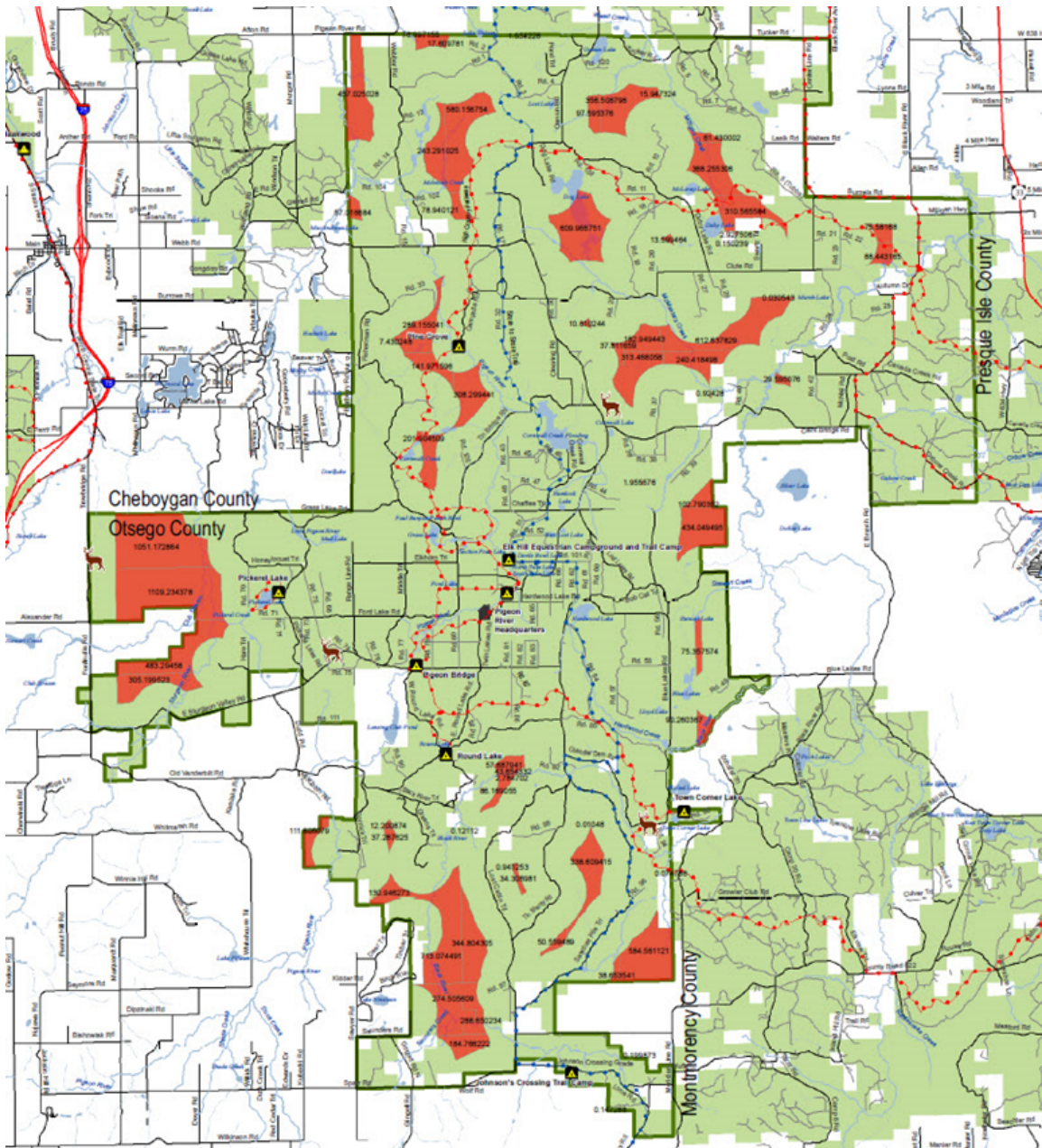


Pigeon River Country Association Newsletter

Summer 2015



So far—yet so near

A new analysis shows that 88 percent of Pigeon River Country is within a half mile of a road. The exceptions are indicated with the orange polygons. Cars and trucks have 290 miles of roads within the boundary. This information may come as a surprise to those who say they want even more roads open in the forest.

