

A greenway system reimagines the role of landscapes in a metropolitan region.

Greenways in the greater Chicago metropolitan area

A Network of Living Land and Water

GREENWAYS WERE ONCE CONSIDERED a luxury in many communities across the greater Chicago region. But through advocacy, planning, and protection efforts, these multijurisdictional connectors of people and habitats are now considered essential infrastructure. A relatively linear parcel of land or water preserved for recreation and conservation, greenways are often our portals to nature—they store carbon, absorb stormwater, and restore biodiversity by connecting habitats. Greenways also create linkages within and between communities, effectively serving a transportation function by connecting residents to schools, shopping, and public transportation. They also bolster local economies with their attractiveness and versatility for both passive and active recreation.

Greenways come in many shapes and sizes—from natural settings along waterways such as the Des Plaines River Trail to rails-to-trails conversions like Old Plank Road Trail that connects Cook and Will counties. Waterways such as rivers, creeks, and headwater streams are natural greenways and provide vital corridors for wildlife, and, when navigable, people. Whether 2-miles long or 500, greenways provide critical pathways to connect people to one another and to nature. And Openlands is leading the way in “connecting the web of green and blue” for our region.

Greenways have been central to the Openlands mission since its founding, beginning with the protection of The Illinois Prairie Path in 1964. Since then, Openlands has led the trails movement, becoming one of the first conservation agencies in the nation to advocate for a metropolitan-scale greenway. In 1991 and 1992, Openlands outlined

the concepts for a regional greenways system in two landmark plans: *21st Century Open Space Plan* and *Northeastern Illinois Regional Greenway Plan*. Our policy and planning initiatives, land acquisition efforts, restoration projects, and advocacy have led to the protection of many iconic greenways in the region. In 1973, Openlands and its partners successfully advocated for the passage of the Lakefront Protection Ordinance in Chicago, which thousands of urbanites use daily. In 1997, Openlands celebrated the transfer of the 22-mile Old Plank Road Trail (in southern Cook and Will counties) after more than 10 years of negotiations with Conrail, in coordination with multiple government agencies and supporters. And through the O’Hare Modernization Mitigation Project, which celebrated completion just last year, Openlands partnered with the Will County Forest Preserves District to de-channelize Spring Creek within Hadley Valley Forest Preserve, the largest restoration effort in the District’s history.

With over 70% of the global population projected to live in metropolitan areas by 2050, it is more important than ever to protect the greenways we already enjoy and make new greenway connections to create a single cohesive network in the Chicago metropolitan region. The Federal Highway Administration’s NextGen National Household Travel Survey reports that 76% of passenger trips in 2022 were less than 10 miles in length and households making less than \$50,000 a year travelled almost half as many miles as those in higher income brackets. While trail developments can be complex, long-term endeavors, connecting existing networks is essential to creating more accessible transportation options and inclusive economic growth for all residents.

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning reported that as of 2024, over 47% of the greenways and trails in the ON TO 2050 regional comprehensive plan have been completed. Together with advocates, trail users, government agencies, and conservation and community organizations, Openlands is looking toward the next 60 years of trail building; connecting the web of green and blue for our region!

Visit [Openlands.org/greenways](https://openlands.org/greenways) to view the trails and reports mentioned in this article.



OPENLANDS, TRAILS, AND A BIRD'S-EYE PERSPECTIVE

The greater Chicago metropolitan area is a national leader in both urban planning and citizen participation. From the designs of Olmstead, which proposed an expansive system of parks connected by drives, to the Burnham Plan's vision for a cohesive system of forest preserves at the urban edge and an unencumbered lakefront in the city, our region was primed to include green corridor linkages during its growth. State and local governments, especially the forest preserve districts, expanded their efforts to protect and acquire open space corridors throughout the 20th century. The City of Chicago became nationally known for protecting the Lake Michigan lakefront and expanding lakefront parks.

In the 1970s and 1980s, open space protection initiatives evolved to include floodplain protection and buffer areas to help shape and guide future urban growth. During the same time, Openlands and various regional governmental entities started to reimagine non-motorized transportation options and invest in a system of trails. Many local governments, such as the Forest Preserves of Cook County, were responding to growing public demand for cycling infrastructure and multi-purpose trails. This work built upon Openlands' existing expertise in trails as Openlands helped to create the Illinois Prairie Path, the nation's first rails-to-trails conversion and an exceptional trail system that winds through the western Chicago Suburbs.

