

Friends
of the **ROUGE**

2024 Annual Report



Letter from the Executive Director

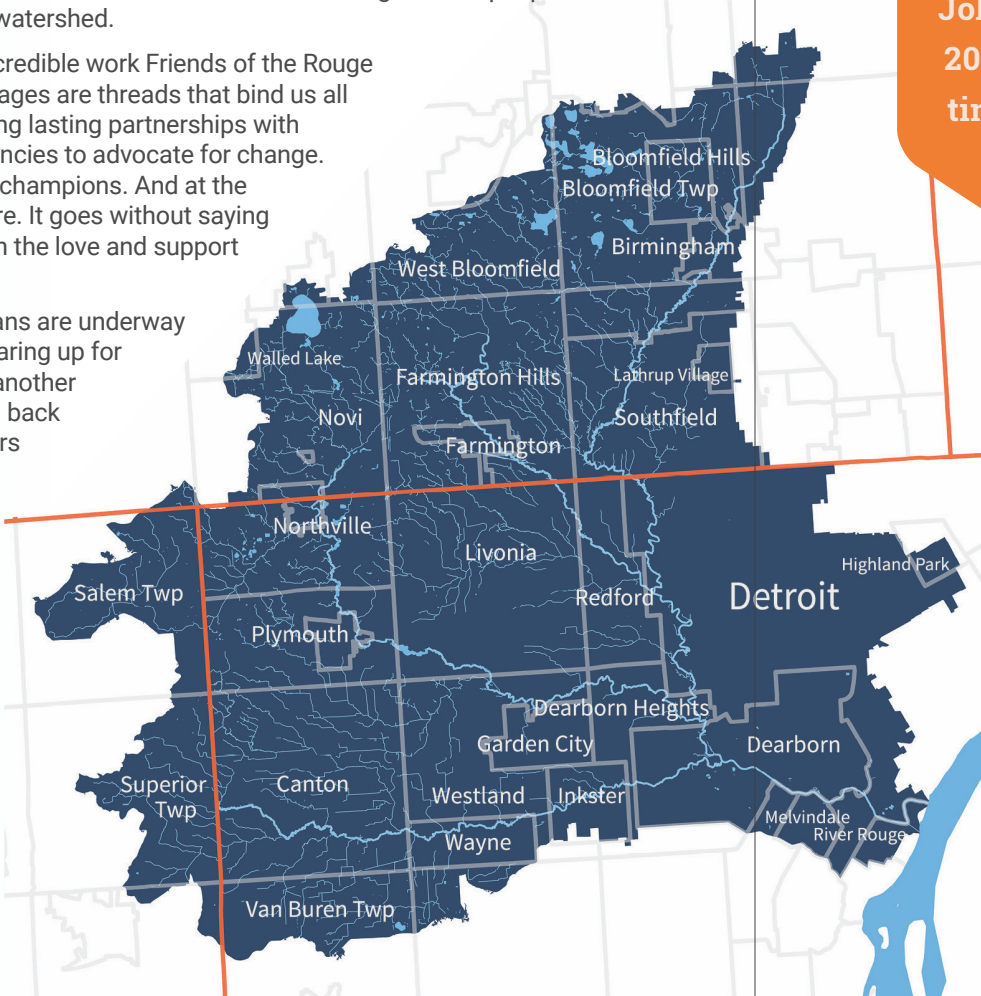
The hallmark of a river is its ability to change and mark the passage of time. For Friends of the Rouge, 2024 marked a year of change and a year of learning. Early in the year, Executive Director Marie McCormick announced her departure from the organization. In July, I started my tenure as your new Executive Director. For me, the last several months have been a whirlwind of growth—from assessing culverts and working seine nets, to identifying native plants, to marveling at herons and turtles along the concrete channel from a kayak, I’ve already learned so much about this River and the many people, animals, and plants that call the watershed home. I feel incredibly fortunate to have been asked to lead this amazing team of people who are actively restoring, protecting, and enhancing your Rouge River watershed.

