



**The Pigeon River flows unimpeded through the deconstructed Song of the Morning dam (exits on bottom right). The former pond, now vegetated, is in the center of the photo. @ Dale Franz**

## Dam is gone from Pigeon River

On the brisk, sunny morning of Oct. 26, 2015, a work crew began prying apart a dam that has stood, in one form or another, in the pristine Pigeon River for more than a century.

Four days later, all the visible structure was gone. A small crowd met to see the open river, then the crew resumed breaking up concrete footers that were found below the riverbed, lifting the pieces with a scoop shovel, and taking them from a Pigeon moving vigorously through the opening.

People stood looking at the bare earth sloping down to the water, marveled at the scene, and spoke of the wonder of natural things being restored. It was almost as if a subdi-

vision that had replaced a meadow was itself removed and the meadow restored. Brad Jensen, executive director of Huron Pines, looked out at the meadow now surrounding the river in what was, for a century, a pond behind a dam.

“There’s not a lot like this when you look around northern Michigan,” he said. Later he observed, “Even a trout of little ambition will now be able to go upstream here.”

Sam Gabby, a resident at the yoga retreat, said the new timber bridge will open things up with a “whole different atmosphere. The dam was getting kind of tired.” Sam Gabby gathered data in the dam removal project, measuring dissolved oxygen, turbidity, and temperature every morning. “It’s symbolic,” he said, “the removing of blockages. On so many levels, it’s been a healing thing for all of us.”

Linda Gabby, chair of Song of the Morning's board, said, "Now we have a living body that's moving through. The river has a voice. The river demonstrates: this is what flowing looks like."

Removing the structure embedded in an earthen bank 18 feet high from river to roadbed went faster than expected with no mishaps. Mud and sand swirled downstream only in the quantities expected. Here's how it went, starting Monday morning:

-First, the big shovel lifted wood and metal, dumping them piece by piece in a pile at one end of the roadway across the river. Then, step by step, the Elmer's contracting crew:

-Stretched orange snow fence across the river channel downstream to catch any timber accidentally falling into the water as the dam was dismantled.

-Dug out the earth in stages five or six feet down from around the concrete and hauled it out of the way.

-Crushed the concrete exposed by the digging and hauled it to onsite disposal.

-Continued digging down and crushing until the entire structure of the dam and surrounding embankment were gone.

-Sloped the banks at a 3 to 1 angle from the water up to the remaining roadway on either side of the new opening and prepared to:

-Drive four piles that resemble telephone poles into the ground as supports for a new bridge.

-Install a timber bridge 72 feet long across the opening above the Pigeon River.

The whole project was expected to be complete by Thanksgiving.

Approaching the site on foot along the Song of the Morning Ranch roadway that first Monday morning, a visitor heard the chuck-chuck whisper of the Pigeon River flowing and the low rumble of machinery blending in the fall air. It sounded pretty much as the impending dam removal was characterized a few nights before by Chairman John Walters at the Pigeon River Country Advisory Council meeting:

"Music to our ears."

Lisha Ramsdell of Huron Pines, project coordinator, updated the advisory council that night. Bids came in higher than expected—a good sign of the recovering



**The entire dam structure began coming down on October 26.**

© Dale Franz



**Lisha Ramsdell stands with Jeff Allen, job foreman, on ground just before his crew began removing it from the river along with just about everything visible between the two fences on the right.**

© Dale Franz

economy, but a challenge for funding, one that was met by contributors. All approvals were in place.

The dam used to be the only source of power on the property. All the utilities spider webbed out from there. By August, all of that had been disconnected from the dam. Public power's been restored to both sides of the river, with a transformer on each side and lines rerouted under the river. Phone cables have been moved. All that was left by October was the concrete structure and the old turbines.

In late September, J&N contractors dug a sand trap downstream. The flow slows over the large hole in the streambed and much of the sand drops into the trap, to be excavated afterward. "It's our major safety measure for minimizing the impact of sediment that's going to" flow during removal of the dam, Ramsdell told the council. "Some sand

is going to mobilize downstream. We've done our best to estimate how much.

"It's important to remember that, just like any surgery, there's going to be some bleeding. The river's going to get turbid for awhile. We don't expect that it's anything that should alarm anyone."

