



RIVERCHAT

Winter/Spring 2024 • A publication of Chattahoochee Riverkeeper



30 YEARS OF KEEPING WATCH

This year we are celebrating the 30th anniversary of Chattahoochee Riverkeeper! Since our founding in 1994, CRK has been at the forefront of environmental advocacy, spearheading efforts to protect and preserve the Chattahoochee River and its lakes and tributaries.

Our journey began with a small group of passionate individuals who recognized the urgent need to address pollution throughout the Chattahoochee River system: the lifeblood of our region and the drinking water source for more than five million people. Under the leadership of CRK's Board of Directors and staff, and with the support of more than 10,000 members and volunteers, we have collectively transformed this precious natural resource.

At the heart of our mission is a commitment to environmental stewardship and community engagement. We have leveraged water monitoring, research, and legal action to ensure our waters are protected now and for future generations. Through advocacy, education, and outreach initiatives, we have helped empower individuals and communities along all 435 river miles to become champions for our waterways.

In the last three decades, CRK is proud to have welcomed more than 100,000 students and teachers

aboard our Floating Classroom program on Lake Lanier and West Point Lake, mobilized thousands of volunteers to remove more than 1,000 tons of trash from the watershed, and prevented billions of gallons of sewage and polluted industrial runoff from entering our drinking water source.

As the challenges faced by the Chattahoochee River have grown over the years, so too have our operations. We now maintain regional offices in Gainesville, metro Atlanta, and LaGrange, as well as laboratory locations at our offices and through partnerships with Columbus State University and the University of North Georgia.

Whether it's stopping spills, combating litter pollution, or educating the next generation of river protectors, our work as environmental stewards never ends. Here's to 30 incredible years of progress and many more in service to a healthy, forever flowing Chattahoochee River.



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Our mission is to advocate and secure the protection and stewardship of the Chattahoochee River, its lakes, tributaries, and watershed.

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MIDDLE CHATTAHOOCHEE OFFICE: 300 Kingfisher Lane, LaGrange, GA 30240

404-352-9828

WWW.CHATTAHOOCHEE.ORG



REFLECTIONS: CELEBRATING 30 YEARS



In 1994, the year Chattahoochee Riverkeeper was founded by Rutherford and Laura Seydel, I was just a high school freshman who loved fishing on the Hooch. I was growing concerned about pollution in the river and remember hearing news of a major pollution lawsuit led by Riverkeeper Sally Bethea against the City of Atlanta. Little did I know, 13 years later I would join the organization as CRK's Watershed Protection Specialist before going on to become Riverkeeper and Executive Director.

Over the past 30 years, we have seen significant changes to the Chattahoochee River system and the demands we place on our waters. Sections of the river that were once written off as permanently polluted are now bouncing back and recovering. Downstream of the City of Atlanta, water quality has dramatically improved thanks to more than \$2 billion dollars in improvements to Atlanta's sewage system – the result of CRK's first lawsuit. We have documented a 99%

decrease in the volume of sewage spills, and as a result, the river downstream of the city is cleaner than it has been in decades.

CRK has experienced tremendous growth since 1994. We have increased our staff, established new regional offices and laboratories, and expanded our water monitoring programs, trash removal efforts, education, advocacy, and outreach. While we have made incredible progress, our work will never be complete: the Chattahoochee River faces new challenges every day, from growing populations to a changing climate. We must all continue to do our part to protect this natural resource. I am proud of all that we have achieved together with your support and look forward to the next 30 years of keeping watch over our waters.


JASON ULSETH
Riverkeeper & Executive Director

FACES OF THE CHATTAHOOCHEE: VANISHA STRAHOTA

A Georgia native and lifelong nature explorer, Vanisha Strahota first learned about Chattahoochee Riverkeeper while pursuing a B.S. in biology at Columbus State University (CSU). After graduation, she joined CRK as an intern and later as our first Columbus Technical Programs Fellow at our newly established CSU lab space. Vanisha's talents are best described by Michael Newbrey, Ph.D., senior lecturer of biology at CSU: "She is bright, dedicated, broadly trained, and an excellent problem solver, making her predisposed to diagnose and identify complex environmental problems using science and technology." When not investigating water quality issues in Columbus and Phenix City, Vanisha enjoys working as a veterinary assistant and spending quality time with her toddler and her husband.



Strahota processes water samples in the CSU lab space.