As you read through our annual report for 2024, you’ll hear about the incredible work Friends of the Rouge continues to do for your River. Woven throughout the stories on these pages are threads that bind us all together in our shared love of the Rouge. These are stories about building lasting partnerships with individuals, businesses, community organizations, and government agencies to advocate for change. These are stories about engaging with communities to empower River champions. And at the heart of it all, these are stores about connecting people like you to nature. It goes without saying that the many incredible stories in this report would not be possible with the love and support from you, our friends.

As I write this, spring is once again returning to Southeast Michigan. Plans are underway for rain gardens, pollinator gardens and tree plantings. Monitoring is gearing up for the annual Spring Bug Hunt, and the Trails team is readying kayaks for another season of exploration of your River. When the world seems chaotic, I go back to the water. Water doesn’t know municipal or political boundaries. Rivers don’t recognize human intent. Nature moves in ways that we have yet to fully understand. And yet, it inextricably connects us to each other. We are drawn to water and to the inherent benefits it brings. So as we welcome another season, I urge you to reconnect with your River. Join us for a paddle event, volunteer for a rain garden maintenance day or a planting, sit for a few minutes and listen for the call of a frog or toad. Listen to the River’s song; a call to your heart and a thank you for the good work that you make possible.

Thank you—
Ashley Flintoff, Executive Director

On the cover: Students plant trees and shrubs at Thurston High School in South Redford





Great News!
Eight endangered
redside dace fish
were found in
Johnson Creek in
2024 for the first
time in 10 years.

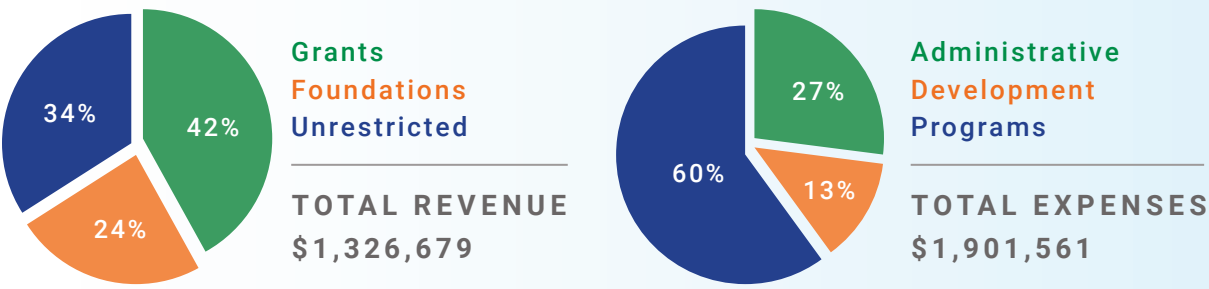
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2024 Financial Report



**Please note: Some program expenses are covered by temporarily restricted net assets that have been released (unrestricted) during the 2024 fiscal year.*

***Temporarily restricted net assets are funds that come with donor-imposed limitations on how they can be used. These funds are designated for a specific purpose or a period of time. Once the purpose is met or the time period ends, they become unrestricted. Examples include grant funding for a specific project or a donation earmarked for a particular program.*



Partnerships for Lasting Change

A better Rouge River takes a village; a network of boots-on-the-ground partners in action. Friends of the Rouge teams with individuals, businesses, government, non-profits, citizen groups, and other community organizations to champion the river. In 2024, Friends of the Rouge continued to connect, build, and mobilize with over 250 valued partnerships to broaden our reach and improve our collective impact for lasting change.

Local nonprofits partner for rain garden training to meet the growing need for garden maintenance. As green solutions, like rain gardens, become more widespread, there is an increased need for skilled workers for maintenance. Like any landscaping, a rain garden needs seasonal upkeep. The Detroit StormWater Specialists Training (SWST) trains workers with technical know-how to meet this need. SWST was offered by Friends of the Rouge in 2024 in partnership with Sierra Club Michigan Chapter and St. Suzanne Cody Rouge Community Resource Center. The Siena Literacy Center provided additional support to three cohorts of

trained stormwater specialists to perform all aspects of rain garden and native plant maintenance. Trainees learned how to identify native plants vs weeds, identify soil type, conduct photo monitoring, and solve soil erosion and sediment issues. Forty-five students completed the six-week, 12-part training course. Graduates became eligible to take on contract work to maintain public and private rain gardens—and many did so directly through the St. Suzanne Cody Rouge Community Resource Center. Friends of the Rouge looks forward to working with the incredible SWST graduates in the future to solve local flooding threats to the Rouge River community with new rain gardens.

