



Preparing the Discovery Center



It was a few days after the big volunteer event. Rudi Edel and Joe Jarecki worked alone, shoveling and smoothing, filling in the last 10 feet of the pathway from the headquarters parking lot to the ramp into the new Pigeon River Country Discovery Center.

It seemed a study in contrasts. More than 130 people one day working to ready the center inside and out. Two people another day doing the same. But, really, both days showed how people are stepping up to bring an idea to life by doing recognizable chores: lugging old things out of a basement, cleaning windows, painting walls, clearing brush, putting native plants into clusters along a pathway, shoveling and hauling, picking up, putting down, making ready.

The volunteers have ranged from young to mature. Rudi Edel is busier in retirement from the court system than many who are at the height of their working days. Joe Jarecki used to live in the very building now being renovated. Our grandson Christian Franz, 15, came out one quiet day and had his first experience applying paint to walls—and his first experience in the Pigeon.

Most of the volunteers on May 20 were from AmeriCorps, coordinated by Huron Pines. Others were from supporting

organizations, and several were public and private citizens from nearby communities, lending a hand. One hundred and thirty sounds like a lot of people descending on a little patch of the forest, but the forest absorbed them in a way that made it seem hardly more than the two people finishing up the path a few days later.

Here's what they accomplished:

--More than 300 feet of Americans with Disabilities Act accessible pathway using 85 yards of gravel.

--More than 325 native plants placed along the pathway and near the Discovery Center.

--Two miles of trail cleared of brush.

--Discovery Center rooms painted, outside power washed, entire building cleaned.

--Two acres of brush cleared from the area.

It appears the Discovery Center will be ready for a formal opening by summer 2017. A contract has been signed for the design and installation of public displays, expected to take until next spring to complete, with Good Design Group of Midland and Ypsilanti.



Some work remains in preparing the building, such as installation of a few doors. But most of the preparation remaining is the steady, low-visibility work of planning and executing details of operation, gathering and organizing historic files arriving from people's basements and storage spaces, choosing content for displays, providing written materials for the public, and, of course, raising funds.



The steering committee of Rudi Edel, Sandra Franz, Brad Garmon, Pat Lunden, and Scott Whitcomb continue meeting regularly and carrying out much of the work behind the scenes, such as preparing, distributing, evaluating, interviewing, and deciding that resulted in establishing a contractor for designing displays. Three of them, Edel, Franz, and Lunden, gave a presentation in early July to the Gaylord Rotary Club. The Discovery Center project is being well-received in the community, steering committee members said.

Half a dozen people have been interviewed about their historic connections with the forest, and more recorded interviews are planned.

Honeymoon over

Two cabins left standing after the Green Timbers property was added to the forest in 1982 are no more. They were being dismantled in August after being deemed unsafe by the Department of Natural Resources, which declined to pay for restoration of the vandalized and aging structures.

The structure called the River Cabin and the so-called Honeymoon Cabin were accessible to the public only by walking at least two miles. The Honeymoon Cabin was particularly favored for its view over a valley.



Honeymoon Cabin.



River Cabin.

Special visits show off the PRC

Two national agencies visited the forest in July to prepare a dual certification that allows favorable terms for selling forest timber. Unit manager Scott Whitcomb told the Pigeon River Country Advisory Council that auditors from the Forest Stewardship Council and the Sustainable Forestry Initiative are particularly impressed by citizen participation in the PRC. “Things like the Discovery Center and the advisory council are highly thought of by the auditors,” he said.

Among the many other recent visits to the forest, staffers were glowing about one in particular. Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder was looking for places to go in the state for family vacation. Brian Mastenbrook, wildlife biologist, and Scott Whitcomb suggested the PRC, then had only a week to prepare when the governor said yes.



Gov. Snyder kayaks on the Black River

The governor came to the forest for the day July 7 with his wife, sister, two of his children (age 19 and 24), two of their friends the same age, and four state police. The party, with a few others, were taken to look for elk on Tin Shanty Bridge Road but in those numbers were not stealthy enough to get in visual contact with the iconic animals.

Gov. Snyder said his college roommate made several research visits to the PRC, so he knew it by reputation, but this was his first visit. “He and his family were super engaged” with the forest, Whitcomb said, “They were really interested in what we’re doing up here. His sister was particularly interested in the Hemingway connection.”

The governor's group went kayaking up the Black River for an hour and a half. When Whitcomb told the advisory council about the visit, members recollected that Ned Caveney, then the unit manager, and Dave Smethurst once took Gov. William Milliken on a hike in the Pigeon, and Caveney once went grouse hunting with former President Jimmy Carter deep in the forest.