Ramsdell, who has shepherded the agreement by all parties to remove the dam, said, "It has been for many in this room a long time coming. We had fantastic support from a variety of funders, from businesses, individuals, foundations. It's going to be a showpiece not only for the Pigeon River, not only for this area, but really for the state. It's something the DNR has invested very heavily in."

Describing the timber bridge, Ramsdell noted, "That's 72 feet long. We wanted to ensure that the center span spans the whole river width. The whole point of doing that is so the river won't even know that there's a road over it.

"The contractor's confident everything will be wrapped up before Thanksgiving. Heavy rains they can't work in, per the DEQ permit, so we keep our fingers crossed. We will look to do a pretty large ribbon-cutting celebration in the springtime. It's very important for everybody who's been involved and invested in so many different ways to be able to come out and celebrate that success."

DNR's Fisheries Division reports that the trout population has rebounded since the spill in 2008, and with the pond gone for more than a year, temperature readings upstream and downstream are now similar. Looking on Oct. 30 at the river now able to create its own natural level, Dave Borgeson from DNR Fisheries Division said, "steelhead will now have access upstream—they never used to." He said the division will be interested to see how the dynamics work out upstream with brook trout and browns.

## Looking down into history

Water flowing toward the disassembled dam on the Pigeon River is at this very moment contributing to our view of the past. Four boats sunk long ago are emerging from sand in the channel above the former pond at Song of the Morning Ranch.

The four craft sit in the stream bed next to islands at the upper part of what was the pond. The islands formed, mostly from organic material, as the pond filled in over the last hundred years from materials settling out as the water slowed down just upstream of the dam.

The boats are lodged in sand 3-4 feet deep that is expected to start moving quickly once river flow has sufficiently deepened the channel running downstream through the former impoundment.



**Four boat hulls emerge as river resumes normal flow.**

© Joe Jarecki



**Sand trap preparation on September 18.**

© Joe Jarecki

Judi and Joe Jarecki and John Ernst, a retired engineer, are monitoring river flow closely, so that when the sand does start to move quickly, the sandtrap dug in September downstream of the dam can be emptied fast enough to prevent the sand flowing farther downstream. If that sand, which has been accumulating for more than a century, suddenly inundates the Pigeon downstream, it would cause what river experts call "negative impact" on stream health. There is more than half a mile of sand upstream from the emerging boats, poised to let loose some time soon.

The story of the four boats, and whatever else may be uncovered, might remain beyond accurate telling. But such forms from other days offer much food for thought to anyone standing quietly in contemplation by the river.



## Pathway map fresh off the presses

The association has just revised the High Country Pathway and Pigeon River Forest topographic map in time for the holidays.

Printed on a fibrous paper that resists water and tearing, the map provides up-to-date road and terrain information, along with descriptions of pathway highlights and user rules and guidelines. It will be available from our website, [www.pigeonriver.org](http://www.pigeonriver.org), and at forest headquarters.

One of the truly impressive features of our new map is the information condensed into every square inch—not only in such details as shading and contour lines, but in the text on the other side.



**A low-key setting for a high-key experience: the Shingle Mill Pathway overlapping part of the High Country Pathway north of Pigeon River Campground.**

© Dale Franz

Packed into those words are many more words we have summarized for clarity while paying careful attention to accuracy. For example, if a visitor would ask, “Can I camp here?” a full technical reply quoting all the various regulations for all the possible situations might leave the visitor confused instead of informed. Our task was to try to answer as close to a simple yes or no as we could by adding just enough language to cover all the situations.

Here are some examples of what users will find on the new map:

### Camping

**Recreation Passport:** The passport is required for vehicles entering all state forest campgrounds and state parks. It’s also required for parking at the trail heads of all pathways on this map except Green Timbers. Get an annual passport with your Michigan license plate or at any DNR office, or online at [www.michigan.gov/recreationpassport](http://www.michigan.gov/recreationpassport). Additional fees are levied at campgrounds for overnight camping. The Recreation Passport contributes to upkeep of pathways and campgrounds in state forests as well as state parks.

**State Forest CGs:** Campsites in all state forest campgrounds are available on a first-come, first-served basis. Except for Elk Hill equestrian campground, no reservations are accepted. The campsites have fire rings, picnic tables, vault toilets, and potable water. Self-registration information is in each campground. Put cash or check in the registration envelope and then into the pay post.

