

# The Vermilion River

The Vermilion River of northern [Ohio](#) in the [United States](#), is 66.9 miles (107.7 km) long and flows northward into [Lake Erie](#), draining an area of 268 square miles (690 km<sup>2</sup>). The name alludes to the reddish clay that is the predominant local soil along its route. The city of Vermilion, Ohio was named by Native Americans for the red clay along the river banks. *Oulanie Thepy* (Red Creek) in the Native American language was translated by early French explorers as “Vermilion River”.



*Vermilion River North Ridge Bridge @ Bacon Woods, west of Brownhelm, Ohio June 12, 2020. Note slight red coloration of river water.*

The word vermilion came from the Old French word *vermeillon*, which was derived from *vermeil*, from the Latin *vermiculus*, the diminutive of the Latin word *vermis*, or worm. The name originated because it had a similar color to the natural red dye made from an insect, the *Kermes vermilio*, which was widely used in Europe.

The Vermilion River flows from Mud Lake in the town of Bailey Lakes in Ashland County and follows a generally northward course through Huron, Erie and Lorain Counties past the towns of Savannah, Ruggles, Fitchville, Clarksfield, Wakeman, Birmingham and into city of Vermilion, where it empties into Lake Erie.





*The Vermilion River passes through the Augusta Anne Olsen State Nature Preserve, near Wakeman, Ohio*

As the river flows gently northward, and just before it flows into Lake Erie, it passes through a deep gorge, cut by the river over time. This gorge may be easily viewed by travelers along Ohio State Route 2, as the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT) has built a rest area at the point where the river flows under this major highway. The rest area for the westbound traffic features a unique nature trail, which winds through the native hardwood forest along the route, to the edge of the gorge, where travelers may see first-hand the beauty and majesty of this natural feature. A major archaeological site, known as the Franks Site, sits atop the gorge walls; it was once a large village of the Erie tribe of Native Americans. It is unfortunate that this trail has been closed for repairs for the past couple of years. We hope it opens once again to the public for viewing and enjoyment of a truly magnificent natural feature.





*The scenic overlook at the Vermilion Rest Area along State Route 2.  
Note the closed for maintenance sign on the fence.*

The Erie tribe members used the reddish, clay soil, often mixed with the juice of bright red berries to paint their faces for ceremonial or other functions. The early European explorers (1787-1791) assumed that the clay and berry juice mixture was the same as the substance “vermilion” (a highly prized commodity in Europe). Even though the actual mixture was worthless brown-purple clay mud and juice, the name “vermilion” stuck, and the river and town of Vermilion have been known as such ever since.

Three short tributaries are known as branches or forks of the Vermilion River. The Southwest Branch Vermilion River and the East Branch Vermilion River join the Vermilion in Huron County. The East Fork Vermilion River (see image below) rises in Lorain County and joins the Vermilion in Erie County.





*Vermilion River East Fork looking south, at Green Road,  
just south of Birmingham, Ohio. April 29, 2020.*

Throughout history the Vermilion River was often central to many industrial or manufacturing enterprises including ship building, fishing, quarrying and milling, lumber and furnaces of the Geauga Iron Company of Painesville. Today however little if any industry is located along the banks of the Vermilion, save marinas and fishing outlets and gear. Following the course of the Vermilion through Erie, Lorain and southward to Ashland county, the river runs through profitable farming country. Farms raise cattle, corn, soybean and other human needs. The small towns encountered along the rivers course are small-town Midwest America, with their small, crowd-free Post Office, a general store, one bank, maybe a gas station, auto parts store and sometimes as in Wakeman, a small, fine restaurant may be found.





*Farming along the Vermilion River watershed, Ashland County, Ohio.*

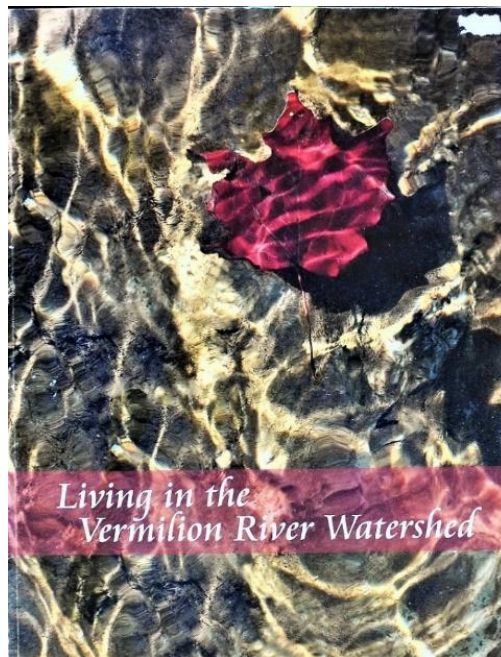
Several years ago, while browsing through a bookstore in Wooster, Ohio, my wife and I came across a very fine, softbound book titled *“Living in the Vermilion River Watershed.”* A glance at some of the included articles within the edited book soon indicated that we should purchase this fine addition to our natural history library. My first and foremost reason was the fact that four of the 20 articles included in the volume were written by colleagues at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History where I have been a Research Scientist since 2011. One of the items, penned by our good friend Diane Lucas, *“Mosses and Liverworts: the first green of Spring”*, is a well written and illustrated article on those small, often overlook “green-all-year” plants, the mosses (bryophytes) and their kin. We were especially pleased to see coverage on the liverworts, surely a neglected part of the beauty of Spring.

Diane is a professional scientist, now retired and volunteers at the Cleveland Museum in their Botany Department, as a world expert on the mosses. Before she began, for the most part, her self-taught expertise on these little-known plants, she was a professional astronomer, building her own telescopes, including making and polishing and installing her own compound lenses into self-built telescopes! I have known Diane for about 8 or 9 years and have visited with her in her laboratory and herbarium where she proudly talks of the many specimens of mosses, she calls friends and has studied well their morphology and ecology. Diane is a quiet, reserved, professional always with a story or tale of her collecting skills and times in the field searching for new species of mosses, liverworts or other plants of interest.





*Diane Lucas at the herbarium cabinet checking her mosses.*



*Garvin, Mary C. and Jan Cooper 2008.  
Living in the Vermilion River Watershed.  
Western Reserve Land Conservancy,  
Firelands Chapter & Oberlin College, 119 pages.*



The Vermilion River is among my favorite rivers of the world. It does not have along its course magnificent waterfalls, as does the Zambezi in Zambia, or even rapids as does the Niagara; nor does it foster iron and steel works along its shores as does the Cuyahoga or Detroit Rivers, it does not even have a famous resort or tropical “get-away” as does the Amazon along its many miles of green. But to me, the Vermilion is a quiet, peaceful passage of freedom, and tranquility. It marks at several points along its course familiar locations to tell us where we are geographically and which direction we are travelling. Near Birmingham, it passed through the beautiful Schoepfle Gardens, where people often visit for a picnic lunch, or simply a quiet walk alone along the many paths of the garden. One special path, not often followed by visitors to the botanical garden is an unimproved pathway along the bank of the Vermilion River. It is here where my wife Susan and I pause to inhale the scents of life, and the soft, gentle breezes of the day. We are one with nature and pleased with the world. Some things are just right.



*Susan walks along the pathway following the Vermilion River at Schoepfle Gardens, November, 2011.*

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