Triston Cole, who represents Antrim, Charlevoix, Montmorency, Oscoda, and Otsego counties in the Michigan House of Representatives, came for a visit to the PRC this summer and said he would like to bring other legislators to see the forest first hand. Cole was a hunting guide for 15 years prior to his election as the northern Lower Peninsula legislator in 2014.

Fishing in a flash: electronic tool guides anglers to exact spots

The DNR is providing website navigation to dozens of sites along the Black, Pigeon, and Sturgeon Rivers so people can get to them and fish. Each site shows a photo, site description, and provides an electronic map for driving directions.

The navigation tool is located within the <http://www.michigan.gov/dnr> website by clicking on Fishing and then Trout Trails. There are 200 locations detailed statewide and more coming. Already, there are 59 sites in the Huron drainage basin, most of them clustered in and around Pigeon River Country.

Tim Cwalinski, fisheries biologist, told the Pigeon River Country Advisory Council that the Trout Trails project is designed to help those not familiar with the premier fishing locations navigate to them. He indicated a few remote spots will not be highlighted.

Another mile of frontage

The recent acquisition of a 148-acre parcel has added 1.2 miles of Pigeon River frontage to the forest.

The so-called Skiba site is within forest boundaries, but access is being rerouted because of legal restrictions in the existing property descriptions. Song of the Morning Ranch

to the north has agreed to provide a quarter-mile access corridor in exchange for getting formal access to its property from Sturgeon Valley Road, which presently runs 600 feet across state land from their sign to their property.

Until now, access to the Skiba parcel has been through an easement restricted to single family use. The access arrangement is being formalized in Lansing, and may take until fall 2016.

Peek-a-boo: Video cameras recording activity in forest

An unspecified number of trail cameras are posted in the PRC to collect research information, the Pigeon River Country Advisory Council learned at its July 21 meeting.

Fisheries Division has one operating at Cornwall Flooding to count how many people are fishing for how long. Tim Cwalinski said the data will help when seeking funds to maintain the dam. There is insufficient operating money to post people at the site to collect data, he said, and the experimental filming project is “working very, very well,” showing trucks entering and leaving the launch site. He likened it to collecting wildlife information with trail cameras.

Lisha Ramsdell asked how many trail cameras were being used in the PRC. No number was given. She questioned whether it is appropriate to operate a number of cameras in the forest, given that people expect it to be remote and not under video surveillance. Brad Garmon agreed that it is a serious issue appropriate for discussion. Michigan State University has two cameras for elk research, and other student researchers have been using trail cameras from time to time.

Our book, *Pigeon River Country*, notes: “Science in Hemingway’s day concentrated on examining creatures who were dead, a tradition that is only now beginning to change with the development of ... video and audio equipment ... and the pioneering efforts of a growing number of naturalists who try to observe without disturbing the lives they are studying.”

Relay runs along pathway

Nine hundred people ran through Pigeon River Country on a Saturday in July and apparently only one got lost.



Tin Shanty and Sawdust Pile Road during Great Lakes Relay on July 16. (website photo)

The lost runner was soon found. Actually, only 91 people were running at any given moment, each going about five to seven miles to where the next relay team member took over. They entered the northeast forest at Center Line Road, ran west and south along the High Country Pathway, and left the forest where Tin Shanty meets Sparr Road.

The 91 teams of runners started the day before in Mio (July 15) and ended the day after in Empire (July 17). They covered a hundred miles each on the first and second days, and 77 miles on Day 3.

The organization, Great Lakes Relay, donated \$1,400 and 110 volunteer hours clearing downed trees and obstructions on the northern part of the pathway for the DNR, which has limited funds for such work. In an arrangement worked out by Scott Whitcomb and Scott Thompson, each team used only one of its three support vehicles at the staging points, dropping off a fresh runner and picking up the previous one. These relay points were placed so vehicle traffic would remain at the periphery of the PRC as much as possible to minimize impact.

“Here was a chance to get a group of outdoor enthusiasts, recreation and fitness enthusiasts, into the loop” about the special qualities of the Big Wild, Peter Gustafson, chairman of the Standards and Limitations Committee, told the advisory council. The group ran previous relays in PRC in 2005 and 2009.

