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# The Mighty Mississippi

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Written by Caryn Swark

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Rain falls on Minnesota's Lake Itasca—and the start of the Mississippi River.

## A Long Journey

Rain falls on Lake Itasca. It mixes into the clear waters of a river so small that a child could wade across it. So begins the mighty **Mississippi River**.

Over the next three months, the water will take a 2,350-mile (3,781 km) journey through ten U.S. states. At last, it will reach the Gulf of Mexico.



A *watershed* is the area that drains into a river or lake. The Mississippi River watershed is huge! It's the fourth largest in the world.

Many other rivers flow into the Mississippi. One of them—the Missouri—is even longer than the Mississippi!



This Minnesota lock (left) can raise or lower boats. Then they can pass around the dam (right) and continue their trip along the Mississippi.

## The Upper River

At first, the river flows through dozens of **locks** and **dams**. Together, they make it safe for boats to travel. They hold back water so boats don't hit the river bottom.

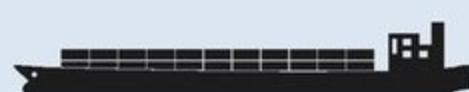


Ground corn pours onto a barge in Iowa.

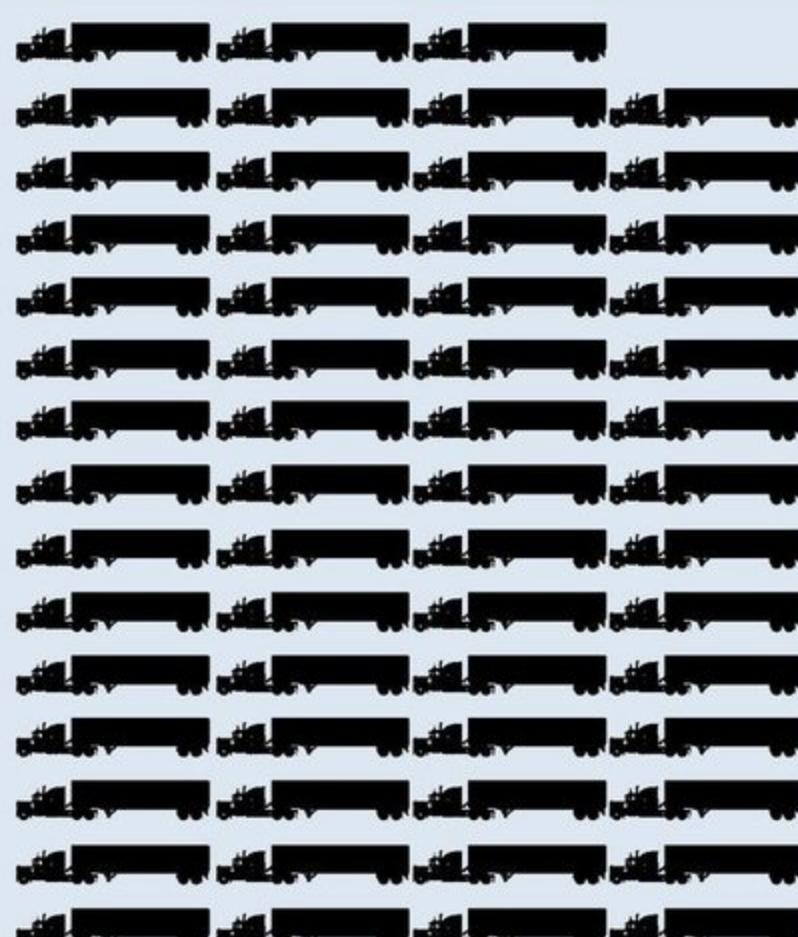
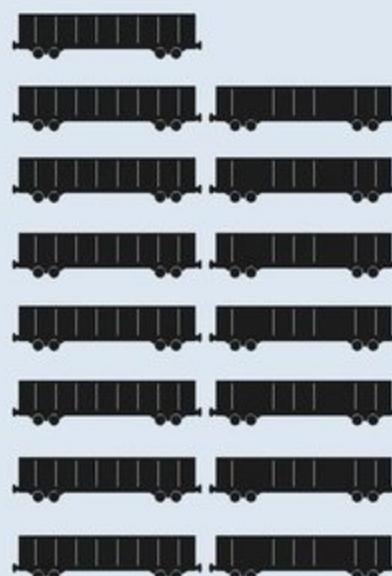
## Barges

A barge is a large boat with a flat bottom that carries goods. Compared to semi trucks, barges are a great way to carry a big load!

Source: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers



1 Barge = 15 Train Cars



= 58 Trucks

Boats on this part of the river carry corn and soybeans south. Much of this food is **shipped** around the world.