The popularity of the Illinois Prairie Path, the Lake Michigan Lakefront Trail, and trail developments along the Fox and Des Plaines Rivers highlighted the need to coordinate interconnected trails that crossed many different municipal borders. Openlands was a key convener to coordinate efforts to protect, fund, connect, and build continuous trail systems resulting in the bi-state Wolf Lake Trails that straddles Illinois and Indiana in the Calumet region, the 500-miles of the Grand Illinois Trail that spans the northern part of the state, and representing Illinois in the 4,673-mile coast-to-coast American Discovery Trail.

GROWING GREENWAYS THROUGH WATERWAYS AND WATER TRAILS

In 1997, Openlands and partners updated the *Northwestern Illinois Regional Greenways and Trails Plan*, an expansion to the 1992 plan. This update included approximately 3,000 miles of stream-based greenways and 200 miles of trails, with around 500 miles already completed. The new plan expanded the notion of greenways to include waterways as essential corridors for protection. It proposed a water trail system on ten major rivers and the Lake Michigan shoreline. It also put new emphasis on creeks and headwater streams, which

are vitally important to protect but often lack recreational value. During this period, the growing popularity of trail use, the need for habitat connectivity between large forest preserves, and strategies for stormwater and water quality management related to rivers and tributaries converged.

Openlands co-wrote the *Northeastern Illinois Regional Water Trails Plan* with the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission (NIPC) and the Chicago Paddling Council, which was adopted in 1999. This plan focused on expanding paddling opportunities and public access to waterways. Increased public access fostered a deeper understanding of the various impacts on our aquatic resources and bolstered advocacy for restoring their ecological quality.

Conservation efforts had traditionally focused on terrestrial habitats like prairies, woodlands, and savannas. However, Openlands and other conservation organizations began to recognize the value of high-quality headwater streams, meaning areas where streams begin, and the need to include comprehensive watersheds, which are the land areas that channel water to rivers, lakes and oceans, in land preservation efforts. During the 2000s, Openlands initiated a multi-year project to identify headwater streams, aquatic habitats, and species found within. In 2017, Openlands published *Headwater Streams of the Chicago Wilderness Region: Status and Recommendations*.

