American eel
*Anguilla rostrata*

The American eel is an enigmatic creature that is born in the North Atlantic in the Sargasso Sea and travels for years to reach their ultimate destinations in freshwater habitats from Canada to South America including the Great Lakes and sometimes the Chicago River.

Ever-present, but rarely seen, American eels can spend as much as 20 years within a watershed; ascending rivers, crossing lakes and pushing toward headwaters; eventually returning to the ocean to spawn. Once they do, it is assumed that adult eels die, but these events have never been witnessed in the wild.

The only freshwater eel found in North America, adult American eels have a long, cylindrical body with a single continuous fin running from the dorsal side to the pelvic area. Eels have thick skin colored olive to brown above, yellowish on the sides and lighter below. Females average 24 to 36 inches in length, while the males are smaller.

In their freshwater homes, eels prey on aquatic invertebrates, amphibians and fish. In turn, predators such as bass, trout, fish-eating birds and mammals eat them. Sadly, many eels are also caught by humans and used as bait for fishing or are themselves eaten. There is a large demand for eels in America, Europe, and Asia.

The Great Lakes population of American eels has declined more than 90% over the last 50 years or more, generally due to habitat loss, dams, and overfishing. Harvest quotas and mechanisms restoring fish passage, like dam removal, a priority of Friends, have helped boost their population. So keep an eye open for the elusive eel. As water quality in the Chicago River improves, we hope to see more and more of them.