

ILLINOIS RIVER: GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING

The Illinois River is either 270 or 327 miles long, and it may or may not be considered to lie entirely within the boundaries of our state. These discrepancies arise because the river has had several incarnations. Geographically, it begins at the point where the Des Plaines, DuPage, and Kankakee Rivers converge near the Will and Grundy County lines; that river flows for a distance of 270 miles, ultimately entering the Mississippi at Grafton, about 40 miles north of St. Louis.

But the Illinois is a working river with a working title, the "Illinois Waterway." In that form it extends all the way to Lake Michigan through the Des Plaines and Chicago Rivers. With this added length, the Illinois Waterways spans 327 miles from Lake Michigan to its confluence with the Mississippi.

From its headwater river basins, considered to be the Des Plaines, Lake Michigan and the Kankakee, the Illinois River forms at the confluence and winds southwest through northern Illinois. Along this stretch, known as the "upper Illinois," currents are swift because the river flows down a fairly steep incline through a narrow, young valley that was once occupied by the Mississippi River.

The upper river flows to Hennepin in Putnam County, where it encounters the "Great Bend." This point marks the beginning of the middle river. Here the Illinois turns southward and flows past Peoria to Beardstown in a gentle gradient through a broad, shallow valley three to six miles wide.

The banks along this stretch of the Illinois are lined with dozens of lakes and backwaters that were originally carved out of the land by sediments contained in the river waters. When the river overflowed, its sediment-laden waters cut crevices through the riverbanks. As the waters escaped through these crevices, they created side channels, sloughs, swamps, and other backwater wetlands, so that the river valley resembled a boundless marsh. When dams were built in the river in the nineteenth century, many of these backwaters and wetlands were filled and formed as many as 300 long, narrow backwater or bottomland lakes.

In our century, the natural sedimentation processes that formed the backwater wetlands have been altered and accelerated by human activities such as agriculture, levee building, and urbanization. These activities have set the stage for the very extinction of the wetlands and lakes along the middle

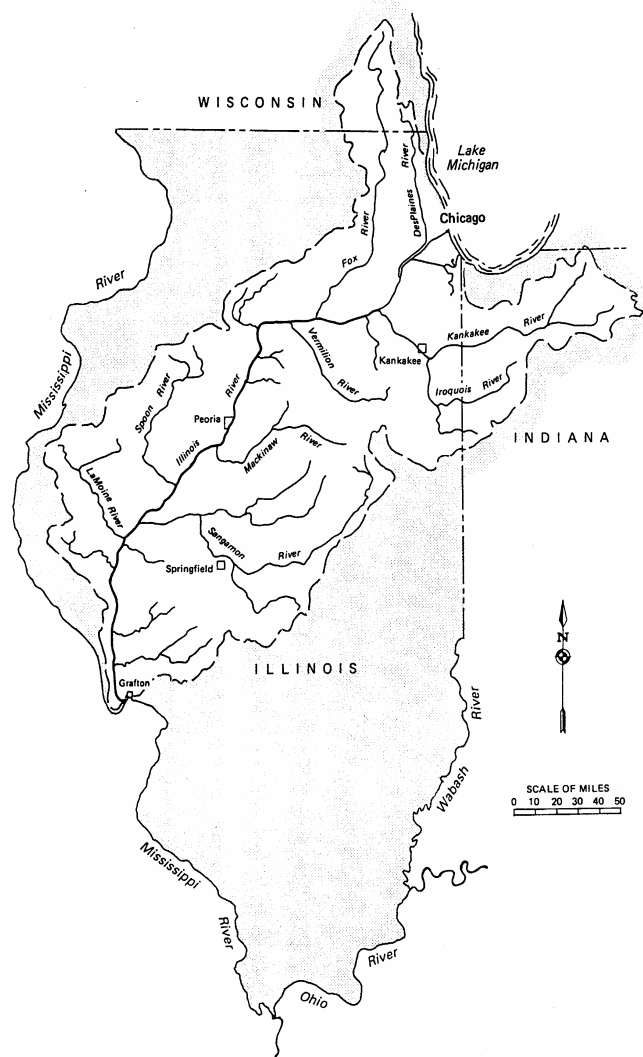


Figure 1. Location of the Illinois River basin

river, which are now being filled with sediment. As of 1975, sedimentation had reduced their average depth to only 2 feet.

The lower river, extending from Beardstown to Grafton, was once rich with backwaters, but levees erected early in our century destroyed almost all of the lakes and wetlands along this stretch. Thus only about 53 backwater lakes now survive along the full length of the river, and the floodplain of the Illinois River is now little more than 200,000 acres, about half its size 100 years ago. Although the Illinois River Valley was once almost entirely wetlands, actual water surfaces now account for only 60 to 100 square miles (40,000 to 70,000 acres).

The Illinois River Valley (which is also known as a "basin" or "Watershed" or "drainage area") encompasses some 30,000 square miles, covering 44 percent of the land area of the state and including more than a dozen tributaries of the main river. About 1,000 square mile of the watershed extend into Wisconsin with the upper portions of the Fox and Des Plaines Rivers, and another 3,200 square miles extend into Indiana with the Kankakee and Iroquois Rivers. The Illinois River Basin includes 46 percent of the state's agricultural land, 28 percent of its forests, 37 percent of its surface waters and streams, and 95 percent of its urban areas.