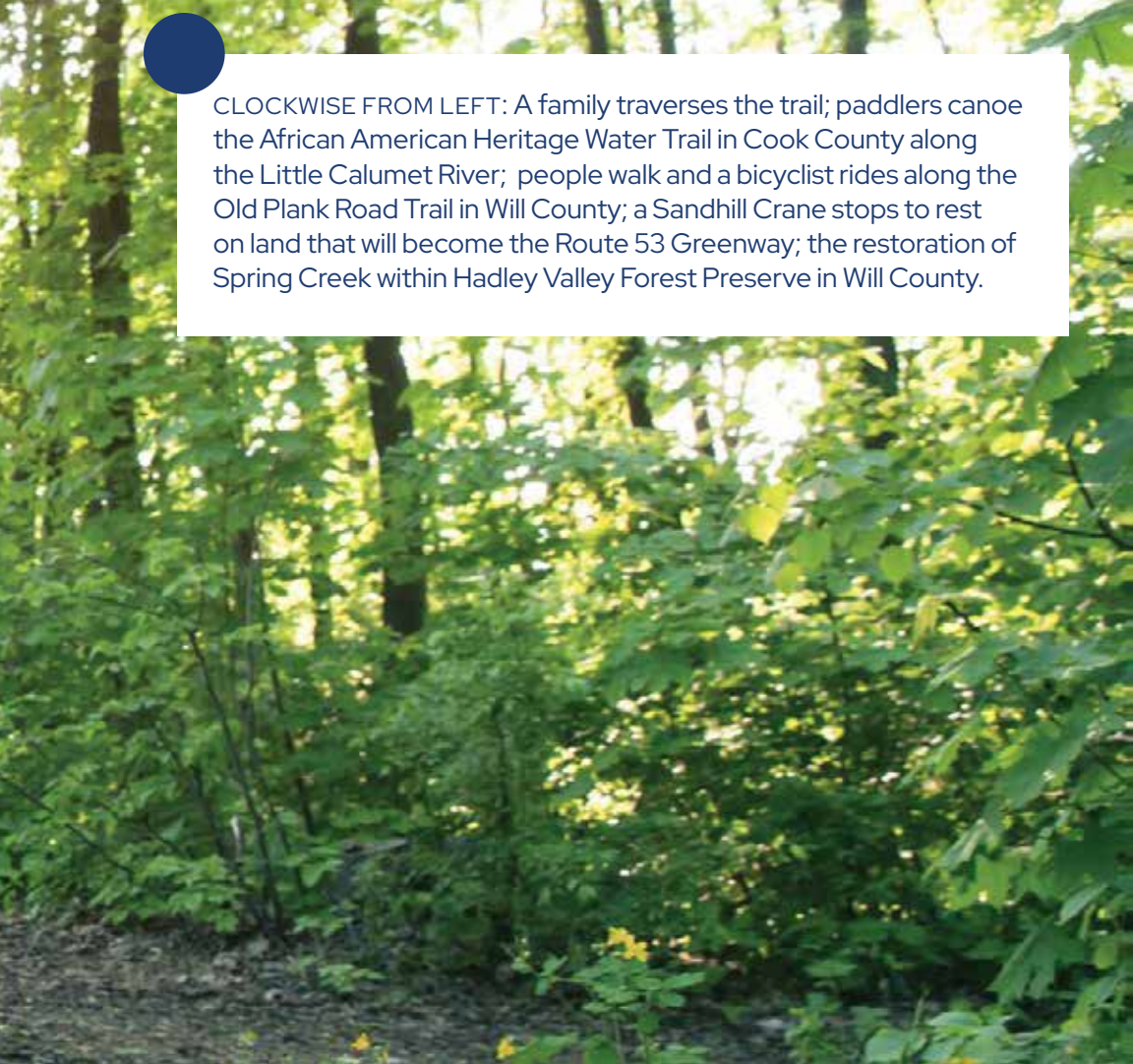
This report highlighted the importance of headwater streams to the integrity of larger-order stream and river systems. It offered comprehensive recommendations for integrating headwater streams into regional conservation efforts and mapped stream systems along with biological inventories. This work was based on foundations laid by researchers and natural resource agencies nationwide, with important regional information from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, the Illinois Natural History Survey, the Indiana Department of Natural Resources, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, and many others. Organizations have since used this information to allocate additional support for protecting aquatic resources.

REGIONAL COLLABORATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Regional collaborations are essential to the past and future success of greenways in the greater Chicago metropolitan area, ensuring open spaces, trails, and waterways are connected and accessible to all communities. Greenways create vital connections between people, nature, and place. Openlands plays a pivotal role in these efforts through active involvement in various alliances and projects, demonstrating that strong partnerships are key to driving change.

Greenways create vital connections between people, nature, and place.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: A family traverses the trail; paddlers canoe the African American Heritage Water Trail in Cook County along the Little Calumet River; people walk and a bicyclist rides along the Old Plank Road Trail in Will County; a Sandhill Crane stops to rest on land that will become the Route 53 Greenway; the restoration of Spring Creek within Hadley Valley Forest Preserve in Will County.



One significant collaboration is Openlands’ membership in the Greater Chicago Watershed Alliance. The Alliance, initiated by the Friends of the Chicago River, aims to expand watershed-based stormwater management using nature. Through this partnership, Openlands shares knowledge, resources, and strategies to guide investments in ecological, community, and economic health along the 156-mile Chicago-Calumet River system.

In 2020, Openlands and partners—including The Little Calumet River Underground Railroad Project, Robbins History Museum, The Village of Robbins, We Keep You Rollin’ Bike & Wellness Group, Golden Gate Homeowners Association, People for Community Recovery, FRESH, The Forest Preserves of Cook County, The Field Museum, and The Metropolitan Planning Council—debuted the African American Heritage Water Trail. This trail showcases significant Black history sites along seven miles of the Little Calumet River and Cal-Sag Channel, highlighting the underground railroad, Tuskegee Airmen, Major Taylor, and the birthplace of the environmental justice movement. Part of the nationally significant Calumet Heritage Area, the trail emphasizes the interconnectedness of greenways and history. By inspiring greater investment in both ecological and cultural heritage, the African American Heritage Water Trail exemplifies Openlands’ commitment to connecting people to nature where they live.