**Dispersed Camping:** You can camp for no fee anywhere on state forest land as long as:

- The area is not posted “No Camping.”
- You are at least a mile from a designated state forest campground.
- You are at least 600 ft from the posted sinkhole lakes in the PRC.
- You follow all state land rules.

- You post a Camp Registration Card (PR 4134) at your campsite. The card is available at DNR offices or [http://www.michigan.gov/documents/dnr/PR4134\\_CampRegCard\\_383467\\_7.pdf?20140624](http://www.michigan.gov/documents/dnr/PR4134_CampRegCard_383467_7.pdf?20140624).
- You are not camping with horses in the PRC. (See below.)

Equestrian camping: Campgrounds for horse camping are Elk Hill and Johnson's Crossing, both on the North Spur/Midland to Mackinac Trail. Dispersed camping is limited to four campsites within the PRC, but is not restricted outside of the PRC.

### Holiday special: Book and map for \$30!

Get both *Pigeon River Country*, regularly \$24.95, and the new \$9 High Country Pathway & Pigeon River Country terrain map on waterproof paper for \$30 from now until December 31, 2015. Order with form on back of newsletter, or order at [www.pigeonriver.org](http://www.pigeonriver.org).

The map is expected from the printers in early November.



Discovery Center. © Dale Franz

Sandra Franz, the association's member of the discovery center steering committee, reported: "The many ideas from people who passionately love the Pigeon River Country about history, geography, geology, wildlife, biology, forestry, and forest uses will be distilled into educational exhibits for the center. The steering committee will be meeting in the next several months with professional exhibit designers and fabricators, some of whom are retired from the DNR, to further define the center's message and how it will be presented.

"The Pigeon River Country Association has hired a Wayne State PhD candidate as an intern to research archives at the DNR, as well as at academic historical libraries, for photos and historical documentation of the forest's early days.

"Oral history also plays an important role. Oral histories from some people who lived in the residence are being recorded, and other transcribed interviews with men who worked in forest during the logging era of the early 1900s are available.

"In the next several months, publicity about the center will be more widely distributed to the general public, donors, and media. Fundraising for operational expenses and further development of exhibits is ongoing and will be a priority in coming months. Periodic updates on the center's development will be provided.

"**Annakathryn Parker**, the Wayne State PhD candidate/student intern who has been doing historical research for the discovery center, was invited to give the advisory council an overview of her work. She was unable to attend, but compiled a 20-minute slide presentation, with voice over, in which she detailed her findings regarding P. S. Lovejoy, his connections with Aldo Leopold, and the beginnings of the Pigeon's elk herd.

## Discovery center preparations creating excitement

Volunteers are hearing high praise for the location and the facility as they undertake the many tasks needed to get a Pigeon River Country Discovery Center open by late summer 2016.

An archivist from busy Lansing grew visibly excited at the prospect of interviewing people where they had lived deep in such woods. An expert on public displays marveled at the appropriate feeling of the stone fireplace and log structure to help visitors appreciate the subtle qualities of the Pigeon River Country. AmeriCorps announced 70 to 80 volunteers will spend the day May 20, 2016, landscaping, washing and painting walls, and power washing the building exterior. We will be soliciting materials, food, and funds for that work day.

A new heating system and basic upgrades for electrical and plumbing systems are being bid and expected to be completed by late fall. The State Historical Preservation Office has approved architectural drawings for the proposed historical and educational space that outline exhibit spaces, occupancy limits, storage and utility spaces, and the utility upgrades.

“She also provided amazing archival photographs of some of the elk, shipped to northern Michigan by train from Yellowstone National Park in (I think it was) 1913, and traced their initial migration through northern Michigan. She revealed that the PRCSF elk herd is likely descended from seven elk who were originally located in Cheboygan. She has dubbed this foundation herd ‘the Cheboygan Seven!’”

*We are still gathering ideas for what to offer at the center we expect to open in 2016 near headquarters. Here are some ideas to think about.*

So who is the person walking into the Pigeon River Country Discovery Center and what do we want to provide for this person?

Grew up on a residential lot 50 feet by 100 feet, with some lawn, hedges, gardenias, and a tree or two. The street is 30 feet from the front door, lined on both sides with houses, and intersected at every block by cross streets.

What is she to make of the forest? There are roadways, but they are not called streets. Only a couple have any hard surface, and all are lined with trees unevenly spaced and surrounded by bushes and vegetation of every description. Branches and ferns litter the ground. There are no street lights, hardly any signs, and no buildings in sight, except for the log structures at headquarters.