Image provided by Scott Whitcomb, PRC unit manager.

The drive-in forest

I figger that a whole lot of the side-road country should be left plenty bumpy and bushy ... and some so you go in on foot—or don't go at all.

—P.S. Lovejoy, quoted in *Pigeon River Country*

The Pigeon's great visionary, P.S. Lovejoy, cut through bureaucratic language to tell it plain: Highways, he said, "and roads and trails ... *are jeopardizing* the peculiar resources ... of our big wild-land tracts (of which the Pigeon River is biggest and best)."

Nearly a century later, the struggle to keep the Big Wild remote goes on. At the spring 2015 meeting of the Pigeon River Country Advisory Council, two local residents complained that vehicle access is too restricted. One said having berms everywhere is not good. Another said road restrictions were keeping local people out of the forest.

In fact, 88 percent of the Pigeon River Country State Forest is within half a mile of a road.

There are 175 miles of county roads in the PRC. In addition, there are 115 miles of state forest roads within the boundary.

That's 290 miles of road open to motor vehicles in some 180 square miles of state forest. Only 12 percent of the forest is more than half a mile from cars and trucks.

By the time Scott Whitcomb, PRC unit manager, presented this and other information to the advisory council, the two local residents had left. He was able to speak with them briefly outside the Forest Township Hall before they departed.

Inside, advisory council members listened intently to his presentation, then urged that it be shared with legislators and others who attempt from time to time to influence the character of the PRC. A public misperception, Brad Garmon said, is that the state is "locking up land and making it inaccessible."

Dave Smethurst said, "I've got an artificial knee, a surgically-repaired back, I've got a lot of gray hair. I don't walk in the Pigeon River Country unless I've got a staff in my hand. I hunt four days a week" throughout bird season in locations more than a quarter mile from a road. "When I hear people say 'I can't hunt,' well, if I can do it," so can they. "I hunt this country all the time."

The Pigeon is the only state forest with a vehicle management plan of any kind. The state is looking at the PRC plan to see if it would work elsewhere, Whitcomb said.

Counties regulate uses for their own roads. Cheboygan County has made ORVs (off road vehicles) legal on its roads. In Otsego County, within the boundary of the PRC forest, ORVs are not legal on the county roads.

The state has authority over the state forest roads, so you can snowmobile, mountain bike, or ride a horse on those roads shown on the map as forest roads. You cannot operate an ORV on any of those state forest roads.

The PRC access plan provides a regulatory framework for recreational activity, unlike all the other state forests. "We're managing for different values," Whitcomb said, "for wildlife habitat, sensitive species, elk, bear, bobcat. Some of those species do really well where there are large tracts of land, where there's solitude."

"The challenge comes when you balance those requirements as well as recreational activities. Some people like to seek out those areas that don't have high road access because they can get off the beaten path."

He said, "We did some analysis and said, 'Let's put a half-mile buffer [on the map] around each one of those roads.' If you were there and you were looking to hunt or looking for mushrooms or whatever it may be ... at a leisurely pace it is probably a 20-minute walk from your car.

"What's left after you buffer those roads is those orange polygons" on the map. "You can see that 88 percent of the state land is within a half mile of a road."

"That's pretty good access," Whitcomb said. The more remote spots, he added, are "a value that's probably underrepresented on state forest land." And while they are farther away from vehicles, they are often crisscrossed with trails, old paths, and roadways now closed to vehicles.

These isolated areas are even more rare when looked at individually because they are not all the same. For example, one is the open grassland of Green Timbers, another the very different habitat of the Black River swamp. Somebody wanting to run hounds may actually have very few locations available in the PRC.