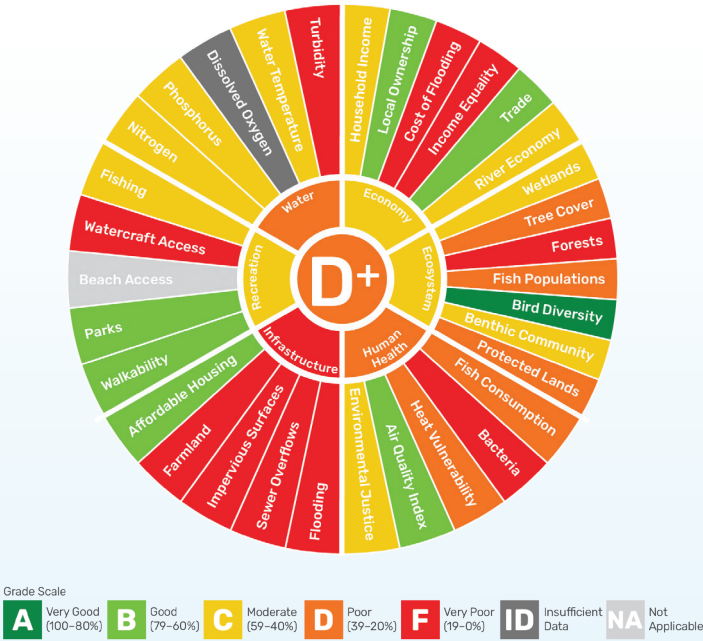
A unique education collaboration for local riverside learning continued in 2024, as the University of Michigan-Dearborn offered its second river education day in collaboration with Friends of the Rouge. As part of the UM-Dearborn summer education program, the Environmental Health Research-to-Action Group, Dearborn-area high school students learned how

river pollution affects public health and conducted hands-on water quality testing in their hometown Rouge River. With a focus of promoting intergenerational environmental health leadership, community science, and policy advocacy, this partnership continues to educate Southeast Michigan’s young people and promote environmental literacy for the upcoming generation of Rouge River watershed stewards.

A regional parks partnership brings paddlers to the Lower Rouge River Water Trail thanks to the Huron-Clinton Metroparks. In 2024, this partnership allowed for complimentary paddle trips for youth and family service organizations in Lower Rouge Communities along the Water Trail. The Huron-Clinton Metroparks sponsored boat rentals and shuttle service for 75 paddlers at three paddling events, including the popular Fall Birding Paddle Trip on Newburgh Lake. Metroparks staff further enhanced these events with an interactive educational experience that featured the wildlife of the Rouge River Watershed. The Park West Foundation, Inkster TaskForce, Hype Athletics, and Black to the Land were all partners and beneficiaries of this collaboration.

Regional watersheds partner with University of Maryland and the Erb Family Foundation to give water a grade. The “Sistersheds”—Huron River Watershed Council, Friends of the Detroit River, Clinton River Watershed Council, River Raisin Watershed Council and Friends of the Rouge—collaborated with the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Sciences to create report cards for watershed health. Released in 2024 with funding from the Erb Family Foundation, each watershed received an individual grade determined by data across 33 indicators in water, economy, recreation, infrastructure, human health, and ecosystems. The combined region was given a grade of C for overall watershed health. The Rouge River Watershed received an overall grade of D+. Bird Diversity ranked as the watershed’s only A (very good). Impervious Surfaces, Sewer

Overflows, and Flooding received some of the watershed’s F grades (very poor). While the Rouge River has come a long way from its very poor health in the 1980s, the report card (pictured below) highlights the imperative of continued support, focus, and care for a better future. An updated iteration of the report card is intended in the next five years. Friends of the Rouge looks forward to continued partnerships to raise our grade.