CHATTAHOOCHEE RIVERKEEPER



ON PATROL WITH CHATTAHOOCHEE RIVERKEEPER

Stream Buffer Restoration Underway

Thanks to a hotline call from a paddler, stream buffer restoration is underway on the Chestatee River in Lumpkin County. Officials worked with the property owner to approve and oversee a restoration plan for the site, which is being conducted over the fall and winter months to have the best chance of success. Hotline calls are important to our work, especially for identifying problems in remote areas with little traffic and visibility. Thanks to all the paddlers, anglers, and hikers who help protect our waters by reporting problems!

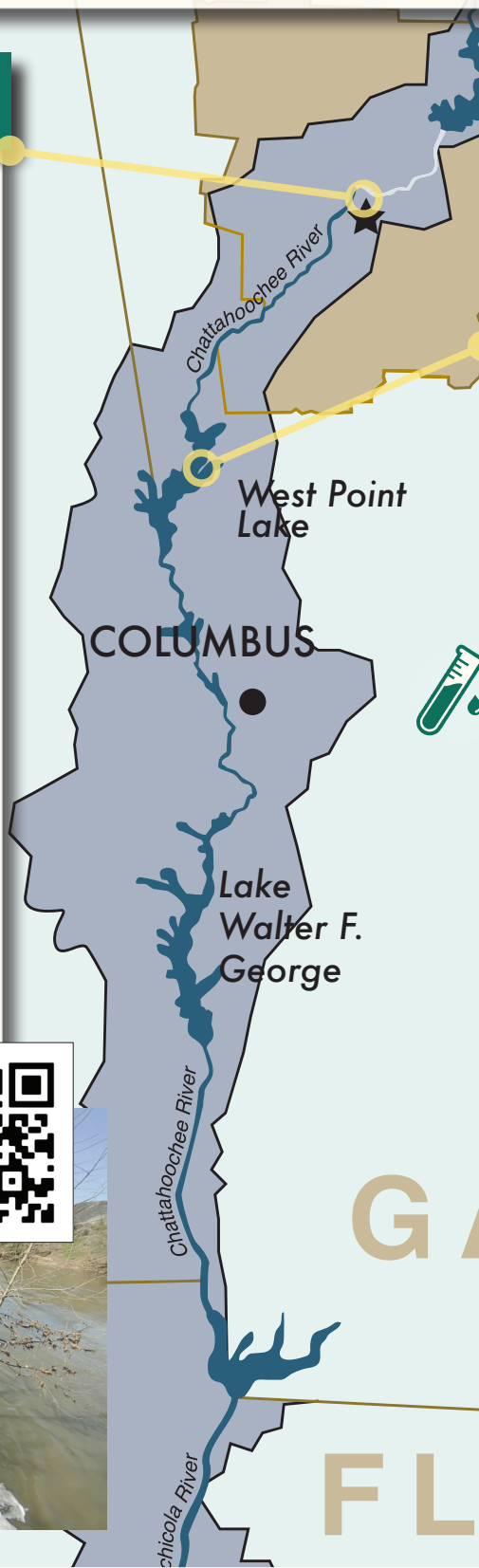


Largest wastewater treatment plant in metro Atlanta fails

During routine river monitoring in March, CRK detected dangerously elevated levels of bacteria in the Chattahoochee and traced the source to the City of Atlanta's R.M. Clayton Water Reclamation Center. Daily water samples collected by CRK at R.M. Clayton's outfall between March 4 and March 14 showed E. coli levels an average of 340 times higher than the amount recommended by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for safe water recreation.

The plant is responsible for treating a large volume of Atlanta's wastewater. The ongoing discharge, caused by a malfunction at the plant, is sending undertreated wastewater into the river in violation of the Clean Water Act. CRK is monitoring the discharge and the river daily and is working with the City of Atlanta to ensure the plant comes back into compliance. High bacteria levels pose serious risks to public health, especially for vulnerable populations like young children, the elderly, and people with weakened immune systems.