Over decades of advocacy and coalition building through groups like the Green Corridor Coalition, Openlands and partners have successfully stopped the Route 53 Tollway Extension project in Lake County and proposed an alternative land use plan. With crucial support from Governor JB Pritzker and members of Lake County’s legislative delegation, lawmakers approved a Fiscal Year 2025 state budget allocating \$1 million to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources to prepare a master land use plan to convert the proposed site of the defunct extension into a greenway. Roughly the width of a six-lane highway, this 12-mile asset would effectively function as a park, habitat refuge, and alternative transportation system for Long Grove, Hawthorn Woods, Mundelein, and Grayslake. The proposed greenway features over 1,000 acres of flourishing meadows, creeks, ponds, and wildlife sanctuaries. This vision aims to connect more families to nature and recreational opportunities while providing ecosystem services and economic development benefits to the region.

Regional collaborations are vital to the future of greenways in the greater Chicago metropolitan area. Through strategic partnerships, community-driven projects, and persistent advocacy, Openlands continues to lead the way in creating a connected and sustainable greenway network. These efforts enhance the region’s ecological health, foster community engagement and cultural appreciation, and pave the way for a more vibrant and resilient metropolitan area.

(Above right) Tamarack Farms—The Conservation Fund



Tamarack Farms exemplifies accelerated conservation at scale.



Nature for All Campaign Fuels New Era of Conservation

OPENLANDS IS THRILLED TO ANNOUNCE the successful conclusion of the Nature for All campaign on Earth Day, 2024. Over 60 years ago, Openlands was founded in response to a national call for more open space in urban areas. Today, we face significant challenges, including poor land use decisions that erode habitats and biodiversity, urban disinvestment that prevents large swathes of our region from experiencing nature, and a rapidly warming climate that brings huge uncertainty to the land.

The Nature for All campaign was Openlands’ response to these accelerating challenges that require a bold, accelerated pace and scale of conservation. The Nature for All campaign focused on three critical areas: Conserving Land for All, Expanding Access for All, and Accelerating Impact for All. Thanks to your overwhelming support, we have two major updates to share from the campaign.

In March 2024, Openlands, along with partners from The Conservation Fund and Illinois Audubon Society, acquired nearly 1,000 acres of land with the purchase of Tamarack Farms in Richmond, Illinois, for Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge. The acquisition accounts for approximately 10% of the Refuge’s footprint and is the largest regional conservation acquisition in 28 years. This achievement, made possible by your support, exemplifies accelerated conservation at scale, connecting several existing conservation areas to create a continuous 5,600-acre site—the third largest in the six-county metro region behind Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie and the Palos Preserves of the Forest Preserves of Cook County.

As part of the Nature for All campaign, The Negaunee Foundation contributed \$3 million to launch The Negaunee Opportunity Fund. This Fund will support Openlands’ land acquisition transactions across the region, including ongoing efforts at Hackmatack. We are grateful to The Negaunee Foundation for their trust in Openlands’ ability to form dynamic partnerships and implement our strategic vision to ensure the continued vibrancy and vitality of the region.

This campaign’s success would not have been possible without the steadfast leadership of our campaign co-chairs, Dean Fischer and Judith Stockdale, and the members of the Campaign Steering Committee. A big thank you to all our donors who believed that together, we can make a lasting impact for now and for generations to come.

Stay engaged with our mission at Openlands.org/support.



2024 Openlands Annual Luncheon

OPENLANDS IS EXCITED TO ANNOUNCE the 2024 Annual Luncheon will take place on Thursday, October 17, at Hilton Chicago. Co-chaired by esteemed civic leaders Gloria Castillo and Steve Koch, this annual event unites individuals, corporate partners, and community leaders who are dedicated to preserving and protecting nature in the greater Chicago metropolitan area. At the heart of this year’s luncheon is a collective commitment to “Conserving Nature for Life,” Openlands’ perennial tagline and guiding star.