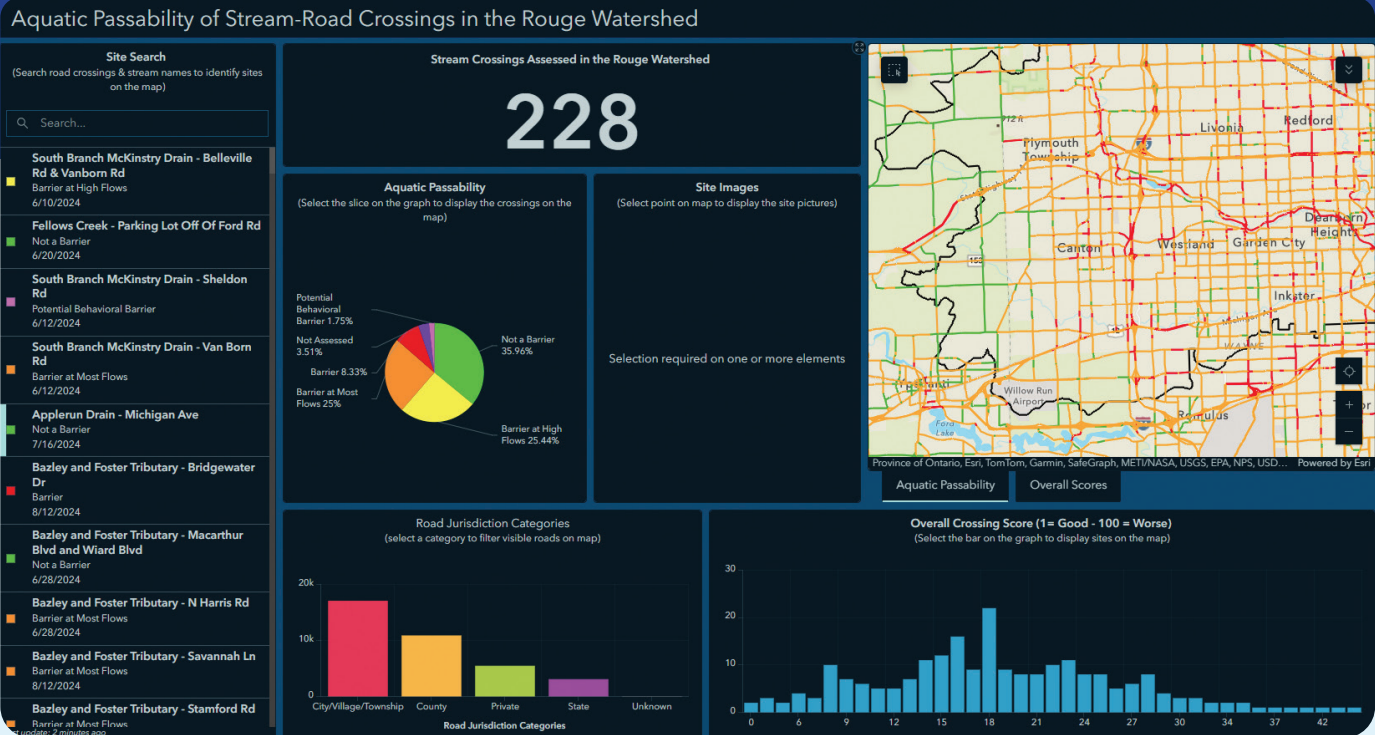


Opposite page, left: Detroit StormWater Specialists Training workers learn rain garden planting techniques. **Center:** Volunteers assist in log jam work days along the Lower Rouge River Water Trail. **Right:** Dearborn students learn about salt monitoring at the Environmental Health Research to Action (EHRA) event at Ford Field Park.



Culvert Inventory and Stream Survey for Municipalities to Improve Fish Habitat

In 2024, Friends of the Rouge surveyed over 200 structures supporting river movement under roadways and found that over half could be a barrier to fish passage. The Michigan Department of Natural Resources, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Wayne and Washtenaw Counties, and Canton Township and other partners received a prioritized list of problematic structures to identify potential repair projects in the future to improve the fish community. The Rouge River was one of the first watersheds in the lower half of the Lower Peninsula to participate in this type of assessment and to be a part of the Great Lakes Road Stream Crossing Inventory (GLSCI). You can see the stream crossing dashboard below.