What remains to do, Whitcomb said, is to examine the cover types of the remote polygons to determine what specific benefits each will provide to a healthy forest ecosystem. Some may need even more contiguous space, or different shapes, than they currently have in order to provide ideal habitat.

Information is needed, he said, “to get a handle on how much access should be provided, and balancing that against the other values.”

He told the advisory council that “these are the decisions we’ll be coming to you for” to advise forest managers about weighing those values.

PRC staff are looking to volunteers to help gather the site information. Pete Datema, the Americorps volunteer working out of PRC headquarters, is doing some of it. “Brian (Mastenbrook, wildlife biologist) and I don’t have the resources to go out and survey birds,” Whitcomb said, “but if we can solicit citizen scientists to do it because it’s their hobby anyway, that’s a win-win. It gets us information we wouldn’t be able to get any other way.”

Making it safer for equestrians

Musing about horses and the snowmelt of May 1910 in Arizona’s White Mountain, Aldo Leopold recalled years later that “every canyon roared with an icy torrent, but soon thereafter you could ‘top out’—if your horse had the heart to climb half a day through knee-deep mud.”

And then, “An hour later, thunderheads may have blotted out the sun, while your erstwhile paradise cowered under the impending lash of lightning, rain, and hail ... Your horse jumped at every rolling pebble ... When you turned in the saddle to unlash your slicker, he shied, snorted, and trembled ... When I hear anyone say he does not fear lightning, I still remark inwardly: he has never ridden The Mountain in July. The explosions are fearsome enough, but more so are the smoking slivers of stone that sing past your ear when the bolt crashes into a rimrock. Still more so are the splinters that fly when a bolt explodes a pine. I remember one gleaming white one, 15 feet long, that stabbed deep into the earth at my feet and stood there humming like a tuning fork.

“It must be poor life that achieves freedom from fear.”

Leopold, who wrote a memorable obituary of his friend P.S. Lovejoy, died five years later, in 1948. Leopold said, “I have never returned to the White Mountain. I prefer not to see what tourists, roads, sawmills, and logging railroads have done for it, or to it.”

Today, Michigan’s remnant of such wild places, the 106,700 acres of Pigeon River Country State Forest, pulses not only to the vibrant life in it, but also the reverberations of intense use at odds with its more natural character. Horse activity itself reached a discomfiting level of intensity in recent decades, until a policy decision in 2008

prohibited equestrian use of virtually all trails except the vehicle roadways and one statewide riding trail that ran north-south through the forest.

In retrospect, many have felt that the excesses of high-volume horse use was met by an excess of restriction. Today, the issue is marked by modest, thoughtful efforts to fit the use into the forest in a way that improves safety while maintaining a balance with other uses, including the needs of the forest itself.

A committee of equestrians appointed by the director of the Department of Natural Resources is proposing several single track and two-track trails to get riders off vehicle roadways.

Bonnie Cornelius, president of the Alpena County Horsemen’s Club, describes what can happen when riders are forced to use the roads:

“We came out on Osmun Road, on a curve. There was a berm. So we proceeded [along the side of the road around the curve.] A pickup came around the corner—really, really, really fast.

“We dispersed. ... He had to put his brakes on so hard that it stalled his truck and it went sideways in the road. Right behind him, before we could all even get off the road, came a huge logging truck ... He had to put his brakes on and put that full load of pulp into a skid.

“We had some scared little kids. We had four little kids with us and six adults.” Three of the children were on ponies and a three-year-old was sitting behind an adult rider.

“That was last year [2014], just after they had told us we shouldn’t cross berms, and of course we were trying to obey the rules. If I had known then what I know now, it was still a two-track road, we would have gone over the berm and been safe, because it was only a matter of feet.

“Berm’s gone now. After we complained so much. So we can ride through there.

“It’s scary when you look up and you’ve got a little kid on the back of you and another one that you’re guiding, telling them what to do. And that huge—you know, they can’t stop: gravel is like marbles. They left grooves in the road they put their brakes on so hard.”

