Friends at 40: Forty Fantastic Fauna

It would be impossible to include all of the extraordinary animals that inhabit our watershed. They all play a part in the health and vitality of the Chicago River system. Mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, insects, arthropods, mollusks, worms, and sponges are all important. These 40 all live in or near the Chicago River. They all rely on the river and they but barely scratch the surface of the full variety that exists. All animal illustrations by Jen Pagnini.

1. **American eel** (*Anguilla rostrata*)
   Born in the North Atlantic, American eels travel for years to reach their ultimate destinations in freshwater. Adults have a long, cylindrical body with thick skin. Females average 24 to 36 inches in length, while the males are generally smaller. In the Chicago River, eels prey on aquatic invertebrates, amphibians and fish. In turn, predators such as bass, trout, fish-eating birds and mammals eat them.

2. **American mink** (*Neovison vison*)
   A member of the mustelid family (which includes weasels, otters, wolverines, badgers and ferrets), the mink has a two-foot-long body, a long thick tail and brown to black fur covered with oily guard hairs that make it waterproof. Mink are capable of swimming for up to three hours at a time while hunting for fish to eat.

3. **Bald eagle** (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*)
   A large, brown bird of prey with a white head and tail, eagles can spot prey while soaring at great heights. Male bald eagles weigh about 25 percent less than females, which allows pairs to hunt different prey, such as fish, ducks, rabbits, crabs, and amphibians, without competing with each other. Since DDT was banned in 1972, eagle populations have been on the rise.

4. **Barred owl** (*Strix varia*)
   Barred owls are nocturnal and often live in the cavities of dead trees 70 feet up in the air, near rivers. They hoot, emit a cat-like scream, or even a “laughing” sound particularly in February and March during their courting season. They stand about 21 inches tall and prey on mice, snakes and birds using their sharp talons.

5. **Belted kingfisher** (*Megaceryle alcyon*)
   The kingfisher is a medium-sized bird with a bushy crest, blue-gray feathers, and a large bill for spearing fish. Females are more brightly colored than males. These migratory birds nest in horizontal tunnels made in river banks. They can be often seen along straight channels with steep banks covered with trees from which they dive head first into the river to catch fish.

6. **Bivalve mollusk** (*Class Bivalvia*)
   The bivalve mollusks live in the river protected by a shell with two hinged parts. Common bivalves are mussels and clams. Adults vary from fractions of an inch to over eight inches in length. Their gills are used for both breathing and capturing food from the water. They are a favorite food of raccoons and are very sensitive to changes in habitat.

7. **Black-crowned night heron** (*Nycticorax nycticorax*)
   These herons have a distinct black cap of feathers on their head and down their backs. They are 24 to 26 inches tall with a wingspan of two feet. They migrate each year to the Gulf coast for the winter and return north to breed. They can often be found at River Park and along the North Branch hunting for fish. They are endangered due to water pollution and habitat loss, which affect their food supply and reproduction.

8. **Blanding’s turtle** (*Emydoidea blandingii*)
   Endangered in Illinois, the Blanding’s turtle is about the size of a small plate with a bright yellow chin and throat and a dark shell with yellow flecks. Small, ephemeral wetlands are frequently used by Blanding’s turtles in spring and early summer, when these habitats provide basking sites, mating opportunities and food such as aquatic vegetation, insects, frogs and small fish.

9. **Bluegill sunfish** (*Lepomis macrochirus*)
   A member of the sunfish family and native to the Chicago River are often found in underwater vegetation. Round and flat, the bluegill’s back and upper sides are dark olive-green to black, its belly is reddish yellow, and can grow as large as 16 inches long. They are daytime feeders and will eat invertebrates, smaller fish, insect larvae, crayfish, snails, and algae.

10. **Bobcat** (*Lynx rufus*)
    About twice the size of a housecat, bobcats have bobbed tails about six inches long and range in color from gray to brown to red. Though bobcats were long absent from the Chicago...
region, their populations have rebounded after state protections in the late 1970s. There have been confirmed sightings of bobcat in Waterfall Glen Forest Preserve. Their diet consist of rabbits, squirrels, rodents, birds, insects, and even deer.