What sounds like distant highway traffic dies away when the upper tree branches stop dancing. She walks into the center. Are we about to tell her she’s in the midst of 170 square miles of forest land, more than 106,000 acres of—pardon? What are acres?

And wait. Look who’s coming through the door now. He grew up on a farm, knows acres better than we do, and is quite at home on terrain not laid out on a street grid with sidewalks.

One thing both visitors are likely to appreciate about Pigeon River Country is the scope of a setting that allows enough room for the living world to more fully seek its own directions without the heavy hand of humans.

Not that the PRC is without human management activities: cutting, burning, restoring, opening, closing, and so on. But these activities tend to contribute to what the land itself is inclined to do, with all its counter-balancing forces. It’s not a wilderness left to its own devices, but if a visitor gets very far into this place the experience is certainly more natural, more unstructured, more wild than either a city block or a farm.

The visitors to our Discovery Center are explorers already on their journey. They have reached the middle of the forest and some of its qualities are already obvious to them. But what might they not know or, put another way, what might all visitors benefit from learning? Is there anything that might apply to all or nearly all of these explorers?

Among the special qualities expressed by a roomful at headquarters this summer, one shared characteristic was that the forest makes you feel something special and different. In fact, all the data, numbers, history, images, or displays seem to have an underlying connection to special feelings.

One way to look at that was examined in the Afterword of our book, *Pigeon River Country*:

*In the outdoors, everything is communicating.*

Just what is the special feeling? It might have a lot to do with this:

*When we look closely at something outdoors, its color or shape, we shift from thinking to sensing.*

In our modern culture, we may still recognize some connection with the sun that provides our own bodily energy. But it’s only very new science that is telling us how vital our connection is to activity at the cellular level or below—most bacteria, far from being bad, are what operate our life systems in and out of our bodies.

*This interaction among living things draws us to the outdoors.*

If there were no forests like the Pigeon, would that diminish our experience of such interaction? Is the richness of that experience available, for example, in our offices, living rooms, street corners, or even backyards and parks?

The primary benefit of a discovery center may be to propel us back out through the door into the woods with our eyes and our hearts open.

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## Who’s here?

Conservation officer Nick Torsky reports there have been fewer people hunting and fishing in the forest this fall than a decade ago, but more people biking, hiking, and those “who want to take pictures of elk, not poach them.”

On the other hand, Brian Mastenbrook reports 38,000 hunters applied for permits to hunt elk. The department issued 50 for the early hunt, with 43 elk killed, and issued 50 more permits for the late hunt of Dec. 5-13. The 43 kills were well distributed throughout the elk range, he said.



Elk in a wildlife opening near Sturgeon Valley Road.

© Dale Franz

## Pigeon leads the way in oil pad restoration

*Some members of the Pigeon River Country Advisory Council toured forest sites on a blustery fall day to see how Brian Mastenbrook, wildlife biologist, and others are trying to restore oil pads after the wells are shut. Sandra Franz reports:*

Within the next 25 years, it is estimated that approximately 10,000 Antrim gas wells will go off-line. DNR foresters are urgently aware that they must develop best management practices (“BMPs”) for restoring these abandoned oil sites to high quality wildlife and forest openings as more and more acreage becomes vulnerable. There are currently approximately 1,800 abandoned well sites in Otsego County alone, totaling about 1,800 acres. Communicating BMPs to other agencies and to private landholders will be crucial in coming years as the number of abandoned well sites increases, and the DNR admits that it will need assistance spreading the word.

There are approximately 2,000,000 acres of land in the northern Lower Peninsula. Of those, 100,000 are open acres, and oil and gas well pads are “a challenging subset” of those 100,000. Open areas can be prime wildlife habitat and are therefore “high value” land. There is a constant natural tendency for those areas to fill in and close up, and constant maintenance is required to keep them open.

Abandoned oil well pads, although already open, have been degraded by hydrocarbon development, even though the oil companies have voluntarily complied with, and in many instances gone beyond, restoration requirements. The challenge is not to keep them open, but to improve the openings as forest and wildlife habitat.