The Pigeon River Country Advisory Council (PRCAC) meeting July 16 recommended approval of 12 horse trail loops that would connect them to existing horse trails or take riders off some of the roadways and put them onto old trails that closed after 2008.

The recommendation was consistent with what R.W. Kropf, editor of this newsletter at the time, suggested in autumn 2008: There is a “need for specially designated ‘loop’ type trails reserved exclusively for horseback riding in a way that would eliminate the need to ride on the ... roads in order to return to their campsite. Horses and motor vehicles do not make [a] pleasant or even safe mix.”

One of the trails approved, for example, reopens a closed two-track that connects to a designated equestrian trail and is recognized as safer than the rocky, curved Twin Lakes Road that runs parallel 10 feet away. Another allows riding on a single track along the side of Hardwood Lake Road rather than in the road. Another uses a two-track a few hundred feet long to avoid having riders come out right across from a road that runs directly into the Pigeon Bridge Campground; that current placement tends to send riders onto that road even though it’s off-limits.

A dozen more proposed trail extensions are going to a committee of equestrians from the Pigeon River Country Equestrian Committee and an equal number of members from the PRCAC to address concerns about the specific routes. In May, the equestrians voluntarily dropped many other proposed trail connectors after learning of potential negative impacts to the forest.

The equestrians are also working with the DNR to have a new campground outside the PRC at Avery Lake near Atlanta and trails for that area.

Riders clear some forest trails

Kerry Mase, an equestrian from Alpena and member of the Pigeon River Country Advisory Council, reports on what a work crew of 21 equestrians did voluntarily on June 5-6 to improve PRC trails:



“We volunteered to help replace some of the posts that have the forest road numbers on them and we cleaned brush and fallen trees” from three forest roads: Put in or repositioned 24 posts with the forest road numbers.

- Cleared Road 63 horse-wide.
- Cleared Roads 52 and 45 vehicle-wide.
- Planted three or four big posts blocking vehicles from the Shore to Shore Equestrian trail.
- Replaced missing numbers on road posts.

She reports, “We also collected a massive number of ticks.”

The equestrians came with what they considered a small crew because their own work agenda was small, but then took on additional chores at the request of Scott Whitcomb, PRC unit manager.

Forest Road 45 “was really a huge job,” she said. Eight “really determined” senior-citizen women and one man with a chainsaw did the work, clearing brush and downed trees. At other locations, equestrians used a power auger to place or reposition posts identifying the roads.

It’s official: Pigeon River Country Discovery Center



Loretta Cwalinski and Steve Milford of the DNR congratulate Stewart Smith. Standing l-r are Scott Whitcomb, Pat Lunden, Rudi Edel, and Brad Garmon at signing of the Pigeon River Country Discovery Center lease.

© Dale Franz

Supporters gathered at PRC headquarters on July 17 to witness the signing of a 25-year-lease to turn the vacant log home a few steps away into a center to help the public understand the qualities of the Pigeon River Country.

The gathering of people with personal as well as public connections to the forest included some who were born or grew up in the PRC. Several were from the Pigeon River Country Association, which took on the responsibility of the lease. Stewart Smith, president, signed on behalf of the association. Then those present shared their own stories about their connections with the forest and talked about how the center ought to convey the PRC's deeper values to a public that can maintain them.

Dave Smethurst, the last of the original members of the Pigeon River Country Advisory Council formed in 1974, said, "I've been fortunate to be a part of this for a long time. And I worry. There are pressures on this forest—to open roads, to do all kinds of stuff that I thought would have disappeared by now. We need to continue to educate people about what the Big Wild is."

Perhaps this center, he said, "can create the place so the next generation understands that if you allow roads everywhere, if you do [these] things everywhere, it will look like every other piece of state or federal land. But this isn't."

Stewart Smith added, "You can come out here 365 days a year and find solitude."