11. Broad-winged damselfly (Family Calopterygidae)
Damsel flies are common in the Chicago River, especially along the banks and among vegetation. Adult damselflies are about two inches in length. They are usually black, blue or green in color. Like dragonflies, damselflies have broad wings and long, slender, stick-like abdomens. But unlike dragonflies, damselflies fly slowly, more like butterflies. At rest, they hold their wings back and above the body.

12. Caddisfly (Order Trichoptera)
Caddisflies are insects that spend most of their lives in the river as larvae. The larva is distinguished by a dark plate on its back by the head. Free-swimming species have a green body. Several species will construct a "home" out of stones or sticks for protection and camouflage. All species live in the water's current, feeding on smaller animals and/or plant material that they can catch.

13. Channel catfish (Ictalurus punctatus)
During the day channel catfish can be found in deep holes in the riverbed wherever the protection of logs and rocks can be found. Young catfish are olive to light blue in color and feed primarily on aquatic insects such as dragonflies and beetles while adults eat snails, crayfish, and smaller fish. Female catfish produce about 4,000 eggs per pound of body weight. Male catfish will stay to protect the young fish until they are able to fend for themselves.

14. Common garter snake (Thamnophis sirtalis)
Fairly tolerant to cold weather, garter snakes can be seen basking in the sun during warm winter days and are the first snakes to emerge each year and among the last to hibernate. Though not dangerous to humans, they prey on fish, invertebrates, amphibians, and small mammals. Averaging 18 to 26 inches in length, they can both climb and swim.

15. Common snapping turtle (Chelydra serpentina)
Snapping turtles have a large head and a mouth with a hooked beak attached to a very muscular mobile neck. Possessing a stocky body, long claws, a long tail, and shells can be up to 18 inches in length, they typically weigh between 10 and 35 pounds. Snapping turtles "snap" their jaws only when startled or threatened. Females will typically lay 25 to 80 eggs at a time.

16. Cooper's hawk (Accipiter cooperii)
This year-long resident is usually found perched on a branch or flying among the trees along the river. The Cooper's hawk has a long tail which allows it to follow the twists and turns of its prey, usually smaller birds. Rounded wings enable the hawk to generate great bursts of speed, while shorter wings allows it to fly in dense woodlands without crashing into branches.

17. Coyote (Canis latrans)
Quick and sleek, these important urban predators help keep goose, rabbit, and white-tailed deer populations under control. Coyotes are medium-sized members of the dog family with pointed ears, a slender muzzle, usually grayish brown fur, and yellow eyes. The male coyote weighs in between 25 and 35 pounds with females slightly less. Coyotes are excellent hunters with exceptional eye sight, hearing, and senses of smell. Pairs typically mate for life.

18. Dobsonfly (Corydalus cornutus)
The larvae of the dobsonfly live in the river and are about three inches long. It has a brownish, segmented, caterpillar-like body and large jaws. They live in the shallow, fast-flowing portions of the river, hiding beneath rocks and logs, or in clumps of leaves. After nearly four years in the larval stage, they live but two weeks as adults, just enough time to reproduce.

19. Eastern tiger salamander (Ambystoma tigrinum)
A large salamander, the eastern tiger salamander can be up to 13 inches in length. They are brown with yellowish blotches in a tiger-like pattern. They have short snouts, thick legs, and a long tail and spend most of their lives living underground. Adults require seasonally-wet pools to breed. These highly-specialized habitats are great for preventing predators like fish from eating their young, but makes the salamander very susceptible to climate change and habitat loss.