Community Engagement for a Better River

At 467 square miles, the Rouge River Watershed—the land area that drains into the Rouge River—is roughly the size of Grand Teton Park or Lake St Clair. The Rouge River Watershed is the most populated watershed in the Mitten State. It includes parts of Wayne, Oakland, and Washtenaw Counties, holds 48 diverse communities, and is home to about 1.35 million people. It is also one of the state’s most polluted watersheds. To achieve the vision of a healthy, vibrant Rouge River, community collaboration and engagement is vital.

In 2024, volunteer community scientists of all ages rolled up their sleeves and put on waders to examine life at the river at the Fall and Spring Bug Hunts. The “bug hunts”—or search for the aquatic insects, crayfish, snails, and clams that make up the bottom of the river food chain—is a monitoring effort by communities and volunteers to uncover a picture of local stream and river health. Bug diversity indicates the health of the Rouge River stream, and because this community science effort is in its 27th year, volunteers have created an in-depth picture of Rouge River health over time. In 2024, 55 sites were surveyed at locations in all four Rouge River branches and in the major tributaries. Participating bug hunt communities include Beverly Hills, Birmingham, Canton Township, Farmington, Livonia, Northville Township, Novi, Plymouth, Plymouth Township, Southfield, Troy, Washtenaw County, and more. Volunteers join “the hunt” from these host communities

All of the rain gardens created in the last 10 years will prevent 9.5 million gallons of rainwater runoff from entering the sewer system in 2025—and every year, into the future.



Rain Garden to the Rescue (RGtR) recipients and Sierra Club of Michigan partners plant a residential rain garden.



and beyond. The data is shared with state agencies, the Alliance of Rouge Communities, Michigan Clean Water Corps, participating communities, and volunteers. Additional River investigation during Bug Hunts includes salt (chloride) testing and surveying for and reporting pollution, collapsed culverts, and illegal discharges. Like a report card or doctor's visit, Bug hunters and host communities provide a seasonal wellness check on the River that broadens the collective understanding of the health of the River over time.

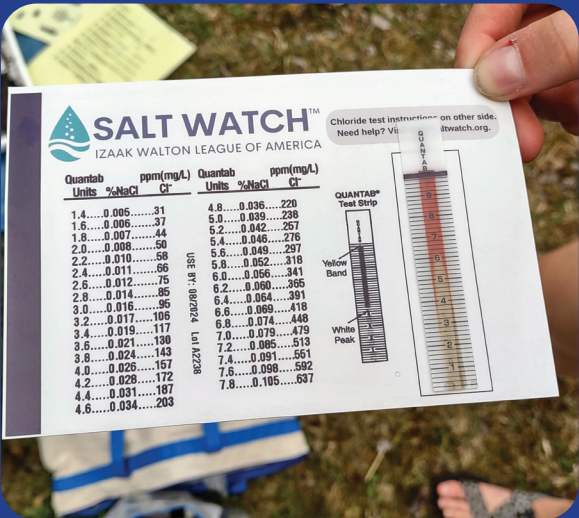
Community engagement is vital in tackling the environmental challenges of today. In 2024, the City of Dearborn engaged Friends of the Rouge to explore green solutions to help alleviate community flooding and basement backups. In a city where the four branches of the Rouge River come together, these issues are bad and getting worse, leading to increasing concerns for community health and wellness. The result was a 3-year contract for Friends of the Rouge to engage with residents, city employees, and community organizations who will benefit from education and green solutions for stormwater management, like rain gardens, trees, and bioswales. Over the next three years, FOTR will lead the community in creating five new public rain gardens and provide rain garden seminars and in-depth courses on rain garden design, installation and maintenance. Select municipal employees and residents will participate in a six-week, twelve-class training course to gain skills to maintain these gardens for years to come. Expected results include improved Rouge River community health and fewer wet and flooded basements. The new rain gardens will support City of Dearborn goals for city beautification, provide green spaces to connect with nature for improved community wellbeing, and will serve as demonstration gardens for flood management.