Visit our website for the latest information on this ongoing issue: chattahoochee.org/rm-clayton

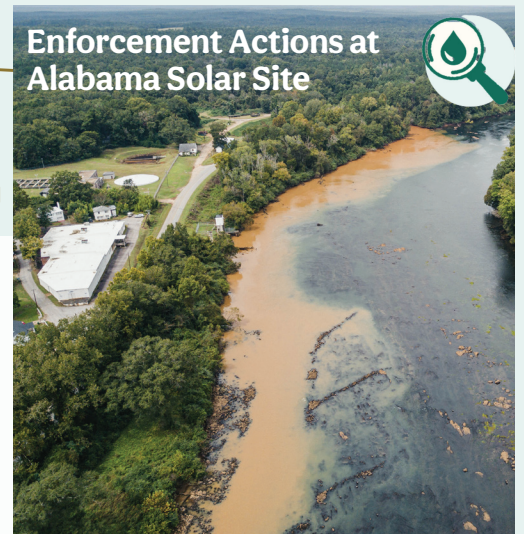


West Point Lake Exceeds Chlorophyll-a Standards in 2023



In 2023, West Point Lake experienced its highest levels of chlorophyll-a (algae) in over a decade, surpassing Georgia Environmental Protection Division (EPD) standards set in 2013. A state-mandated cleanup plan will be triggered if these levels are exceeded again within five years. The City of LaGrange and individual donors support monthly sampling by CRK staff at three lake stations, following an EPD-approved plan. Combined results from CRK and EPD data reveal a gradual increase in algae levels since 2014, with a notable spike in 2023. CRK staff will continue to monitor from April to October and work with stakeholders to protect water quality in the lake.

Enforcement Actions at Alabama Solar Site



In 2018, CRK discovered a plume of muddy water flowing into the river upstream of the City of West Point's drinking water intake. We tracked the source to a solar farm in LaFayette, Alabama and filed a complaint with the EPA. As a result, in November 2022 site owner AL Solar A agreed to pay civil penalties for violation of the Clean Water Act: \$250,000 to the U.S. and \$250,000 to the Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM). In January 2024, the site construction manager Swinerton Builders resolved violations with the EPA and will pay \$540,500 to ADEM and spend \$1,402,000 to purchase 14,020 stream restoration credits.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS by the NUMBERS 2023

TRASH-FREE CHATTAHOOCHEE



2,492 CLEANUP VOLUNTEERS

2,950 POUNDS OF DISPOSABLES AND RECYCLABLES COLLECTED BY TRASH TRAPS

62 Tons of trash and recyclables removed by volunteers



14 In-stream trash traps in operation

48 Volunteer cleanup events

ADVOCACY

107 Industrial sites investigated for compliance with stormwater rules

21 Permit comment letters and testimonials before government agencies to maintain and advance environmental laws



OUTREACH

1,336 NEW MEMBERS

198 RAIN BARRELS DISTRIBUTED

43 COMMUNITY EVENTS AND FESTIVALS ATTENDED



WATER MONITORING

5,559 Neighborhood Water Watch (NWW) samples collected and tested

105 Nutrient samples tested from lakes Lanier and West Point

167 NWW VOLUNTEERS AND PARTNERS

1 Major wastewater treatment plant failure in the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area (CRNA) identified and stopped

147 BacteriALERT samples from the CRNRA tested



228 NWW sites tested weekly



15 SEWER SPILLS FOUND AND STOPPED BY NWW

5 CASSI devices collecting real time water quality data

18 SAMPLES FROM URBAN STREAMS ANALYZED FOR MICROPLASTICS

EDUCATION

70 Industrial operators trained in permit compliance

151 Volunteer hours accumulated by youth participants in Water Warriors programs

6,029 STUDENTS AND TEACHERS ON BOARD THE FLOATING CLASSROOMS



373

PARTICIPANTS IN WATER WARRIORS EDUCATIONAL, PADDLE, AND FLY FISHING EVENTS



THANK YOU TO ALL OUR MEMBERS AND DONORS

FOR HELPING US KEEP WATCH OVER OUR WATERS! Donors July through December 2023

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A NEW HOME ON WEST POINT LAKE

Chattahoochee Riverkeeper's outreach office in the Middle Chattahoochee region has moved from the Downtown Square of LaGrange to the shores of West Point Lake at the new Oakfuskee Conservation Center!

The new space includes an indoor classroom for the land-based portion of the West Point Lake Floating Classroom program. Students can now experience additional hands-on activities during field trips, including a working model of a watershed, an aquarium, and microscopes for the study of phytoplankton and zooplankton species that live in the lake.