20. Emerald darner dragonfly (Anax junius)
One of the top predators in the Chicago River system, emerald darters are large (up to eight cm in length), with big eyes that can see nearly 360 degrees, thick blue-green bodies and
They have been known to eat frogs, sunfishes, minnows, and bluegills. A variety of smaller fish including shad, striped bass on its side. They prey on a lighter belly and a dark longitudinal ray. Its body is dark green with a separated with a rear fin having 12-13 rays. Its body is dark green with a dark longitudinal stripe on its side. They prey on a variety of smaller fish including shad, sunfishes, minnows, and bluegills. They have been known to eat frogs, reptiles, and even small water birds.

21. Freshwater sponge (Family Spongillidae)
Less dramatic than their saltwater counterparts, freshwater sponges are usually brown, gray, and yellow or sometimes green. Looking deceptively like plants, sponges live attached to objects below the water line such as rocks and plant stems. They flush water in and then out of their tiny pores, feeding on a variety of microscopic life.

22. Great blue heron (Ardea herodias)
The four-foot tall great blue heron stands still for long periods of time in the water while waiting to spear fish. They stride slowly and deliberately, webbed feet keeping them from sinking into the muddy bottom. The great blue heron, the largest heron in North America, nest in noisy colonies called rookeries, usually in the tops of trees on islands or in swamps.

23. Largemouth bass (Micropterus salmoides)
Up to 18 inches long, this native fish has an upper jaw that runs deeper than its eye. The two dorsal fins are separated with a rear fin having 12-13 rays. Its body is dark green with a lighter belly and a dark longitudinal stripe on its side. They prey on a variety of smaller fish including shad, sunfishes, minnows, and bluegills. They have been known to eat frogs, reptiles, and even small water birds.

24. Little brown bat (Myotis lucifugus)
The little brown bat is about three inches long with a wingspan of 10 inches and generally brown, although they can be reddish or golden brown. They can live in colonies of up to 100,000 individuals and during warmer weather, the colonies roost locally in buildings or trees, often the Chicago River where insects are easy to find. Little brown bats fly south to hibernate during the winter months in more protected structures like caves or abandoned mines. They sleep up to 19 hours a day.

25. Meadow vole (Microtus pennsylvanicus)
Meadow voles, otherwise known as field mice, reproduce in great numbers, which feed birds of prey, snakes and mammals such as foxes, coyotes, and weasels. Voles are good swimmers and diggers and use of tunnels and underground chambers for shelter and food storage. They can eat up to 60 percent of their body weight each day, mainly grass, seeds, grains and berries.

26. Monarch butterfly (Danaus plexippus)
Monarch butterflies have colorful orange wings with black veins. Their black wing margins feature two rows of small white spots. Monarchs are foul-tasting to birds because of toxins in their bodies, which they take in while feeding on milkweed as caterpillars. They serve as important pollinators for numerous native plants.

27. Muskrat (Ondatra zibethicus)
This foot-long, semi-aquatic rodent gets its name from secretions produced by paired musk glands at the base of its tail. They have brown, waterproof fur and large, partly webbed hind feet. Muskrats consume cattails, arrowheads, sedges and other aquatic plants. By zig-zagging trails across the marsh they create a maze of channels up to three feet deep which raises oxygen levels in the water and allows larger fish into the area, increasing diversity.

28. North American beaver (Castor canadensis)
Weighing 40 pounds and four feet long, the beaver is one of the biggest mammals found in the Chicago River system. With its large, flat tail and webbed hind feet for swimming, they can remain submerged up to 15 minutes. Their fur consists of dual layers of long, thick outer hairs and short, soft inner hairs and is waterproof. Besides providing a home for the beaver, dammed ponds provide habitat for waterfowl and fish, and reduce soil erosion and the impacts of flooding.

29. Northern green frog (Rana clamitans)
Adult green frogs can range in length from 2½ to 4½ inches. Green frogs can produce as many as six different calls, used to attract each other during mating, to protect their territories or to warn against predators. Green frogs have excellent vision and use this to detect and capture prey such as insects. Frogs absorb water through their skin so they don’t need to drink.