Community engagement can trailblaze pathways to the Rouge River, like the creation of the Norwayne Community Trailhead. In 2024, the Norwayne Community Citizens Council partnered with Friends of the Rouge to envision, design, and build a trailhead honoring the community's place in the great arsenal of democracy, as the manufacturing site of WWII bombers. The result was a community-designed Rosie the Riveter Monument and Interpretive Gallery trailhead at the Venoy-Dorsey Park in the City of Westland. The trailhead, located by the Jefferson Barnes Community Vitality Center, breaks ground in 2025 and will tie the community to park trails, the Lower Rouge River Water Trail,

and two universally accessible boat launches in Venoy-Dorsey Park. "It is very exciting to see this work happening. The bookend launches at Venoy-Dorsey will provide safe access to the River, and this particular route is a short, modest paddling experience that we hope will be great for local residents and beginners," said Friends of the Rouge Trails Manager Herman Jenkins. Friends of the Rouge community engagement through the Lower Rouge Water Trail Leadership Committee laid the groundwork for the construction of the two launches incorporated in the 2019 Water Trail Strategic Plan. Community engagement will continue to drive further development of recreational opportunities and amenities to best benefit the residents they serve.

Opposite page, top: Students from the University of Michigan Dearborn learn fish and bug collection techniques from FOTR staff at Shiawassee Park in Farmington Hills. **Bottom:** Volunteers of all ages gather to search for Stoneflies in January.

This page: Dry Dock Pop Up at Jefferson Barnes Elementary in Westland.



Volunteer water testing leads to state level attention

Friends of the Rouge volunteers have measured salt content during events like the Stonefly Search and Bug Hunts since 2020 as part of the Izaak Walton League's Salt Watch Program. High salt levels in rivers are toxic to aquatic organisms, often entering the Rouge as road salt after rains or snowmelt. Data collected by volunteers has shown high salt levels across the Rouge River Watershed in all seasons. It is thanks to this work that the first comprehensive salt monitoring project in the Rouge River system was completed, in collaboration with the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE). Now, significant portions of the Rouge River are under consideration for receiving special attention due to salt impairment, which could lead to pointed studies and solutions by the state.



Connecting People with Nature

In all seasons, Friends of the Rouge offers people immersive experiences in nature. Program participants explore the corners of the Rouge River Watershed to plant trees, create new green space, enjoy and tend water trails, restore river habitat, and track Rouge animals. Volunteers, members, and supporters steward their Rouge River. In turn, time spent in nature nourishes them back.

Creating new spaces for nature and people to thrive is a central theme to Friends of the Rouge's work. In 2024, volunteers contributed their time and care to create and improve green spaces with hundreds of new trees, dozens of new rain gardens, and three new pollinator gardens across the Rouge River community. Each new rain garden is an invitation to children and neighbors to enjoy nature. Each tree, a future resting spot to sky gaze, and every new Michigan flower will sing its special song to Michigan bees, birds, and butterflies. These restorative solutions will enrich the community for decades to come as they improve community health and vitality. At Jane Addams Elementary and Thurston High School in Redford, Friends of the Rouge partnered with students, staff, and local volunteers to plant trees and shrubs in the school yards. The woody plants will create a buffer between the school buildings and the adjacent I-96 freeway. Now and for years to come, the growing trees and shrubs will reduce freeway noise, air pollution, and water pollution as they lessen local flooding for the school grounds and at the Rouge River. At maturity, the trees will absorb over 9,000 pounds of carbon dioxide and manage 756,000 gallons of stormwater annually.

