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Chicago River Day: Chicago River Facts

Chicago River Day:

- The first Chicago River Day was held in 1992. About two dozen people gathered at Linne Woods on the North Branch of the Chicago River in Morton Grove.
- More than 60,000 volunteers have worked cleaning trash on Chicago River Day since 1992.
- In 2019, about 2,000 volunteers are expected to work at 70 locations in the city and suburbs across the Chicago River system.
- Participants include individuals, families, clubs and organizations, corporate volunteers, and government officials.
- In a survey of 2018 Chicago River Day volunteers, 57 percent had never participated before. About two percent had participated in 25 or more Chicago River Days. Asked about the various reasons they decided to participate, 79 percent said they wanted to leave the Chicago River system cleaner for future generations and 60 percent said they thought it would be fun, and 19 percent thought it would be a good way to exercise.
- Trash removed over the years includes automobiles, household appliances, shopping carts, tires and other car parts, and bowling balls. Typical items removed include wrappers, plastic bags, disposable packaging and bottles.
- In 2018, Chicago River Day activities were covered by a number of Chicago news outlets, including the Chicago Sun-Times, CBS2, NBC5, ABC7, Fox32, WBBM Newsradio and WGN Radio.

Chicago River System

- 156 miles of shoreline, starting as far north as Park City, near Waukegan.
- In the 1800s, the river was heavily polluted and blamed for outbreaks of cholera, dysentery, and small pox.
- The river was permanently reversed in 1900 by opening the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal.
- Today, the river is far cleaner, helped by wastewater disinfection by the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District at two of its three facilities and continued progress on the Tunnel and Reservoir Plan which includes 109 miles of tunnels and with two out of three planned reservoir complete.

- The Chicago River system is home to mammals such as mink, beavers, coyotes, red fox, river otters, and white-tailed deer. Birds include kingfishers, black crowned night and great blue herons, several species of ducks including many migrants, and osprey. Reptiles include American toads, blue-spotted salamanders, painted turtles and snapping turtles. Over 70 species of fish have been found in the river including bluegill, largemouth bass, channel catfish and pumpkinseed sunfish.
- The city maintains 32 moveable bridges on the Main, North and South branches of the Chicago River. Downtown bridges are open approximately 100 times a year from April through November. Bridge openings take eight to 10 minutes.
- Native Americans, such as the Chippewa, Ottawa, Pottawatomi, and Miami, used the Chicago River and its portage for thousands of years. French traders were active in this region in the late 1600s, canoeing goods along the Chicago waterways.
- The first anti-pollution ordinance was passed in 1833, which declared that no “dung, dead animal carrion, putrid meat, fish entrails or decayed vegetables” could be dumped into the Chicago River. It was largely ignored.
- The Chicago River once turned south at what is now Michigan Avenue and Wacker Drive and emptied into the lake around what is now the Art Institute of Chicago.
- In the early 1900s, annual swimming races were held in the Chicago River, attracting tens of thousands of spectators.



About Friends of the Chicago River

Friends of the Chicago River is an award winning nonprofit organization whose mission is to improve and protect the Chicago River for people, plants and animals. With over 10,000 members, volunteers, and online advocates, Friends works to make the river greener and more accessible, while building awareness of the benefits that a clean, healthy river can bring to the surrounding community. Friends of the Chicago River is working to make the Chicago River one of the world’s great metropolitan rivers. For more information please visit our website www.chicagoriver.org.