

RiverWatch Season Begins in May  
Recreational Paddle Coming Soon  
Adopt-a-Highway Season Underway  
2021 USRC Showcase Cancelled  
Spotlight Volunteer – Joe Niernberger



Recreation \* Stewardship \* Citizen Science

# USRC Newsletter



## Breaking news >>> USRC Adopt-a-Highway Kicks-Off 2021 Season

The USRC begins its 10<sup>th</sup> year of participation in the Illinois Adopt-a-Highway Program.

Starting in 2012, the USRC has been collecting roadside trash along a 2 mile stretch on Rt. 47 from I-74 north to CR2425, an area that drains directly to the Sangamon River. Chuck Berschinski first coordinated the effort and assumed that role through 2016 at which time he passed the coordinator duties on to Joe Niernberger.

Through the years tons of typical roadside trash has been collected along with a few oddities, such as a pingpong table, a package of fresh steaks, and a total of nearly \$200 in cash. If you would like to be a part of this admirable crew of volunteers please contact us at [volunteer@sangamonriver.org](mailto:volunteer@sangamonriver.org). Check page 4 of the newsletter for of schedule of times and dates.



## Spring Marks Return of Paddlers to the Sangamon Enjoy the Beauty, but Please Be Careful

*If you are new to paddling, the USRC strongly recommends a paddle safety course from an instructor certified by the American Canoe Association before paddling the river.*

Paddling the Sangamon River can be a wonderfully enjoyable experience with pleasant surprises along the way. A significant part of that beauty are the magnificent trees that line the river corridor and reach to the river's edge. As the naturally flowing river begins to erode its banks it can wash soil away from the roots of those trees. Some of the exposed roots are above the water's surface, allowing us a view of the trees' impressive root structure. Some of the exposed roots lie below the water surface creating habitat for many aquatic creatures, including dragonflies, damselflies, and crayfish, as many of our RiverWatch volunteers are well aware. When the soil is eroded enough that a tree topples into the river channel, it provides additional habitat to countless aquatic invertebrates including mayflies, stoneflies, caddisflies, riffle beetles, to name but a few.

This deadfall is particularly important for the health of the Sangamon River, since so little sunlight reaches the river's substrate. The deadfall can provide habitat for many fish species, places for turtles to sun and many other wildlife benefits. However, the deadfall can present a hazard for paddlers, as Scott Hays warns, "Boats pressing sideways against a fallen tree parallel to the current can quickly capsize." Attempts to navigate "under, over or through can present challenges even for seasoned paddlers. When the channel is completely blocked, paddlers are forced to portage around." The USRC organizes river trips during the summer, but if you are just starting out or have recently purchased a kayak or canoe, the USRC strongly recommends a paddle safety course from an instructor certified by the American Canoe Association before paddling.

# Citizen Science: An American Tradition

*"Citizen Science is most simply described as public participation in organized research efforts". – Janis Dickinson & Rich Bonney*

## Civic Duty

One of the lesser-known contributions that Thomas Jefferson made to our young country was that in which he enlisted a deputy in every county in Virginia to log twice a day temperature and wind direction observations. In so doing, he began what is known today as citizen science.

This Spring, throughout the United States, hundreds of thousands of volunteers will answer the call to be citizen scientists. They will observe, monitor, measure, count, and analyze a massive amount of data to benefit science and to fulfill a sense of civic duty. They will be counting insects,

documenting the timing of bud bursts, recording frog calls, testing water chemistry, and much more, in order to provide valuable information to scientists and other professionals with the goal of gaining a better understanding of the world in which we live. Citizen science can provide an avenue for those who embrace the ideals of civic duty, and value their right (or perhaps even their obligation) to be educated in order to more effectively self-govern, to reduce corruption and privilege, and to promote science as a way to defend our democracy.

The scale of our environmental problems outpaces the scale of our professionals. Citizen science can relieve some of the constraints imposed by limited budgets and the limited number of professionals, while at the same time increase the scientific literacy of our citizenry.



## Land of Opportunity

The USRC offers opportunities to participate in citizen science. We currently have 9 stream sites in which we conduct invertebrate monitoring through the Illinois RiverWatch Program. Additionally, we conduct mussel surveys in August at 4 sites. These activities provide the non-professional an opportunity to contribute meaningful information to science, to discover more about the world in which they live, and to be part of a great American tradition.