river otters

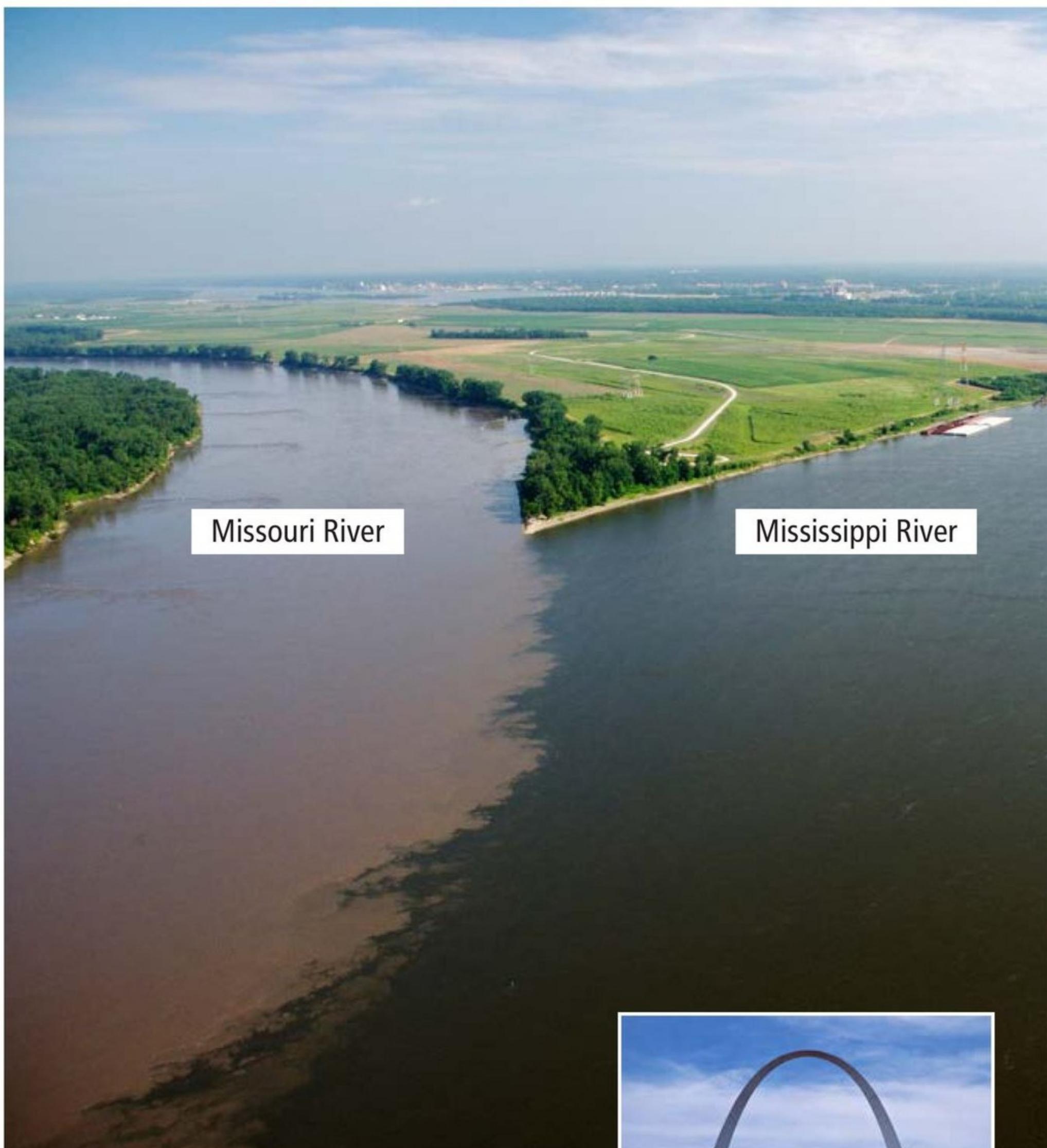
More than fifty kinds of mammals live along the upper river. River otters love to play here.

## Oldies but Goodies

At least 260 kinds of fish live in the Mississippi River. One kind is the pallid sturgeon, one of the oldest fish on Earth. It has hardly changed in 70 million years.



pallid sturgeon



Missouri River

Mississippi River

Eight miles (13 km) north of the St. Louis Arch (right), the Missouri River joins the Mississippi (above).



Farther down, a big, muddy river comes in from the west. It mixes with the clear waters of the Mississippi. The river grows brown and wide.

For the next 190 miles (306 km), the river runs through areas with many wild animals. Bald eagles nest in the tall trees. They eat the fish that swim in the river.





## The Lower River

Another big river joins the Mississippi from the east. The river grows deep and even wider. In many spots, it stretches 1.5 miles (2.4 km) across.

With so much water, the Mississippi is famous for its **floods**. They can cause a lot of damage, but they're not all bad. Along the river's banks, the floods leave behind rich soil for farming.



A man rescues his cat after a 2012 flood in the area around New Orleans, Louisiana. His home was flooded by 12 feet (4 m) of water.



New Orleans, Louisiana

More cities rise up here, and the boats carry iron and steel, rubber, and wood. They carry farm crops such as cotton from the area, too. Some things move north, back up the river, and some move farther south.



An alligator rests on a floating log in Louisiana.

Several types of turtles call this part of the river home. So do alligators!

## Swimming All Summer

Even humans swim in the river sometimes. In the summer of 2002, Slovenian long-distance swimmer Martin Strel swam the entire length of the river, from Minnesota to Louisiana, in sixty-eight days.





This image shows the Mississippi River from space. Here, the river runs from the top left into the Gulf of Mexico at bottom left.

## The Mighty Mississippi

Finally, the Mississippi flows into the Gulf of Mexico. The rain that fell in Lake Itasca three months ago has reached the sea. Someday, some of that water may return as rain to Lake Itasca. It may make the journey all over again. And again . . .

## Glossary

<b>dams</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	barriers that stop the flow of water (p. 6)
<b>floods</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	water that covers land that is normally dry, sometimes caused by too much rain (p. 12)
<b>locks</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	gated sections in a river or canal in which the water level is raised and lowered to allow ships and boats to pass (p. 6)
<b>mammals</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	warm-blooded animals with backbones and hair or fur that nurse their young and have babies that are born live (p. 8)
<b>Mississippi River</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a major river in the United States that flows from Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico (p. 4)
<b>shipped</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	moved goods, especially by a large boat (p. 7)

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Title page: A paddlewheel riverboat on the Mississippi River south of Memphis, Tennessee

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