The office and laboratory will connect us with ongoing activities at the Oakfuskee Center and allow our staff to continue our regional program work – monitoring water quality on the lake, river, and nearby tributaries. The entire space overlooks West Point Lake, with floor-to-ceiling windows showcasing the reservoir that CRK has worked tirelessly for thirty years to protect and preserve.

The Oakfuskee Conservation Center is a Troup County facility at Pyne Road Park with space for conferences and events. We sincerely appreciate Troup County's invitation to work together on the development of a portion of the lower level of the building. From 2011 to 2023, we were fortunate to have our outreach office in Downtown LaGrange thanks in large part to the leadership of Charles Smith, a long-time member of CRK's Board of Directors.



Welcome to the newly opened outreach office on the shores of West Point Lake.



The new space includes an indoor classroom for the land-based portion of the West Point Lake Floating Classroom program.



The entire space overlooks West Point Lake, with floor-to-ceiling windows

We are

extremely grateful to the donors who helped fund the build-out of our new classroom, office, and laboratory:

Ray C. Anderson Foundation, Callaway Foundation, Charter Foundation, Alice Huffard Richards Fund, WestPoint Fund, Kia Georgia, Interface, Pete and Sally Parsonson, and the Hart Family Foundation.

Visit us

Oakfuskee Conservation Center
300 Kingfisher Lane
LaGrange, GA 30240



Photo by Tom Wilson

THE BANDED WATER SNAKE OF THE COASTAL PLAINS

When enjoying the waters of the Coastal Plains of Georgia, you may encounter one of the region's most common snake species, the banded water snake (*Nerodia fasciata*). This misunderstood snake is often confused with its venomous cousins, the cottonmouth and copperhead.

There are key characteristics that distinguish cottonmouth and copperhead snakes (members of the pit viper family) from water snakes like the banded. Water snakes have narrow heads that are slender like their body shape, while pit vipers have distinct, triangular-shaped heads. Pupil shape is also an important identifier: pit vipers

have slit pupils, while water snakes have round pupils. The bands on pit vipers are also narrow at the top of their bodies, while water snake bands are widest at the top and are typically symmetrical.

Observing behavioral traits can also help with snake identification. Water snakes bask in limbs overhanging the water, while aquatic pit vipers bask on land or low-lying stumps and logs. When swimming, water snakes can and will fully submerge themselves, whereas pit vipers always swim with their heads above the water.

While myths and misconceptions surround water snakes, it is important

to dispel terms like "nope ropes" and "danger noodles." Such labels perpetuate unnecessary fear of these snakes and hinder conservation efforts. Unlike venomous species, banded water snakes pose no threat to humans and should be respected for their role in controlling pest populations. As with all snakes found in the Chattahoochee River Basin, they should be admired from a distance!



Photo by Julia Thompson

PROTECTING THE GEORGIA ASTER: A SPECIES OF CONCERN IN THE CHATTAHOOCHEE BASIN

When most people think of Georgia wildflowers, they picture springtime. However, fall is a wonderful time to get out and see what's blooming. In the heart of the Chattahoochee River Basin, a rare gem of the southeastern United States thrives in quiet resilience—the Georgia aster (*Symphyotrichum georgianum*).

The Georgia aster blooms from September to November, displaying some of the largest blooms of the season. With bright purple flowers and slender leaves, it is hard to mistake for smaller species. It prefers rocky, open areas and is drought-tolerant once established. Numerous pollinators and wildlife depend on it as a food source ahead of the winter months.

This sun-loving plant thrives along roadsides, in open fields, and in meadows. With its special habitat

preferences, this species faces a myriad of threats that have led to it being considered for federal endangered species status. Habitat loss, invasive species encroachment, and climate change are the biggest challenges to its survival.

Despite these challenges, there is hope on the horizon. Conservation initiatives in Georgia are gaining momentum, bringing together local communities, government agencies, and non-profit organizations to protect and restore the species. According to the Georgia Native Plant Society, there are six sites in the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area where the species is being managed. Management projects like these demonstrate the collective commitment to safeguarding the region's rich biodiversity.

After admiring the wildflowers of spring

and summer, remind yourself to get out this fall and see if you can find the elusive Georgia aster near you!



American Lady butterfly perched atop Georgia aster.



BECCA SUE KLEIN ALL KIDS FISH COMMEMORATES FIFTH YEAR

We are thrilled to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the Becca Sue Klein All Kids Fish program, an initiative that has brought together environmental education and outdoor access for children from all walks of life. Named after longtime CRK staffer and fly angler Becca Sue Klein, the program was established in 2019 with the vision of providing children with meaningful experiences in fishing and environmental education regardless of socioeconomic status.

