

# Chicago River

## Northeast Illinois

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**Facts:** The Chicago River Water Trail is a long, diverse waterway that begins in northern Lake County and flows into the Sanitary and Shipping canal near Joliet. Several portions offer safe and beautiful paddling opportunities including hidden gems in the City of Chicago.

**Pollution:** Decades of cleanup and pollution control have now made the river safe for swimming and Chicago River swim events were held in September 2025 so if you happened to tip over while on the water you are safe. Additionally, there are groups like the Friends of the Chicago River which do routine monitoring and hold cleanup days to keep the river free of garbage.

Illinois has issued advisories regarding eating fish from the river due to PCB and mercury contamination, including a "do not eat" advisory for carp more than 12 inches long.

**Fish and Wildlife:** The Chicago River hosts a surprisingly diverse ecosystem, with common sightings including mallard ducks, Canada geese, a variety of heron (great blue, green, night), and ring-billed gulls. You may also see muskrats, American beaver, snapping turtles, coyotes, and fish like bass or carp, particularly around the Wild Mile floating eco-park and calmer bank areas.

**Landscape:** You will see a variety of landscapes from natural waterways full of birds and wildlife to heavy industrial areas with motor boat and barge traffic. Along the way you'll pass beautiful residential neighborhoods, gardens, artwork, parks, the Chicago Riverwalk, Downtown Chicago and Chinatown.

### Information:

#### **North Branch from source to River Park in Chicago (not paddleable):**

With the exception of the Skokie Lagoons this section of the river is generally too narrow and shallow to paddle until you reach River Park.

#### **Wild Mile Chicago floating eco-park (at REI Chicago on the North Branch):**

Wild Mile Chicago located at the REI Chicago launch. The Wild Mile, the flagship project of [Urban Rivers](#), takes a wildlife-first approach to public greenspace. Combining ADA-accessible boardwalks with floating artificial habitats, the Wild Mile remains open to the public 24-7 and is used as a space for recreation, education, research, community gatherings, and more.

The habitats mimic a natural wetland ecosystem - one that might have been found in the Chicagoland area long before the city was developed. They are pontoon-based, made of environmentally friendly materials, and built to last. Populated by wetland species native to Illinois, the gardens allow plant roots to grow through the physical framework, directly into the river.

#### **North Shore Channel and North Branch (River Park area to Wolf Point):**

- Beginner friendly
- Minimal boat traffic
- Ample launches and beautiful nature scenery

The North Shore Channel runs southwest starting at the Wilmette Pumping Station, where sluice gates are generally used to provide for consistent water levels and help with flood control. It meets the North Branch at River Park.

The North Branch continues south from River Park through residential neighborhoods to Belmont Avenue where it turns to a mix of residential, retail and industrial until it reaches the industrial area known as the Clybourn Corridor. At the North Avenue bridge, it divides to form Goose Island. From there it continues to Wolf Point where it joins the Main Stem.

#### **Main Stem (Lake Michigan to Wolf Point):**

- Suitable for experienced paddlers and groups
- Heavy motor boat traffic and few launches

The Main Stem runs 1.5 miles east starting at sluice gates at the Chicago River Controlling Works to meet the main river at Wolf point. It runs along Wacker Avenue and the Riverwalk.

You will encounter heavy motor boat traffic including large tour boats. There are high walls and minimal launch points so this section is suitable for experienced paddlers or groups with experienced paddler support.

#### **South Branch (Wolf Point to Ping Tom Park):**

- Suitable for experience paddlers and groups
- Heavy boat and barge traffic with few launches

The South Branch starts at Wolf Point at the confluence of the Main Stem and the North Branch and runs south through Downtown, past the rail yards and on to Ping Tom Park in Chinatown.

You will encounter heavy motor boat traffic including large tour boats and barges. There are high walls and minimal launch points so this section is suitable for experienced paddlers or groups with experienced paddler support.

#### **South Branch (South of Ping Tom Park):**

- Suitable for experience paddlers and groups
- Heavy boat and barge traffic with few launches

From Ping Tom Park the river turns southwest at Ashland Avenue, widens to form the U.S. Turning Basin and the start of the Illinois and Michigan canal. It's joined by the South Fork of the South Branch (Bubbly Creek) and continues until it enters the Chicago Sanitary and Shipping Canal at Damen.

You will encounter heavy motor boat traffic including large tour boats and barges. There are high walls and minimal launch points so this section is suitable for experienced paddlers or groups with experienced paddler support.

#### **Reference:**

Openlands including a waterway access map and trip itineraries

<https://openlands.org/waterway/chicago-river-water-trails/>

Friends of the Chicago River

<https://www.chicagoriver.org>

## Chicago River Water Trail Safe Paddling Guide

[https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/depts/cdot/supp\\_info/chicago\\_river\\_watertrailsafepaddlingguide.html](https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/depts/cdot/supp_info/chicago_river_watertrailsafepaddlingguide.html)

Chicago waterway trail map includes traffic zones and access points

<https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/depts/cdot/bridge/general/ChicagoRiverWaterTrailMap.pdf>

Wild Mile Chicago the World's First Ever Floating Eco-Park

<https://wildmile.org/>

# CHICAGO RIVER WATER TRAIL MAP



PREPARED BY: SASAKI ASSOCIATES, INC.  
\*PARKING IS A HIGH CAPACITY REDUCED SUSTAINABILITY RIVER-BASED OPENING.

CITY OF CHICAGO  
CHICAGO DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION  
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