Connecting people to the River's magic by kayak and canoe has been at the heart of Friends of the Rouge's vision since 2003. Thanks to years of volunteer efforts and investments from the City of Dearborn, Dearborn Heights, Wayne County Parks, and other partners, many barriers to paddling access have been removed. Along the Lower Rouge

River Trail, the vision of connecting people to the River has become a reality. In 2024, 11 scheduled paddle trips were offered to the public to create outdoor experiences and access to nature. Partnership events with The Black Pack, Detroit Bird Alliance, and The Queer Outdoors created new opportunities for fellowship, mentorship, and engagement with our hometown river. Another 2024 highlight: the Haunted Paddle Trip hosted over 150 paddlers and required two launch times to accommodate 84 vessels on the water trail, a record for Friends of the Rouge paddling events! Joy-filled paddling trips like these specialized events increase access to the Rouge River for new and veteran paddlers to feel excited and welcome to recreate on the Rouge. Paddling offers participants many benefits: fresh air, low impact exercise, and a moment to connect with nature. The experience of the Rouge River from the seat of a kayak can change a person's relationship with the River forever.

An immersion in nature with the frog and toad survey is one of the great rewards of this 27-year-old program. Mark Bacigal, veteran frog and toad listener, explains that "listening for the frogs and toads helps you slow down and appreciate the real beauty of nature on a spring night." In 2024, 181 Friends joined this survey, lovingly referred to as "Frog Patrol," to listen for the songs of local amphibians who call local wetlands home. Data collected by participants provided up-to-date knowledge on where and what frog and toad species



Opposite page: FOTR Intern Lian Anderson catches a Big White Sucker during fish surveys.

This page, clockwise from top left: Students plant trees and shrubs at Thurston High School in

South Redford; Learning about crayfish at the first annual Fall Friends Fest at Ford Field Park in Dearborn; Planting rain gardens at Grace in Action Church in Detroit; American Toad, copyright Mark G. Mittlestat 2009; Paddlers enjoy the Lower Rouge River Water Trail.



Bug Hunt Team Leader Bill Craig searches for stoneflies in Northville.

inhabit the Rouge River watershed. With this updated picture, the distribution of future frog and toad populations can be monitored for both positive and negative changes over time. The program teaches wetland ecology, amphibian biology, and the value of protecting and restoring habitat in an urban environment. Through the Frog and Toad survey, participants gain an intimate understanding of the health of the Rouge River and an immersive natural experience tracking one of our community's most vulnerable animals. As long-time frog and toad surveyor Ted Kozlowski says, "Get outdoors, find some peace and quiet, and enjoy the symphony."

Northern Leopard frogs, heard calling in only 8% of survey blocks by Frog & Toad survey volunteers, were the least common frog heard in Southeast Michigan."

FOTR Trails Secures \$4.6 Million to Fund Construction of Rouge Gateway Greenway Phase II

2024 heralded big wins for Rouge River access and connectivity—most notably, the revitalization of the Rouge Gateway Greenway. Thanks to \$4.6M from the Wayne County Economic Development and \$2.7M from the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation, Friends of the Rouge will lead the construction of a 1.9 mile asphalt trail, including two pedestrian bridges, to connect The Henry Ford and UM-Dearborn. This project realizes part of a decades-old dream by a community of partners to better connect Metro Detroiters to their Rouge River. The Rouge Gateway Greenway is part of a network of planned and existing trails from Hines Park to Fort Street Bridge Park in Detroit, where the trail connects with several regional trail systems, including the Downriver Linked Greenways, Joe Louis Greenway, Iron Belle Trail, and the Great Lakes Way.



YOU Create a Better Rouge River



10,631 volunteers took action for a better Rouge River and more vibrant future



49,200 gallons of water managed by new rain gardens each time it rains, for less pollution and flooding



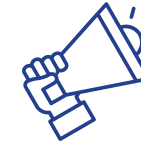
9,649 square feet of grass transformed into new bird, butterfly and pollinator habitat



928 school students experienced hands-on Rouge River quality education



32 Lower Rouge Water Trail events to trail build, explore and connect with nature



404 advocacy and outreach events to raise a collective voice for your River



4,301 hours of river monitoring for bugs, frogs, toads, fish and invasive species



14,402 native plants and 932 trees and shrubs planted for a more vibrant watershed



9,962 hours of river education for the public and caring people like you



Only ONE Rouge River to restore, protect and love

Thank you for making wonderful things possible in 2024!