Among those attending: Pat Lunden, whose family started the project with a donation; Rudi Edel, who is chairing the project; Brad Garmon from the advisory council; Scott Whitcomb, unit manager; and two people born when their father William Horsell was the PRC forester from 1923-1949.

See subsequent newsletters for developments and check our website www.pigeonriver.org from time to time.

Members step up

Following our spring newsletter report that a shortfall of funds threatened the project, members generously donated for removing the dam structure on the Pigeon River. As a result, the PRC Association contributed \$19,264 to the project from membership donations and an Otsego County Community Foundation grant.

Huron Pines, the project coordinator, posts periodic updates at www.huronpines.org. If you are reading this newsletter online, click <http://www.huronpines.org/projectinfo.asp?pjt=pv&pid=64> to go directly to the update page.



Pigeon River on July 16, 2015, upstream of the opened dam.

© Dale Franz

New map in the works

The association is preparing to print a new edition of the High Country Pathway and Pigeon River Country map last updated in 2007. It will again be on waterproof, tear-resistant paper and fold open to 22 x 22 inches, with detailed text on the reverse side. It should be available before our fall 2015 newsletter comes out. Look for an announcement on our website www.pigeonriver.org. Map sales provide funds used exclusively on behalf of the PRC.

A space called *unknowing*

An entry in the *I Ching* ancient book of wisdom could apply to the forest we are attempting to reveal to visitors with our Pigeon River Discovery Center. It hints of the mysterious essence we find so difficult to describe. Titled "Nurturance of the Great," the entry urges the seeker to be "still within and also still without, continuing subtly, not forgetting, not forcing." It refers to "the crossing of great rivers" as being in a place "whereby inner nurturance and outer effectiveness is accomplished," where you can be "detached from biases and extremes" by "stopping in unknowing."

[quotes from Hexagram 26, *The Taoist I Ching*, translated by Thomas Cleary, Shambhala Publications, 1986]

New president

Stewart Smith accepted a nomination from Richard Kropf, at the urging of Ray Hoobler, and was elected association president at the annual meeting July 5. Eugene Horan remains vice president, and Joe Jarecki remains treasurer. Hoobler was elected secretary.



From Stewart Smith, association president:

To members of the Pigeon River Country Association:

This is an exciting time in the history of the Pigeon River Country. As you read above in this newsletter, the association has signed a 25-year lease with the State of Michigan for the former unit manager’s residence located immediately behind the forest headquarters on Twin Lakes Road. Watch this newsletter for further developments.

In addition, our new map will be at the printers soon. It will be improved over the present version. It has been an exhausting process double, triple, and quadruple checking for additions, subtractions, errors, and changes in the features of this map. Again, please watch this newsletter for additional information.

Also, this organization has elected a new president at the July 5th annual meeting. It’s me, Stewart Smith! I’m a forest user of 40 plus years in the tent camping, hiking, fishing, and hunting interests. I’m from Greenville MI, I’m 62 years old. My wife of 38 years and I have raised three sons and all of us have an abiding fondness for the Pigeon River Country. We have made many memories enjoying this very special area and it’s time to pay it forward by ensuring future families such as mine have a place to go and experience the “Big Wild”. I thank the board for expressing confidence in my ability to bring this 43-year-old organization into the future.

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.

The mailing label on your newsletter includes your membership expiration date. Please keep your membership current. Thank you.

Joe Jarecki, treasurer



A red pine sprouts its flowers at the end of May in Pigeon River Country. | © Dale Franz

We can announce now that our next annual meeting will be Saturday, July 8, 2016. That’s right: a year from now!

We voted at our 2015 meeting the other day to firm up the date as the second Saturday each July.

Mark your calendars now. We start at noon with a light lunch, then business meeting at 1 p.m. We meet at forest headquarters near the middle of what is now a 106,700-acre Pigeon River Country. It may be bigger by next July.

Would you like to join us?

Membership available at www.pigeonriver.org.