

Introduction to Prairie Rivers

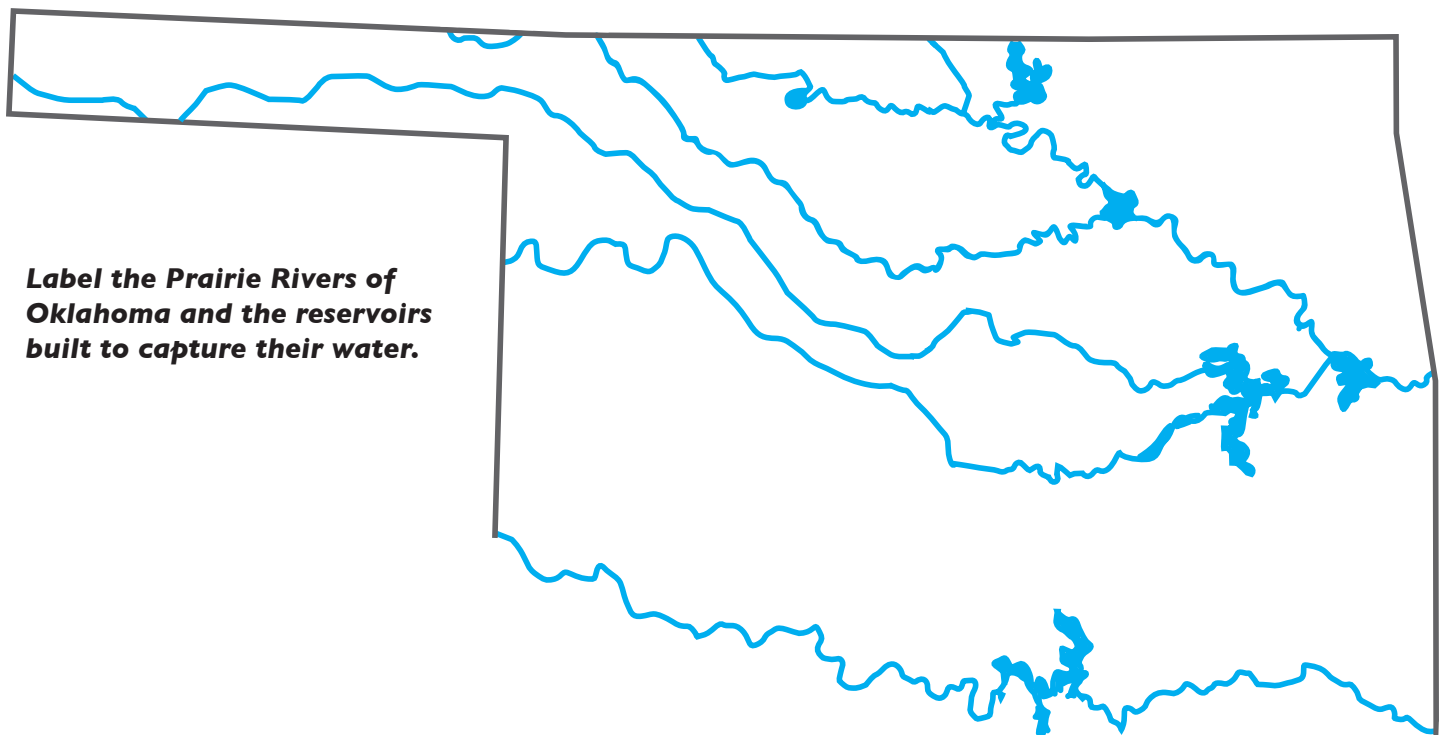
Rivers have a vital role in the landscape, although river water makes up only about 0.2% of the Earth's freshwater. Rivers are like highways — with water, animals, and seeds travelling along this road. Energy and nutrients also flow along this corridor. Rivers and their associated wetlands help to absorb and drain rainwater.

The large, sandy-bottomed prairie rivers of the Great Plains are generally under appreciated in spite of their biological diversity and wildlife viewing potential. On a brief walk along one of these captivating rivers, you may observe dozens of herons fishing along the water's edge, turtle tracks criss-crossing in the sand, coyotes skirting the edge of the trees, migrating shore birds wading in isolated puddles and pecking in the mud deposits, leaves of the majestic cottonwood waving in the breeze, and fish spawning in the shallow, turbid water.

Many prairie rivers are “braided” — meaning that the river is divided into several smaller channels that are separated by temporary islands or sandbars. Braided rivers occur in relatively flat regions, such as western and central Oklahoma, with an abundant supply of sediment. Eroding sandbars and sandy river banks contribute to the sediment that is deposited in the river channel creating the islands. Braided and meandering rivers are usually highly mobile with the river channel moving during flood events (see the activity “How does flooding change the landscape?”).



Braided and meandering section of the Canadian River south of Lexington, Oklahoma.



Label the Prairie Rivers of Oklahoma and the reservoirs built to capture their water.