Openlands welcomed nearly 1,000 attendees to the 2023 luncheon to celebrate the organization’s 60th anniversary. This year, attendees will hear from Openlands’ new President and CEO, Michael Davidson, and honor Arnold L. Randall, Executive Director of the Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation, with the 2024 Gerald W. Adelman Conservation Leadership Award. This award, renamed in honor of Openlands’ immediate past President and CEO Gerald W. Adelman, acknowledges significant contributions to the environment. We are proud to welcome Dr. J. Drew Lanham, a renowned author, professor, and wildlife ecologist at Clemson University as our keynote speaker.

The 2024 Openlands Annual Luncheon offers new sponsorship opportunities to increase exposure and support conservation efforts.

To learn more about ticketing and sponsorships, please visit Openlands.org/AL2024.



2024 GERALD W. ADELMANN
CONSERVATION LEADERSHIP AWARD
RECIPIENT, ARNOLD L. RANDALL



2024 KEYNOTE SPEAKER,
DR. J. DREW LANHAM



Welcome New Openlands Board Member

DOUG VOIGT is a Partner at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM) and leader of the firm’s Urban Design and Planning Practice.

What brought you to Openlands?

As planner, I have always admired Openlands’ leadership and pioneering work in our region and beyond. The organization’s energy and enthusiasm are truly inspiring, and I look forward to supporting their efforts to achieve balance between the built and natural environments that connects us all.

Where is your favorite place to get outside?

We are fortunate to have diverse landscapes in our region—serene and picturesque areas that span from expansive prairies to interconnected forest preserves and waterways. Our family spends a lot of time at the Chicago Botanic Garden and the Fort Sheridan Forest Preserve.

OPENLANDS GRATEFULLY ACKNOWLEDGES THE FOLLOWING LEAD SUPPORT:



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Illinois Watertrail Keeper
Michael Taylor kayaks the
Little Calumet River in Chicago.



Paddle sports, including canoeing and kayaking, offer exciting ways to get outside and explore nature from a different vantage point. These water activities also provide many benefits to physical and mental well-being. While there are options for different paddling abilities, all paddlers should be aware that water conditions can change rapidly, requiring vigilance and preparedness. Beyond recreation, paddling serves as a form of advocacy and environmental stewardship, allowing enthusiasts to promote clean waterways and protect natural habitats. By participating in paddle sports, you can enjoy the beauty of nature while contributing to its preservation.

CALUMET AREA WATER TRAILS

CHICAGO RIVER WATER TRAILS

DES PLAINES RIVER WATER TRAILS

DuPAGE RIVER WATER TRAILS

FOX RIVER WATER TRAILS

Check out Openlands' interactive water trails website to view trip lengths, difficulty levels, launch points, dams, and downloadable maps:

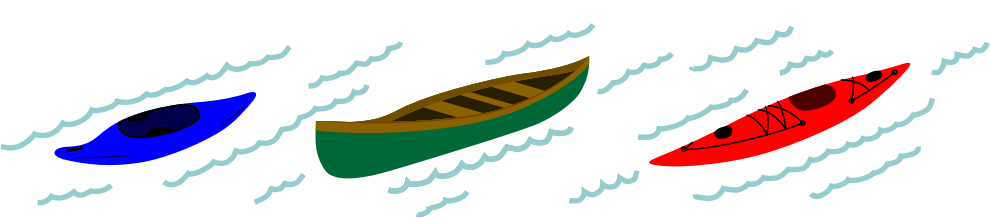
→ → →
ARROWS INDICATE
DIRECTION OF FLOW

Salt Creek flows through lovely wooded sections of forest preserves in DuPage and Cook Counties, offering a variety of experiences. Paddlers can also enjoy Busse Lake at Ned Brown Forest Preserve, located at the northern end of the trail in Busse Woods.



openlands
conserving nature for life

Openlands’ Guide to Paddling



GETTING STARTED

To embark on your paddling adventure, gather essential gear: a suitable canoe or kayak, a paddle, and a personal flotation device (PFD). Many outfitters offer rental options for those who are not ready to invest in their own gear. Dress appropriately for the weather in quick-drying, non-cotton clothing and layer accordingly. Bring a refillable water bottle for hydration, and protect yourself from the elements and bugs with a hat, sunscreen, UV protective clothing, and insect repellent. Safeguard personal items in a dry bag, and carry a whistle for signaling along with a compass for orientation. Always check the weather before departure to ensure a safe and enjoyable experience. **Visit [Openlands.org/rentals](https://openlands.org/rentals) for a listing of regional paddling outfitters.**