30. Osprey (Pandion haliaetus)
Ospreys nest on elevated platforms above water throughout its range and will swoop and dive to catch fish with their sharp talons, successfully snagging a meal on one out of every four dives. These birds may log more than 160,000 miles a year.
migration miles during their 15- to 20-year lifetime. They are 21 to 24 inches in length with black or dark brown feathers above, a white belly and distinctive facial markings.

31. Red fox (Vulpes vulpes)
With yellow eyes, bright orange fur, black feet, and a bushy tail with the little white tip, red foxes average between three and four feet long and weigh only eight to 15 pounds. Although rabbits and rodents are their preferred diet, red foxes are omnivorous and will eat most anything including insects, plants and even carcasses. They will bury unfinished food and mark it with urine with the intent of eating it later.

32. Red-winged blackbird (Agelaius phoeniceus)
The red-winged blackbird gets its common name from its brilliant red shoulder patches but only the males sport this dramatic plumage. Females are inconspicuous with brown and light colored striped feathers. Females can produce up to three broods per season, each clutch containing three to four light green mottled eggs which hatch after 11 to 13 days.

33. River otter (Lontra canadensis)
River otters are usually three-to-four feet long and weigh about 20 pounds. Their waterproof coat of dense soft fur and sleek body shape helps them zip through the water, propelled by a thick, muscular tail and webbed feet. Near-sighted above water, they have excellent underwater vision and their stiff whiskers, sensitive to water turbulence, are used to hunt for prey. On land, they can run at speeds up to 18 miles per hour.

34. Ruby meadowhawk dragonfly (Sympetrum rubicundulum)
As larvae, the ruby meadowhawk dragonfly have huge jaws and are voracious predators, eating aquatic insects, zooplankton, amphipods, and other smaller creatures, even the occasional small fish. As adults, they are about one and a half inches in length. Adult females have a yellow-brown appearance, while males have bright red markings. They prefer temporary ponds and marshes as their habitat.

35. Sandhill crane (Antigone canadensis)
Though they weigh about 10 pounds, the sandhill crane can travel at 45 mph flying several thousand feet above the ground. With an 80-inch wingspan, they ride thermal winds for hours, requiring only an occasional flapping to stay aloft. Marked by red foreheads, white cheeks, and long, dark, pointed bills, they survive on fish, insects, small reptiles and amphibians. Migrating cranes traverse the city and follow the Chicago River system and the western edge of Lake Michigan.

36. Scarlet tanager (Piranga olivacea)
The colorful male scarlet tanager has a dark-red body set off by jet-black wings and tail while females are a yellowish-green. In the fall, the males’ feathers become yellow-green as well. These migratory birds are mainly insect eaters, but do also consume fruits, seeds, ants, butterflies and beetles. These migratory birds sometimes hover to catch bees and wasps in mid-flight.

37. Virginia opossum (Didelphis virginiana)
The Virginia opossum is the only marsupial (pouched mammal) found in the United States. Their 50 teeth are designed to eat just about anything. When threatened, they lay very still, legs and tail rigid, mouth open, and their breathing becomes almost undetectable. They are excellent groomers and consume 95 percent of the ticks that attempt to feed on them, helping to limit the spread of Lyme disease.

38. Virile crayfish (Orconectes virilis)
The virile crayfish, also known as the northern crayfish, have brown to reddish brown bodies and are 10-12 cm long. They use their many legs to ward off predators including fish, herons, minks and turtles. To escape, they will tuck their legs under their body and shoot through the water backwards like a rocket.

39. Yellow-headed blackbird (Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus)
Male yellow-headed blackbirds are brightly colored with white wing-patches and black masks on a golden-yellow head. Females have brownish-black bodies, no wing-bars, and yellowish-brown heads. They migrate south to Mexico in winter. Their calls have been compared to the sound of a rusty door hinge.

40. Yellow perch (Perca flavescens)
Yellow perch are green and gold colored and have up to eight dark stripes on their sides and a paler belly. They live in a variety of habitats and are common to the Chicago River, although they are primarily lake fish. Yellow perch feed on zooplankton, insects, crayfish, snails, aquatic insects, fish eggs, and other small fish.