

Sangamon River

East Central Illinois

Facts: The Sangamon River is 246 miles long, beginning in rural McLean County farmland ending at the confluence of the Illinois River near Beardstown, IL. The Sangamon River begins as a non-paddleable farmland drainage ditch in rural McLean County. It flows through Saybrook, around Fisher, through Mahomet, Monticello, Decatur, Springfield, Petersburg and meets the Illinois River at Beardstown.

Fish and Wildlife: Smallmouth Bass, Largemouth Bass, Walleye, Catfish, Bluegill, Crappie, Northern Pike, Muskie (released from stocking operations at Lake of the Woods Forest Preserve), and Alligator Gar. Very large Asian Carp are common in the lower parts of the river and often “attack” canoeists and other boaters.

Eagles, Great Blue Herons, Mallards, Canadian Geese, Wood Ducks, turkey Vultures, Turkeys, Kingfishers, Great Horned and Barred owls are common. Also, deer, foxes, beaver, mink, muskrats, otter, woodchucks (ground hogs). Snapping Turtles, Redear Turtles and Softshell Turtles are common. Many varieties of rare mussels are found in the upper reaches of the Sangamon River.

Landscape: Mostly forest and farmland. The Sangamon is dammed at Decatur to form Lake Decatur. Motor craft are very common on Lake Decatur on weekends. The river is heavily channelized south of Decatur to near Springfield and south of Petersburg to its confluence. Extensive wetlands near confluence with the Illinois River at the Sanganois Wildlife Area.

Information: The Upper Sangamon River can be accessed at several locations in the Champaign County area (mapped in detail at sangamonriver.org). There are also access points in Monticello, at Lake Decatur and further downriver near Decatur. There are few public access points between Decatur and Springfield with a good public access at Riverton just east of Springfield and several access points in Springfield through Petersburg.

The Sangamon has been designated the “Lincoln Heritage Water Trail” between Decatur and Petersburg. President Abraham Lincoln paddled the Sangamon along this route in 1831 before taking a flatboat from Petersburg further down the Sangamon and on to New Orleans. Lincoln also helped to pilot the steamboat “Talisman” up the Sangamon River to Springfield a few years later – an attempt that proved so challenging that it was never repeated.

Don't miss a visit to Lincoln's New Salem State Historic Site, which preserves the site of the New Salem Village, where young Abraham Lincoln lived for six formative years, from 1831 to 1837. (see more at <https://dnrhistorical.illinois.gov/experience/sites/site.lincolns-new-salem-state-historic-site.html>)

Safety: Deadfall requiring portage can be common in upriver reaches. The river is not effectively paddleable upriver of Fisher. There is a large dam at Lake Decatur in Decatur. Other low head dams in the Springfield area have been removed or destroyed over time but debris remains. The lower portion between Petersburg and Beardstown is largely channelized to the Sanganois Wildlife Area.

Several Forest Preserves, County Parks and Municipal Parks create public access to the Sangamon River along much of its length in Champaign County, Piatt County (Monticello, including Allerton Park), DeWitt County (Decatur), Sangamon County (Springfield County) and Menard County (Petersburg, including New Salem State Park).



References

- <https://sangamonriver.org/> (Sangamon River in Champaign County; Fisher River gauge available at this link)
- <https://www.champaignforests.org/> (Forest Preserves in Champaign County; including 4 along the Sangamon River)
- <https://allerton.illinois.edu/> (Allerton Park, Monticello)
- <https://www.ifishillinois.org/profiles/waterbody.php?waternum=00130> (Lake Decatur)
- <https://www.maconccd.org/conservation-areas/rock-springs-nature-center/> (Decatur, downriver of dam)
- <https://sangamonriveralliance.org/lincoln-heritage-water-trail/> (Lincoln Heritage Water Trail)
- <https://dnrhistoric.illinois.gov/experience/sites/site.lincolns-new-salem-state-historic-site.html> (New Salem State Park)
- <https://menardcountytrailsandgreenways.org/> (Sangamon River in Menard County, including Petersburg)
- <https://dnr.illinois.gov/parks/park.sanganois.html> (Sanganois Wildlife Area near the confluence)