## Breaking News >>>

# RiverWatch Workshop Coming to Mahomet



The Illinois RiverWatch program has benefitted from the volunteer efforts of citizen scientists and educators across the state. Over the past quarter of a century, volunteers have spent thousands of hours educating themselves and collecting data to help better understand our local rivers and streams. The Upper Sangamon River Conservancy is proud to partner with RiverWatch in this effort. If you are interested in becoming a trained volunteer you may sign-up at <http://www.ngrrec.org/Riverwatch>. The Mahomet Training Workshop is Saturday, April 10<sup>th</sup>, 9am – 4pm at Lake of the Woods Forest Preserve, Mahomet. Please contact [president@sangamonriver.org](mailto:president@sangamonriver.org) if you are interested in being sponsored by the USRC for this workshop.



## 2021 RiverWatch Schedule

### Small Stream Sites

Crooked Creek at Scott & Carol Hays  
Sunday, May 2 – 9am-12pm

Intermittent Stream at Sangamon River CCFP  
Sunday, May 2 – 1pm-4pm

Wildcat Slough at Sangamon River CCFP  
Sunday, May 16 – 9am – 12pm

Saddlecase Creek at Buffalo Trace CCFP  
Sunday, May 16 – 1pm – 4pm

### Sangamon River Sites

Sangamon River Forest Preserve  
Saturday, June 5 – 9am-12pm

Hazen Bridge  
Saturday, June 5 – 1pm-4pm

Lake of the Woods  
Saturday, June 12 – 9am – 12pm

River Bend  
Saturday, June 12 – 1pm-4pm

**ILLINOIS RIVER WATCH NETWORK**  
NATIONAL GREAT RIVERS RESEARCH AND EDUCATION CENTER

**Protect Illinois Waterways!  
Become a RiverWatch Citizen Scientist!**

Illinois RiverWatch Training Workshop  
Saturday, April 10th  
Mahomet, IL  
Lake of the Woods  
109 S. Lake of the Woods Rd.  
Mahomet, IL 61853  
[Register Here](#)



The Illinois RiverWatch Network is a statewide, non-profit, volunteer stream monitoring program. Volunteers are trained and certified as citizen scientists to monitor and protect a local stream. Upon completing training and becoming certified, volunteers adopt a stream site and examine indicators of water quality like stream habitat and the diversity of species such as dragonfly nymphs, beetle larva, midges, and snails. Citizen scientists play an important role in helping identify potentially degraded waters and areas that may need better protection. For questions, contact Hannah at 618-468-2781 or email [riverwatch@lc.edu](mailto:riverwatch@lc.edu). Registration is \$50 for adults. Children (17 and under) may attend but must be accompanied by a parent/guardian who is registered for the workshop.

# Meet Joe Niernberger: USRC Vice-President

“Do What You Can...”

Joe Niernberger, born and raised in western Kansas, spent most of his 41 years as an industrial construction engineer, moving with his job. His work took him to 20 sites in 12 different states. This life afforded him the opportunity to visit a variety of parks and preserves over the years. It was not until he married Carol Jo Morgan in 2001 that Champaign became his permanent home. He bought his first canoe in 1980 and he has been paddling ever since. His passion for natural areas is the motivation for much of his volunteer work.

Joe says he “enjoys working with both the USRC and Master Naturalists to help restore and maintain our natural areas.” Most typically he is the first to arrive at a USRC event and the last to leave. He is a certified RiverWatcher, and participates in nearly all of the USRC monitoring events. Joe leads Adopt-a-Highway clean-ups and Hazen Bridge maintenance, as well as playing a key role in mussel surveys, invasive species removal, and river clean-ups. But Joe reminds us that “the USRC is not all work (although enjoyable and rewarding), but also fun (such as float trips, farmers markets, Mahomet festival duck race, and social gatherings).”



Joe at an Adopt-a-Highway Clean-up

The Champaign Park District, Urbana Park District, and Champaign County Forest Preserve District are also beneficiaries of Joe’s volunteer spirit. This spirit is reflected in a favorite Theodore Roosevelt quote, “Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.”

Joe became interested in geology after visiting Hawaii in 2011, and he has audited many geology classes at Parkland and the University of Illinois. He also has had a lifelong interest in old-time, bluegrass, early country, blues, and folk music.

No one puts in more time volunteering with the USRC than Joe, and his generosity with his time and talents are felt within the USRC and well beyond.



## Become a Volunteer

To learn more about the many volunteer opportunities available at the USRC contact Mary Stech at [volunteer@sangamonriver.org](mailto:volunteer@sangamonriver.org) or visit our website at [sangamonriver.org](http://sangamonriver.org).