TIPS FOR BEGINNERS

For beginner paddlers, starting out with a guided experience is highly recommended. Guides provide invaluable knowledge about the local waterways, ensure safety, and offer instruction on paddling techniques. Paddling with a guide can help build confidence and skills, making the experience more enjoyable and less daunting. Beginners may benefit from boats like large canoes, offering stability and easing the learning curve in steering and paddling with guided assistance. Openlands’ partner, Wilderness Inquiry, uses 10-person canoes as floating classrooms for instruction. Another partner, Chicago Adventure Therapy, offers land-based training to acquaint first-timers with techniques and PFDs before hitting the water. **Discover and register for Openlands’ guided paddling events at [Openlands.org/events](https://openlands.org/events).**

HAZARDS ON THE WATER

Navigating water hazards demands awareness and caution. Dams and swift currents may pose significant risks. It’s important to identify and avoid marked and unmarked dams. Never paddle during floods or after heavy rains when conditions are unpredictable. Watch for strainers such as downed trees that can trap boats, and master boat control to maneuver safely. Share trip plans with others for added security, and always portage around dangerous areas to ensure a safe journey. Consider advancing your skills with specialized clinic on water safety, navigation, and whitewater paddling.

COMBINING PADDLING WITH OTHER ACTIVITIES

Paddling seamlessly integrates with diverse recreational activities such as birdwatching, nature photography, and fishing. Plan multiday paddling trips by incorporating camping or hiking. Participate in regional river cleanup events to contribute to environmental stewardship. Remember to adhere to leave no trace principles to minimize environmental impact. Enjoy your water adventures responsibly, ensuring our waterways remain pristine for the future.

ACTION ALERT

Since its inception, Openlands has actively pushed for policy reforms at all levels of government to clean up rivers, safeguard shorelines, and ensure public access to nature. Illinois boasts some of the Midwest’s most stunning and accessible waterways, yet our right to responsibly enjoy them is under threat. Regulation of public waterways occurs through a combination of federal and state laws that have been widely misunderstood. As a result, unfair public access restrictions have been imposed that adversely affect individuals and businesses alike.

In 2023 and 2024, legislation was introduced to clarify that people may enjoy outdoor recreation in Illinois public waters that are “navigable” under federal law as defined by the U.S. Supreme Court, and/or that are “Public Waters” as defined by the Illinois Rivers, Lakes, and Streams Act. The bill also protects landowners by imposing a standard of responsibility on public users to avoid littering and nuisance activities. While HB 4708 did not advance in the Illinois General Assembly this year, your advocacy remains crucial. Join Openlands in urging state lawmakers to support fair waterway access for all Illinoisans.

Contact your elected officials and engage in advocacy at [Openlands.org/actnow](https://openlands.org/actnow).

PADDLE TRAIL DISCLAIMER

Please always keep in mind that rivers and lakes are dynamic features and will vary over time. Conditions can change quickly. Paddling may have inherent risks and hazardous conditions can occur anywhere along the trails. You are solely responsible for your own safety.

The content of this page is provided as an information service only and does not represent a warranty of the condition or navigability of any paddle trail or associated facilities or amenities. Openlands is not responsible or liable for the condition or navigability of the water trails. The water trails on this site are not patrolled, inspected, or managed for passage. You are solely responsible for your personal safety and following all laws and regulations. You should only paddle trails that are appropriate to your skills. Do not paddle when water levels are too low to allow for passage or when water levels are high, currents are fast and/or rivers and streams are in flood stage; if in doubt, do not go on the water.

Do not trespass on private property. Access waterways and land your boat only at public access points or with the permission of the landowner. Any questions about public access to a waterway should be directed to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) (217-782-6302). See the action alert above to protect the right to recreate on streams and rivers in Illinois.



Check out
Openlands’
interactive
water trails
website to view
trip lengths,
difficulty levels,
launch points,
dams, and
downloadable
maps:

[Openlands.org/watertrails](https://openlands.org/watertrails)

