds can be called a "cloud" or "merl" of blackbirds.
- Large flocks of blackbirds move in a rolling fashion (i.e. birds from the back of the flock fly over the rest to the front, and so on, like leapfrog).
- Yellow-headed blackbirds have one of the most unique bird calls. It has been described as a strange mixture of honking, gurgling, and strangling noises; or the grating of a rusty hinge.
- Blackbirds follow behind farm machinery, taking advantage of food churned up by plows and combines.

# 2011 CALENDAR OF EVENTS AND TOURS

## McCORMICK BRIDGEHOUSE & CHICAGO RIVER MUSEUM EVENTS

The McCormick Bridgehouse & Chicago River Museum celebrates Chicago's river and world-famous movable bridges. Visit [www.bridgehousemuseum.org](http://www.bridgehousemuseum.org), or call Ozana Balan King at (312) 939-0490, ext. 23.

*Always Current: "Conversations on the Chicago River" Lunchtime Lectures:*

**Thursday, August 11, 2011, 12 noon**  
**How does TARP/Deep Tunnel work?**

**Thursday, August 25, 2011, 12 noon**  
**Putting a prairie stream to work: The locks and dams of the Chicago River**

**Thursday, September 8, 2011, 12 noon**  
**How do bridge tenders operate Chicago's movable bridges?**

**Thursday, September 22, 2011, 12 noon**  
**How was the Chicago River reversed?**

**Monday, October 31, 2011**  
**Last day of the museum season.**

## FLATWATER CLASSIC PADDLE & PEDAL

**Sunday, September 18, 2011**  
**10 a.m. to 4 p.m.**

Join us at our new location on the scenic and wild North Branch! The course starts at the Willow Road Dam just south of Skokie Lagoons and ends at Linne Woods in Morton Grove. Register today to paddle or pedal at [www.chicagoriver.org/events/flatwater\\_classic/](http://www.chicagoriver.org/events/flatwater_classic/).

We're looking for volunteers to help make this event a complete success! Help out on the safety team, load and unload boats, or assist at the start or finish lines. Contact Cynthia Fox at [cfox@chicagoriver.org](mailto:cfox@chicagoriver.org) if you're interested in volunteering.

## PUBLIC CANOE TRIPS

Friends of the Chicago River offers award-winning guided group tours of several sections of the Chicago River.

Experienced and knowledgeable river guides, paddling skills training, shuttle service (when needed), and equipment (canoes, paddles, personal flotation devices and dry bags) are provided by Friends of the Chicago River. Visit [www.chicagoriver.org/events/urban\\_canoe\\_trips/](http://www.chicagoriver.org/events/urban_canoe_trips/) for more information.

**Saturday, September 24, 2011**  
**9 a.m. to 1 p.m.**

**Downtown Canyons**

**Saturday, October 1, 2011**  
**6 p.m. to 10 p.m.**

**Moonlight on the Skokie Lagoons**

.....YES! I want to help ensure a boundless future for the Chicago River! .....

I'm pleased to make a membership contribution to Friends of the Chicago River in the amount of:

- |                                  |                           |                                |   |
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| <input type="checkbox"/> \$500   | Great Horned Owl          | <input type="checkbox"/> \$30  | White-fringed Orchid / School / Club    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$250   | Yellow-headed Blackbird   | <input type="checkbox"/> \$15  | Purple Coneflower / Teacher / Volunteer |
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$156   | Black-crowned Night Heron | <input type="checkbox"/> \$10  | Prairie Dropseed / Student              |
|                                  |                           | <input type="checkbox"/> Other | \$ _____                                |

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- My check made payable to Friends of the Chicago River is enclosed.
- Charge my credit card (circle one) American Express Discover Mastercard Visa  
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- Please contact me about volunteer opportunities.  
 The best way to reach me is by  Email  Daytime phone  Old-fashioned mail

- Please do NOT add me to your email communications list.

Your contribution is tax deductible as allowed by law. Please send it to Friends of the Chicago River at 28 E. Jackson Blvd., Suite 1800, Chicago, IL 60604-2272 or make your gift online at [www.chicagoriver.org/get\\_involved/](http://www.chicagoriver.org/get_involved/).

For all contributions over \$35, Friends of the Chicago River members receive:

- \* A subscription to Friends' River Reporter newsletter, filled with important information on issues that effect the Chicago River plus a calendar of river-related events;
- \* Volunteer bulletins and other opportunities for hands-on involvement;
- \* Invitations to special events like Chicago River Day and the Big Fish Ball;
- \* Discounts on Friends' canoe trips;
- \* Listing in our Annual Report;

And perhaps most significantly,

- \* The reward of knowing that your membership contribution has a direct impact on improving the Chicago River's health and vitality.

Business members also receive a certificate showing your customers and employees that you care about the environment and the Chicago River.

Donors of \$250 and above are eligible for additional recognition opportunities and more! Those with support of \$1,000 and above for the year are also included on an annual plaque at our McCormick Bridgehouse & Chicago River Museum. Naming opportunities at the Bridgehouse Museum are available as well.

Friends of the Chicago River is a nonprofit, 501(c)(3) organization.

# Friends of the Chicago River



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Permit No. 6269

## BE A FRIEND OF THE CHICAGO RIVER!

### Chicago River Flatwater Classic Paddle & Pedal Come Explore on Saturday, September 18, 2011!

We've moved to the scenic and wild North Branch!  
Join us and hundreds of paddlers, cyclists, spectators, and volunteers as we explore the North Branch of the Chicago River. Paddlers race for the gold in this 6½ mile course downstream – or simply relax and enjoy the wilderness. Bicyclists enjoy a scenic ride down the popular North Branch Bicycle Trail.

To register, and for more information, visit [www.chicagoriver.org/events/flatwater\\_classic/](http://www.chicagoriver.org/events/flatwater_classic/).

All proceeds benefit Friends of the Chicago River.



Photo by Rob Lagorio