Dave Smethurst noted that there was “constant traffic” on Webb Road the morning of the relay as support vehicles traveled down Osmun and Webb to avoid the center of the forest. Rique Campa said he ran the races in 2005 and 2009 through the PRC and described them as “highly regulated” with “very specific rules.” The director has thrown entire teams out of the race “if they don’t meet the guidelines.” It is common in the relays each year to have segments where cars cannot go, called “unsupported legs.” The race demographic of older, casual runners has changed, Campa said, to young outdoor enthusiasts. “They’ve got a deep love for the natural resource.” He finds it encouraging, “because this is the next generation of stewards of our natural resources.” The opportunity to run in such state land is not always available, he noted.

Pathway rerouted away from twisted bridge

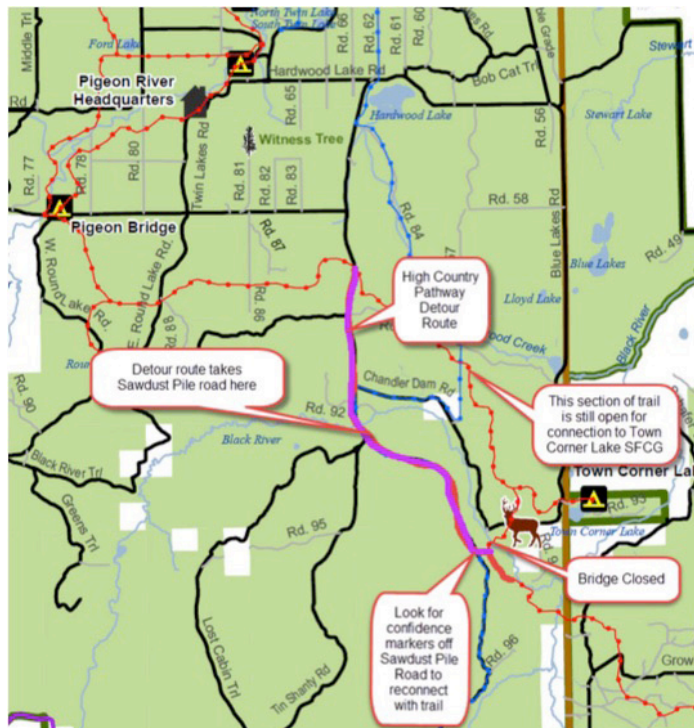
The wooden footbridge over the Black River along the High Country Pathway has torqued into an unsafe spring waiting to fly apart from its own weight. The pathway has been rerouted and the site posted as unsafe to approach.

It was installed a decade ago, as was a similar bridge at Pine Grove Campground, to replace bridges built by Arch Reeves. Both of the new bridges, an experimental design, were reinforced previously when they began to twist out of shape about seven years ago. The Black River bridge eventually torqued into an unsafe condition and was closed in March 2016. The Pine Grove bridge is expected to do the same.

The pathway detour at Black River is about 3.7 miles long, running along portions of Tin Shanty and Sawdust Pile roads. There is no schedule yet to replace the bridges.



Bridge over Black River. (DNR photo)



DNR detour map for High Country Pathway. Black River footbridge closed.

Bobcat ready for its closeup

Some 300 people, mostly youngsters, got to see a bobcat and mink standing on a table during the BioBlitz event on July 23 at Project Nature just southwest of the PRC. The stuffed animals were surrounded by information about the Pigeon River Country Discovery Center on a display table provided by the steering committee.

A boy about 8 years old watched awhile, then asked Rudi Edel, “What are you doing to get that bobcat to stand so still?” Rudi was even more amused (and impressed) by a 3-year-old who looked at the teeth in the skulls displayed and attributed the differences, not as everybody else did to “meat and plant eaters,” but to “herbivore and carnivore.”



**Youngsters learn about Discovery Center
(photo by Rudi Edel)**

BioBlitz is a festival staged across the United States to bring all ages together into teams to identify as many species of plants and animals as possible—including microbes and fungi. The educational and scientific event is promoted by the National Geographic Society and the National Parks Service. The University Center Gaylord sponsored the BioBlitz for the second year in a row and plans another for next summer.

Rudi reports he did a “disjointed wiggle” when joining a crowd dance in response to a challenge by another state. The dance was recorded for showing on YouTube.

Two years in the life of the Pigeon River at Song of the Morning Ranch, what Huron Pines calls “A river made whole.”



Two years in the life of the Pigeon River at Song of the Morning Ranch, what Huron Pines calls “A river made whole.” --continued



Silt at the bottom of the Song of the Morning pond quickly dried when drained in summer 2014.



The silt bed is covered now with natural vegetation. The timber bridge has new railings to increase safety during winter snow cover.

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 discovery 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.

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