Through partnerships with local schools, community organizations, and outdoor enthusiasts, the program has reached hundreds of children across the Southeast. By offering hands-on fly-fishing experiences, educational workshops, and mentorship opportunities, the program has helped participants foster a deeper sense of connection with and appreciation for nature.

A major achievement of the program has been its commitment to tackling obstacles that prevent historically

underrepresented communities from accessing outdoor spaces. Every participant goes home with their own fly rod and gear so they can continue fishing, breaking down financial and cultural barriers and making outdoor access more equitable.

As we celebrate this milestone, we recognize the dedicated volunteers, generous donors, and passionate educators who have made the Becca Sue Klein All Kids Fish program a resounding success. Their unwavering commitment to environmental education and inclusivity has transformed the lives of countless children and paved the way for a more sustainable future.

By providing children from all backgrounds with opportunities to connect with nature and learn about environmental stewardship, the program has become a catalyst for positive change. In commemorating five impactful years, let us recommit ourselves to creating a world where every child has the chance to experience the wonders of nature and become a champion for the environment.

Interested in learning more?
Text **ALLKIDSFISH** to **41444** and follow the link to get involved today!



Photos by Matthew Choe

UNVEILING MICROPLASTIC CONTAMINATION IN THE CHATTAHOOCHEE RIVER

CRK recently conducted its first-ever comprehensive study of microplastic contamination in tributaries of the Chattahoochee River. Plastic fragments smaller than 5 mm, known as microplastics, pose a growing threat to aquatic ecosystems. While microplastics in oceans have garnered significant media and academic attention, much less is known about their presence in freshwater streams.

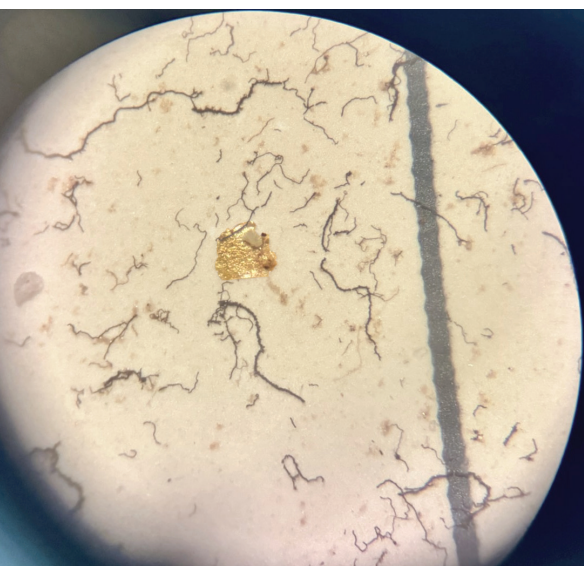
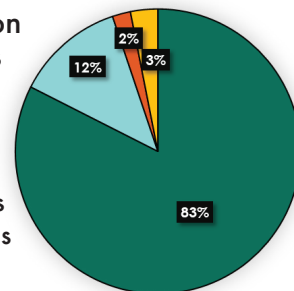
Between February and August of 2023, CRK analyzed 19 water samples from the Chattahoochee River Basin using a protocol developed by the French Broad Riverkeeper in North Carolina. Stream samples are collected in glass jars, filtered to remove sediment, and observed under a microscope to identify microplastics. CRK Fellow Gillian Barber identified plastic fibers, fragments, microbeads, and films in the samples.

Plastic fibers made up 83% of all identified microplastics. On average, Barber discovered 5.11 fibers per liter, 0.79 fragments per liter, 0.13 microbeads per liter, and 0.18 films per liter.

Despite growing concern for their environmental impacts, there are currently no regulatory limits for microplastics concentrations in waterways. "This year-long study sheds light on the presence of microplastics in our rivers, emphasizing the need

Most Common Microplastics

- 83% Fibers
- 12% Fragments
- 2% Microbeads
- 3% Films



Microplastic sample from a tributary (color enhanced).



for continued monitoring and public awareness" says Barber.

CRK plans to continue monitoring microplastics and increase trash removal efforts through volunteer cleanups and in-stream trash traps. Our proactive approach aims to curb plastic entering our waterways before it can degrade into microplastics.