FUNDERS AND SUPPORTERS

4545 Architecture
Aaron Contracting Inc.
Alliance of Rouge Communities
Atwell Group, LLC
Bank of America Charitable Foundation
Bank of America Charitable Gift Fund
Bell’s Brewery
Bosch Community Fund
Bright Funds
Burns & McDonnell
Canton Township
Carmeuse
Cellar Door Bath Supply Co.
City of Birmingham
City of Dearborn
City of Farmington
City of Livonia
City of Novi
City of Oak Park
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Kroger Community Rewards
League Of Women Voters: Dearborn &
Dearborn Heights
Little Detroit Community Garden
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Marine Pollution Control
Master Gardener Association of Wayne County
Master Gardeners of Western Wayne County
Mens and Womens Garden Club of Grosse
Pointe
Mercedes-Benz Financial Services
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Outdoor Education
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Lakes, and Energy
Michigan Environmental Council
Michigan First Foundation
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Michiganense Natives
Microsoft
National Fish and Wildlife Foundation
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ProCom LLC
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Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation
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Village of Beverly Hills
Visteon
Washtenaw County Conservation District
Washtenaw County Water Resources
Commission
Washtenaw County Water Resources
Commissioner’s Office
Wayne Garden Club
WM
Woman’s National Farm & Garden
Association: Bloomfield Hills Branch
ZS Associates

BEST FRIENDS

Karen Alofs
Karin Archer
Brenda Baker
William J. Bialkowski
Curt, Jill & Ann Bixel
Lynne Brackett & Matthew Linn
Richard Brownlee
Pamela Carter
Carl D. & Sheri L. Clark
Abbey & Chris Coleman
Elayne Coleman
Megan Coleman
Catherine Daligga
Rachel Deodhar
Vicky Devinney
Amy Donoghue
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Kathe Koja
Ben Kronk
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Linda M Snow
Guy R. Stark
Bret & Anna Stuntz
Dana Tedesco
Helena Thornton & Jonathan Cotter
Trzeciak Family
Mary & Lars Watts
Elizabeth White
Scott Williams & Erin Reas-Williams
Nicole Wilson
Christine & Keith Yancy
Anita Yeager
Daniel & Heather Yeaw
and other anonymous “Best Friends”

STONEFLY SOCIETY

Kathy & Michael Ableson
Jennifer Adderley
Susan Mogill-Cousin & Peter Cousin
Laraine Deutsch
Sue Dorr & Debbie Hoenscheid
Alan & Ann Frank
Dr. Orin & Charlette Gelderloos
Jeffrey & Marilyn Gilbert
William Eisenman & Susan Guenther
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Aaron Mondry & Susannah Goodman
Jerry Ring
Sam Shopinski & Lisa King
Kenneth & Sharon Snodgrass
Carol Snodgrass
Terry & Jeff Snyder
Jack Snyder
Paula Trilety & John Charles Barker
James Williams
The Zikowski Family
and other anonymous “Stoneflies”

Sixty-five species of fish have been found in the Rouge River! Fifty-seven species are native to Michigan and eight species are non-native. In 2024, a total of 4903 fish were captured and identified at 25 sites.

2025 STAFF

Ashley Flintoff Executive Director
Kathryn Arnold Orin and Charlette Gelderloos Environmental Leadership Intern
Cidney Calloway Trails Assistant
Erin Cassady Grants Administrator
Matt Connors Restoration Field Coordinator
Sam Davis Education and Monitoring Coordinator
Brian Devlin Restoration Landscape Architect and Mentor
Lauren Eaton Monitoring Manager
Allison Eder Operations Coordinator
Lara Edwards Development Director
May Gulley Trails Assistant
Karen Hanna Operations Director
Adele Hawkins Restoration GSI Apprentice
Adam Huttenstine Restoration Assistant
Herman Jenkins Trails Manager
Jacqueline Kristofik Restoration Assistant
Vishnu Kusam Landscape Designer
Elizabeth Lewandowski Development Coordinator
Sally Petrella Watershed Ecologist
Cyndi Ross Restoration Manager
Susan Shell Restoration Field Coordinator
Nicole Wilson Development Coordinator
Erica Zador Landscape Architect

