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Insect signals Rouge River is on mend

Discovery of caddisfly suggests watershed's conditions improving

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The Detroit News

Change does not come overnight to a river system that has the history of pollution the Rouge River has.

But this has been a good year for the Rouge, and indications of improved conditions continue to pop up.

The latest is the discovery of caddisflies in Johnson Creek in Salem Township, part of the westernmost section of the Rouge's watershed. The moth-like insects are uncommon in these parts and they are particularly vulnerable to environmental factors.

"When you have these sensitive insects along the river, they have the need for high levels of dissolved oxygen in the water," said Sally Petrella, the volunteer monitoring program manager for Friends of the Rouge. "They need very cold and clean water. Their presence is an indication of good water quality conditions."

Volunteers with Friends of the Rouge River discovered the insects in March and just recently had one identified. It's the second big insect find of the year.

In January, while working along the main branch of the river, volunteers turned up a stonefly. It was the first time a stonefly was found in the main branch or one of its tributaries. And like the caddisfly, it's an insect that does not show up near polluted waters.

Conservation groups and government agencies have catalogued several other indicators of improving water quality in the River Rouge watershed in recent years. They include:

- Salmon that have traveled up the mouth of the Rouge River as far as the city of Wayne.
- Rainbow trout flourishing in the Rouge's lower branch.
- Beaver activity near Tonquish Creek in Westland.

The caddisfly is more unusual, however. The species identified from Johnson Creek is called *Rhyacophila lobifera* and while it is reported regularly in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and Ontario, Michigan has seen few findings.

"It's usually an indicator of good clean water," said Rich Merritt, a professor of entomology at Michigan State University. "But it's more accurate to say it's uncommon than rare. There are a lot of reasons some insects may not have been found with regularity, including the fact that no one may have been actively looking for them before."

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