Freshwater mussels (Unionidae) occur in nearly all of Michigan’s rivers and lakes. They play an important role in aquatic ecosystems, help sustain fish habitat, act as indicators of environmental change and water quality. Unfortunately, freshwater mussels are one of the most endangered groups of animals in North America. Currently two thirds of Michigan’s mussel species are at risk.

Freshwater mussels can be identified to species by the characteristics of their shells. These include bumps, ridges, size, shape, green rays, and other characteristics. Shells of the same species are like pieces of art created by the same artist. Each one is different, yet there is a consistent theme of shape, color, and texture that holds true.

For more information about freshwater mussels, refer to the “Freshwater Mussels of Michigan” brochure (available from Michigan Natural Features Inventory, https://mnfi.anr.msu.edu/, 517-284-6200). For assistance in identifying mussel species or information on aquatic conservation, contact Pete Badra at Michigan Natural Features Inventory (badrap@msu.edu).

Funding was provided by the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy; the Michigan Department of Natural Resources; and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Shells pictured were provided by the University of Michigan Museum of Zoology, Mollusk Division, https://lsa.umich.edu/ummz/mollusks.html, except for lake floater, which was provided by Dr. David Zanatta, Central Michigan University. Shells are shown approximately life size.