## Quick Bio: Joe Niernberger

- 1974 – Graduates Kansas State University Building Construction
- 1980 – Purchases first canoe
- 2001 – Marries Carol Jo Morgan
- 2012 – Becomes a USRC Volunteer
- 2015 – Retires after 41 years as a construction engineer
- 2015 – Becomes a Master Naturalist
- 2016 – Joins USRC Board
- 2018 – Becomes USRC Vice-President
- 2020 – Begins serving on the Master Naturalists’ Advisory Board

## Feature Fauna >>>

### Dragonflies: Anisoptera

Dragonflies have been around for about 250 million years, first appearing with the dinosaurs in the Lower Permian Period. Their ancestors, Anisoptera, appeared in the Carboniferous Era about 350 million years ago sporting wingspans of up to 30 inches.

Dragonflies undergo incomplete metamorphosis, which is to say, they hatch from an egg then molt from the nymph stage directly to adults without an intermediate pupa stage. Adult dragonflies only live a few weeks on average, but their aquatic larval stage most typically lasts 1-2 years, and can last as much as 5 years for some species.

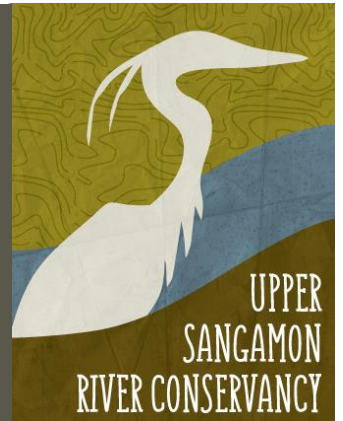
With a considerable amount of their life cycle spent in an aquatic environment, they are often used as indicators of water quality for invertebrate monitoring programs such as



RiverWatch, a program in which the USRC has been a participant for 12 years. Although dragonflies do eat beneficial insects such as bees and butterflies, they are particularly fond of midges and mosquitoes also. Many of the species have brilliant iridescent colours and, along with their spectacular flying abilities, they are particularly interesting to observe. If you would like to attract dragonflies to your garden you might try planting Black-eyed Susans, Swamp Milkweed, or Joe Pye Weed. You won’t be disappointed.

*closing thoughts...*

# One of Our Greatest Assets



*This contribution of "closing thoughts" comes to you from the desk of Scott Hays.*

The Sangamon continues to surprise me as one of our area's greatest assets. I've been paddling when I can since the pandemic set in during all seasons; the experience never fails; feeling like a relaxing excursion into our local wild.

The river has been running low most of this year, as have many of us. But even when it's low my grandson and I enjoy a walk out on our Crooked Creek sand bar. He walks the sand bars, picks up rocks and tosses them in the water. During our explorations, we spot pimpleback and pistolgrip and pocketbook mussels in the shallows, a sure sign of a healthy ecosystem.

Most of last summer, I spent my working days behind my laptop set up on a high café table six feet away from the river bluff, 25 feet over the river, with a relaxing view of the seemingly vast bottomland forest beyond. My colleagues were raccoons, chipmunks, red-bellied woodpeckers, deer, great blue herons, silent owls, and other critters spotted while my gaze wandered during Zoom meetings. One day a bald eagle lighted on a large tree

branch not 30 feet away. I don't think he saw me at first, but as soon as I – oh so slowly – reached for my smartphone, he gracefully but swiftly and surely departed. As a young teenage boy in our bicentennial year of 1976, bald eagles existed only as a mystical symbol to me, certainly not something spotted in the wild. Of course by the mid 70's DDT had made them nearly extinct. Yet there he was, lighting 30 feet away on a tree along the Sangamon. Yes, it's one of our greatest assets.

In mid-September, a small group of us set out on a rainy Saturday to clean one small area where a tree blockage had hung up an impressive collection of construction debris, along with lots of other garbage. We even pulled an old washing machine from the banks a little further downstream. It's easy to get careless. When we think precious natural areas, let's think of our river, and respect it for what it is.

And hopefully soon this summer you can join the USRC on one of our monthly river excursions. See you on the River!



**Upcoming Events >>>**

## 2021 Calendar

*Adopt-a-Highway Clean-up*  
*Museum of the Grand Prairie*  
April 17 – 9am-11am  
June 26 – 9am-11am

*Recreational Paddle*  
April 3, May 1, June 5  
For details contact Scott Hays at  
[secretary@sangamonriver.org](mailto:secretary@sangamonriver.org)

*RiverWatch Monitoring*  
May through June  
See Schedule on page 2 of this Newsletter

*Invasive Species Removal*  
*Mahomet Greenway Park*  
April 25 – 10am -4pm  
May 30 – 10am – 4pm  
June 27 – 10am – 4pm  
Small group every Wednesday – 1pm-3pm

*Sangamon River Showcase*  
May – Cancelled (Covid)



Upper Sangamon  
River Conservancy

[president@sangamonriver.org](mailto:president@sangamonriver.org) [www.sangamonriver.org](http://www.sangamonriver.org)

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Mahomet, IL 61853