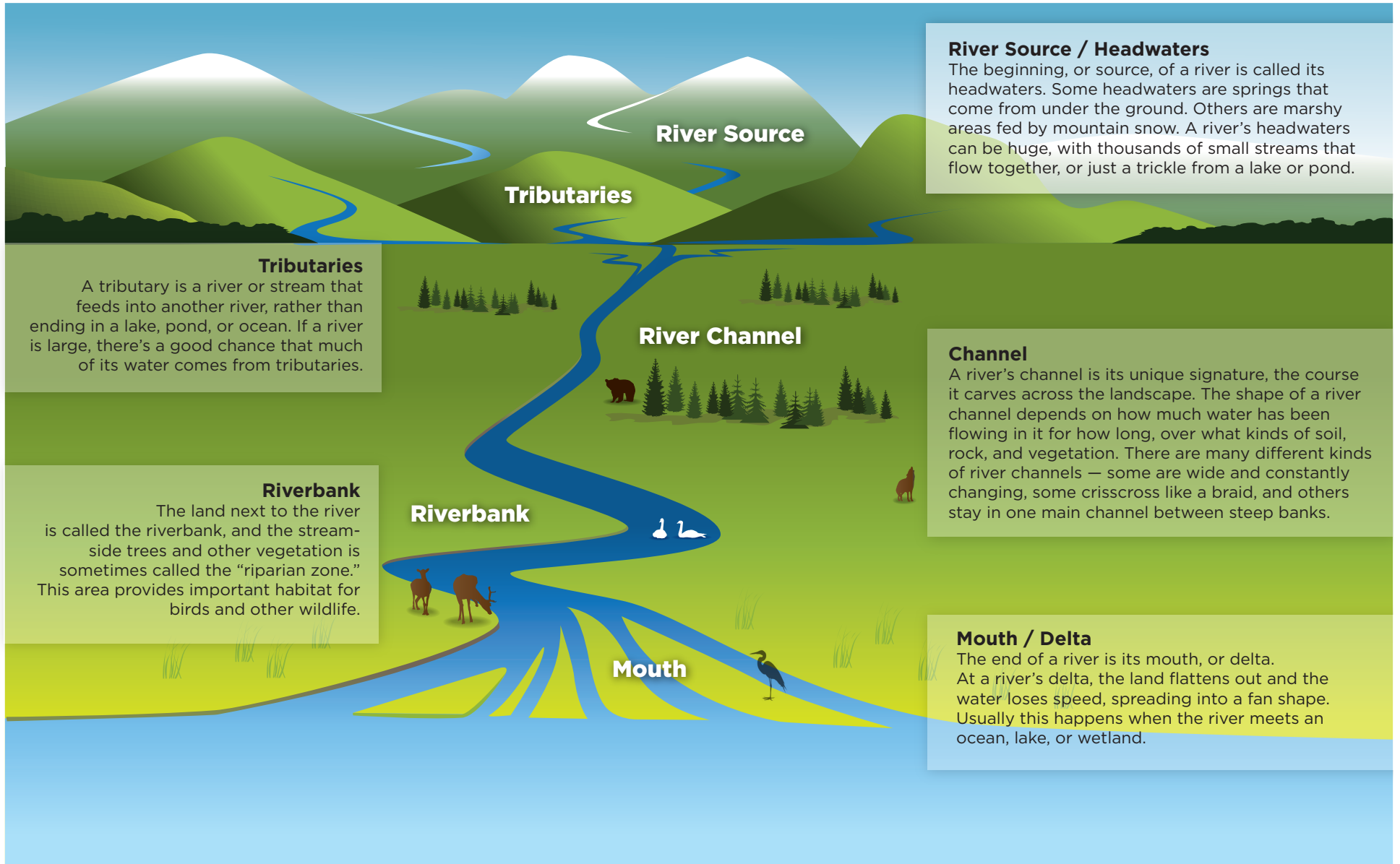


RIVER ANATOMY

The United States has more than 250,000 rivers — a total of 3.5 million miles. No two of these rivers are the same. Each river is unique to its landscape, winding through low foothills and valleys, rushing clear and cold from mountain forests, or sweeping warm and muddy down desert canyons. No matter how different our rivers are, however, they share some basic features:



River Source / Headwaters

The beginning, or source, of a river is called its headwaters. Some headwaters are springs that come from under the ground. Others are marshy areas fed by mountain snow. A river's headwaters can be huge, with thousands of small streams that flow together, or just a trickle from a lake or pond.

Tributaries

A tributary is a river or stream that feeds into another river, rather than ending in a lake, pond, or ocean. If a river is large, there's a good chance that much of its water comes from tributaries.

River Channel

Channel

A river's channel is its unique signature, the course it carves across the landscape. The shape of a river channel depends on how much water has been flowing in it for how long, over what kinds of soil, rock, and vegetation. There are many different kinds of river channels — some are wide and constantly changing, some crisscross like a braid, and others stay in one main channel between steep banks.

Riverbank

The land next to the river is called the riverbank, and the stream-side trees and other vegetation is sometimes called the "riparian zone." This area provides important habitat for birds and other wildlife.

Riverbank

Mouth

Mouth / Delta

The end of a river is its mouth, or delta. At a river's delta, the land flattens out and the water loses speed, spreading into a fan shape. Usually this happens when the river meets an ocean, lake, or wetland.