

JAMES RIVER WATCH



2026
RECAP

PROGRAM OVERVIEW



Volunteers are trained to gather water quality samples, and also to record valuable data such as air and water temperature, conductivity, salinity, and turbidity. Water samples are analyzed through several different methods depending on where in the watershed the sample was taken to determine if bacteria levels exceed thresholds established by the Virginia Department of Health (VDH).

The James River Watch map is updated before the weekend, when river use is at its peak, to inform the public which recreational sites could be considered unsafe and which ones are safe for recreation. At its core, James River Watch is about empowering people to engage safely with the James River and its tributaries and promoting an interest in river recreation and issues impacting the watershed.

The 2026 James River Watch season was one that saw a record number of participants. The James River Watch program engages citizen scientists in water quality monitoring with the dual benefits of fostering interest in river stewardship, recreation, and advocacy and providing critical data to inform the public of the safety and health of waters throughout the entire watershed.

Over the course of the summer, 116 volunteers visited 36 monitoring locations each Thursday from Memorial Day through Labor Day, collecting 528 water samples from sites across the entire watershed from the Allegheny Highlands to the Chesapeake Bay. This program is one of many James River Association programs that focuses on a community-driven approach that can help shape a future in which river access is both safe and inviting, ensuring that more people can safely swim, paddle, fish, or simply relax along the banks or on the rocks.

2026 PROGRAM RECAP



36

MONITORING STATIONS



528

WATER SAMPLES
COLLECTED



116

VOLUNTEERS ENGAGED

KEY TAKEAWAYS

FROM MEMORIAL DAY THROUGH LABOR DAY, DATA SHOWS THE JAMES WAS SAFE FOR SWIMMING & RECREATING 87% OF THE TIME.



WATERSHED-WIDE RESULTS

2026 OVERALL
PASSING RATE

87% 

2025 OVERALL
PASSING RATE

76%

14-YEAR AVERAGE
PASSING RATE

83%

A high school student paddles the Upper James as part of the 2025 James River Leadership Expeditions.

The 2026 River Watch data resulted in an overall passing rate of 87% for the watershed, well above previous years' results of 77% in 2025, largely due to fewer heavy precipitation events and storms throughout the summer of 2026.

Compared to the program-long 14 year average of 83%, this year's passing rate shows the impacts of stormwater on aging infrastructure and impervious surfaces throughout our watershed and why it's important to stay informed of river conditions in your area before you recreate on the James!

WE ENCOURAGE ANYONE FISHING, SWIMMING, PADDLING, OR RECREATING ON THE JAMES THIS SUMMER TO CHECK OUR JAMES RIVER WATCH MAP AND "KNOW BEFORE YOU GO."

KEY RESULTS

Results indicate higher than average water quality, with an average higher than 2025 and the programs 14-year average.

The entire watershed saw an overall passing rate of 87%, and would have been even higher were it not for continually concerning conditions at Powhatan Creek and College Landing just outside of Williamsburg. JRA has been working with Hampton Road Sanitation District (HRSD) to find a source of and resolution to these issues.

LYNCHBURG

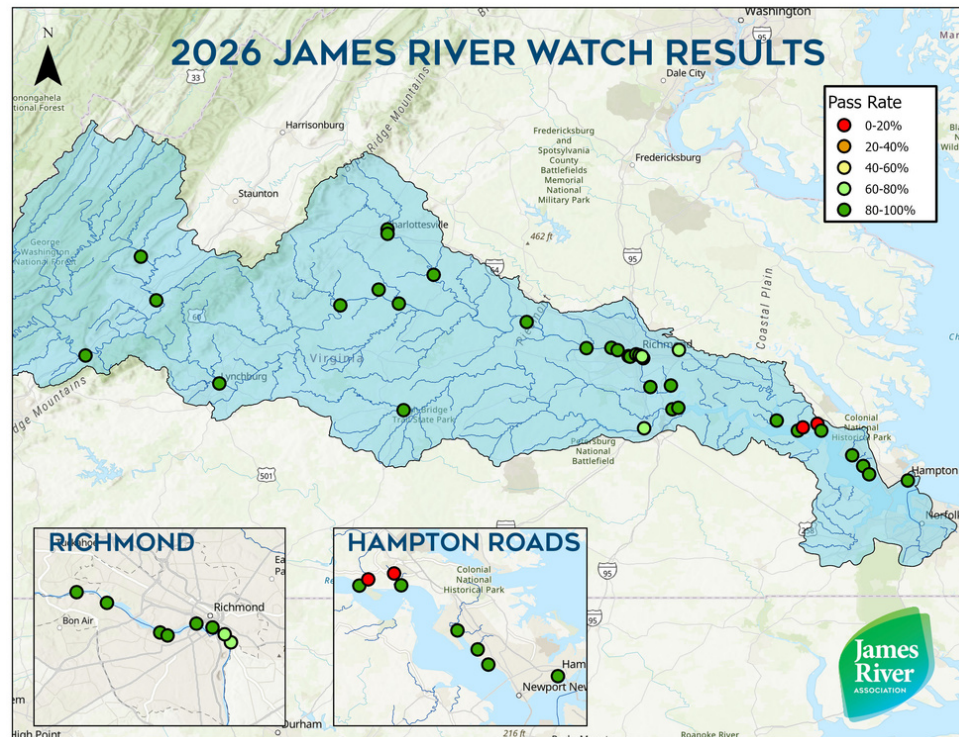
Our Riveredge Park monitoring site had safe levels of bacteria for 100% of samples taken.

CHARLOTTESVILLE & SCOTTSVILLE

There are six sites in this region, three of which are monitored by Rivanna Conservation Alliance. The overall passing rate for the six sites was 95%.

RICHMOND

We monitor eight sites in Richmond, beginning upstream to the west at Huguenot Flatwater, and stretching to Rockets Landing just east of the City. The combined passing rate of all eight sites was 90% -- which now includes Chapel Island, a site that had safe levels of bacteria for 69% of weekly samples, up from 29% in 2025 thanks to action taken by the City of Richmond in response to JRW monitoring.



WILLIAMSBURG

The five Williamsburg area monitoring sites saw an overall passing rate of 61%, which is significantly weighed down due to persistent issues at Powhatan Creek and College Landing. Not including those two sites, the other three Williamsburg area sites had a combined passing rate of 94%.

NEWPORT NEWS & HAMPTON

Four sites are monitored by the Peninsula Master Naturalists. Three sites are on tributaries that are at or near where they empty into the James River, and one is directly on the James River at Riverside Beach. All four sites had safe levels of bacteria for a combined 88% of samples taken.

RIVER WATCH PARTNERS



A crucial element of the program's reach and impact is the network of partner organizations and businesses that contribute time, expertise, and logistical support. Virginia State University, Peninsula Master Naturalists, Rivanna Conservation Alliance, Rockbridge Area Conservation, Allegheny-Blue Ridge Alliance, American Water, Twin River Outfitters, and Appomattox River Company have all played vital roles in supporting data collection and volunteer engagement.

These collaborations allow JRA to have a wider and more meaningful presence across the watershed, making the data more representative of conditions across the entirety of the river and allowing swimmers, fishers, and kayakers in more remote areas of the watershed to remain informed of river conditions throughout the summer.

Additionally, we would like to acknowledge that James River Watch is made possible in part through funding from the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality Citizen Water Quality Monitoring Grant Program.

