

## *The Cahaba River*

The Cahaba River is Alabama's longest remaining stretch of free-flowing river and a global treasure trove of biological diversity. It is the primary drinking water source for one-fifth of the state's people in the Birmingham metro area. Flowing from its headwaters northeast of Birmingham, AL until it reaches the Alabama River southwest of Selma, the Cahaba River is 194 miles long and drains an area of 1,870 square miles.

### **About the Cahaba River Watershed**

The 1,870 square mile Cahaba watershed drains urban and rural areas, farms and forests on its course from the southern Appalachian Mountains through the coastal plain to the Alabama River. About 200 square miles of the headwaters are the primary raw water source for the Birmingham Water Works Board system, the largest water provider in Alabama.

### **International Recognition for the Cahaba River**

International conservation organizations consider our southeastern rivers to be globally significant ecosystems and the Cahaba to be especially important to conserve for its rich biological diversity and scenic beauty. The Cahaba has more fish species per mile than any other river in North America and a similar richness of turtle, crayfish, snail, and mussel species. Eight previously undescribed plant species were recently discovered on the Bibb County Glades next to the Little Cahaba River. Sixty-one rare plant species have been described from these unusual Ketona limestone glades. The Cahaba pebblesnail, Alabama's only endemic Cahaba freshwater snail, once thought to be extinct, was relocated by Dr. Stephanie Clark, then with the University of Alabama.

The rich biodiversity of the Cahaba River has merited these accolades:

1. Cahaba named by The Nature Conservancy as one of eight "hotspots of aquatic biodiversity" in the U.S. that must be saved.
2. Cahaba protection is part of a global partnership between The Coca-Cola Company and the World Wildlife Fund.

3. Named in 2007 edition of National Geographic College Atlas of the World, along with southeastern rivers, as one of six global examples of biological diversity.

### **Economic Value of the Cahaba River**

The Cahaba is a major asset to the urban area and Alabama. Much of the Cahaba's main channel is wild, beautiful, and very popular for canoeing, fishing, swimming, and environmental education. Canoe and boat launches are accessible from downtown Birmingham and many suburban and rural communities. The river is central to eco-tourism strategies for rural counties, including those in the Black Belt of Alabama.

### **Threats to the Cahaba River**

Storm water impacts from suburban development in the upper watershed are the greatest challenge to the river system's water supply, water quality, and biodiversity. Sediment runoff from construction is the immediate threat. In addition, the destabilizing force of increased storm runoff volume from additional paving and roofs is a swiftly growing problem. In recent years the damage has become much more apparent in the river and its tributaries: lower flows in dry weather, mud-covered and radically reshaped stream beds and collapsed stream banks, muddy and algae-choked water, and degraded conditions for recreation and wildlife.

The US Congress has created the 3,500 acre Cahaba River National Wildlife Refuge (CARNWR) and approved another 3,500 acre expansion if willing sellers are interested. This Bibb County refuge is administered by the US Fish & Wildlife Service.

*Information retrieved by Donna Pickens from several sources, including the following:*

[https://www.fws.gov/refuge/Cahaba\\_River/about.html](https://www.fws.gov/refuge/Cahaba_River/about.html)

<https://cahabariversociety.org/about-the-cahaba-river/>