Long-lasting effects of soil compaction, pH readings higher than in surrounding undisturbed soils, and lack of quality topsoil render abandoned oil well sites very poor quality wildlife habitat openings, and they are especially susceptible to the establishment of invasive species. No single restorative “prescription” will fit every site, and different stages of restoration, which is often a multi-year process, exist at different sites. Standards for site restoration have changed since the 1980s; the goal now is to plant native species, especially deep-rooted native grasses like big blue-stem grass, whose deep roots loosen and prepare the soil, eventually, for trees to re-establish.

The Pigeon River Country Open Wildlife Habitat project is funded by the Michigan DNR’s Wildlife Habitat Grant Program (funds derived from hunting and fishing license fees) and by the EPA’s Great Lakes Restoration Initiative grant.

PRCAC members were invited by Huron Pines to participate in a PRC wildlife habitat tour (helping to fulfill the public education requirement of the Wildlife Habitat grant) prior to the Oct. 15 advisory council meeting. Huron Pines is working with the DNR Wildlife Division to learn about and implement reforestation efforts and to document their findings in a “practitioners’ manual”.

We visited two oil well restoration sites, one on Tin Shanty Road and one on Bobcat Trail. The Tin Shanty Road site has been partially reforested, first by planting small deciduous saplings, which was not very successful, and then by transplanting pines from the forest surrounding the pad with more of the trees’ native soil included in the transplanting. This second effort has been more successful, and the pad is now partially forested, but more open than the surrounding forest.

The pad on Bobcat Trail is a multi-year restoration site. It has been sprayed for invasive species, and was planted this summer with a cover crop of annual rye. The rye will be tilled into the soil next spring before planting with native grasses, some of which take up to three years to establish themselves. Deer and elk have already found the annual rye, as evidenced by the hoofprints we saw at the site, and similar predation will no doubt slow the establishment of the grasses.

We also visited a habitat restoration area (that is not an abandoned oil well pad) at Inspiration Point, where

invasive species and shrubs that were encroaching on high-quality grassland have been removed. It costs more than \$1,000/acre to do each of the following: 1) to remove trees, 2) to do prescribed burns, and 3) to remove invasive species. The area is much more open than it was at the beginning of the summer.

The PRCSF is a place where the DNR can focus money on wildlife habitat restoration because of the Concept of Management and because of managing for the elk herd. Even so, the department's original prescription for the forest was to have 50% forest and 50% open land. The amount of prescribed open land is now only 6% to 7% because of the lack of resources to maintain open spaces.

***From Stewart Smith,  
association president:***

While we are occupied digging out our camouflage or hunter's orange clothing, warm jackets, gloves and hats, Mother Nature is putting on a show with reds, oranges, yellows, browns, and some reluctant-to-leave greens in the magnificent trees. It seems especially beautiful this year. That has a lot to do with the recent rainfall, relative warm days and nights, I think.

The ground cover is turning brown, bracken fern reaching its season end, the various mushrooms literally "popping" out of summer hiding places, and the acorns, though small this year, are making walking and hiking a balancing act as they carpet the forest floor.

The elk are bugling for a companion, the bear slowing down and thinking about denning for the winter, while chipmunks and squirrels of many colors are stashing the bounty of nuts and acorns away for a cold winter day not far away.

The starlings are flocking up to head to warmer climes, while the blue jays and cardinals double-check their bunks and the blackbirds and crows warn others of coming hikers and hunters.

The forest is as alive in fall and winter as it is in spring and summer.

One of the most exciting things happening in this forest right now is the complete removal of the Song of The Morning dam that has restricted the Pigeon River for more than one hundred years. Please see the article on page 1.

Stay tuned for news of the former manager's residence as it is transformed into the Pigeon River Country Discovery Center, highlighting the transformation of the PRCSF from a logged-off, burned-over, and sediment-choked watershed into a beautiful forest hosting hundreds of species of nature, including you and me.

Come into this forest and enjoy its beauty and wonder any time and any season. It'll be here waiting for you.

**Membership renewal reminder**

Your membership dues help make it possible to provide a scholarship to a student intern who assists the PRCSF unit manager in the summer with many projects that would otherwise not be completed due to limited staffing. Your dues also help us participate in important activities such as the Song of the Morning dam removal project and the interpretive center project at the former PRC unit manager residence.

Your membership expiration date is on the mailing label of your newsletter or in the email message sending this newsletter. Please keep your membership current. Thank you.

This newsletter can be seen with photographs in color on our website, [www.pigeonriver.org](http://www.pigeonriver.org).