As we grapple with the implications of microplastic contamination, collective efforts to reduce plastic use and promote responsible disposal practices are paramount to safeguarding our waterways for future generations.

WATER QUALITY TRADING PROPOSED FOR LAKE LANIER WATERSHED

Despite progress in reducing some sources of pollution, high nutrient levels in Lake Lanier remain a significant threat to the lake's health. Excess nutrients can lead to algae blooms that harm aquatic life, affect the taste and odor of drinking water, and may cause harmful algal blooms that can make the lake unsafe for swimming. In 2019, the Georgia Environmental Protection Division (EPD), local water utilities, CRK, and other community stakeholders came together to create a cleanup plan to address excess nutrients in the lake. As a result of this plan, the amount of nutrients that flow into Lake Lanier from wastewater treatment plants is tightly controlled.

In 2023, Lumpkin County proposed to build a new wastewater treatment plant to serve a hospital in its growing community. The plant will discharge wastewater (containing nutrients) to the Chestatee River embayment of Lake Lanier; however, under the 2019 cleanup plan, Lumpkin County is not allowed to discharge any new sources of nutrients into the lake. To meet the wastewater

needs of the community, Lumpkin County is proposing to use Georgia EPD's 2023 "Guidance for Water Quality Trading" policy. The novel policy allows Lumpkin County to "borrow" nutrient credits that Georgia EPD has allocated to Gwinnett County for their future wastewater discharges to Lake Lanier.

This is likely the first project to utilize

the new policy. In February, CRK commented on the project's draft permit and trading plan, and asked Georgia EPD to require more stringent and frequent monitoring to detect any pollution issues that arise as a result of the trade. CRK will closely follow the project as it progresses and continue to monitor water quality in Lake Lanier to ensure the water quality trade is successful.



CRK conducts algae sampling at 10 stations around Lake Lanier every year between April and October.

TOWARD A TRUCE IN THE WATER WARS?

In December of 2023, CRK was pleased to learn about a proposed Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint Agreement to cool the decades-long "water wars."

The announcement from the governors of Alabama and Georgia established clear strategies to work towards a resolution of years of conflict over how to share water. Since the 1990s, one of the initial strategies to resolve the "water wars" was an agreement on how much water was enough to sustain the states' and the river's futures. This agreement proposes to do just that, and that is a reason to be optimistic.

CRK remains cautious because we are still learning about the details of the agreement. We have not evaluated the full implications or possible impacts of the proposed "flow objectives" on Columbus (Georgia), Columbia (Alabama), and other parts of the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint River Basin.

Additionally, we want to ensure any changes to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Water Control Manual do not result in changes to existing flow requirements, including a minimum flow requirement of 750 cubic feet per

second (cfs) at Peachtree Creek. CRK has historically advocated for a more protective minimum flow requirement at this location to ensure water quality standards are met downstream.

CRK looks forward to actively engaging in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' public and environmental review of the proposed agreement's flow objectives in 2024. We will work to ensure the river and its communities continue to have sustainable access to clean and plentiful water as we enter a future shaped by the impacts of climate change.





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THE HEART OF THE HOOCH: A PATRON CELEBRATION

On September 22, 2023, CRK supporters and friends gathered at The Stave Room in Atlanta to celebrate the people and communities who have devoted their time and talents for the love of the Chattahoochee River.

We were proud to recognize CRK Board members Richard Jacobson and David Shaffer with the River Heroes Award; Georgia Interfaith Power and Light with the River Steward Award; and Yamaha Motor Corporation, USA, with River Guardian Award. These honorees have made it possible for people across all regions, races, and religions to connect with the Chattahoochee River in meaningful ways.

Thanks to the generosity of those who attended in person and participated in the silent auction and raffle online, the celebration raised \$368,000 to sustain our work to protect and preserve the Chattahoochee River! This crucial funding supports trash removal, educational programs, water quality testing and investigations, and more.

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SAVE THE DATES FOR THIS YEAR'S MAJOR EVENTS:



WATERFEST

April 20 Gainesville, GA



**BECCA SUE KLEIN
ALL KIDS FISH**

May 4 Helen, GA

August 24 Atlanta, GA

October 19 Helen, GA



**30th ANNUAL
PATRON
CELEBRATION**

October 4 Atlanta, GA

Keep up with all of CRK's events at chattahoochee.org/events.