

Discovery Center starting second season following rave reviews and 1,228 visits



The Honor Forest in the Discovery Center

Photo by Dale Franz

The Pigeon River Country Discovery Center begins its second season on Saturday, May 4, at 10 a.m. after an opening year that brought much praise.

“The first thing one notices upon entering,” one visitor said, “is the welcoming atmosphere and strong sense of place.” That visitor was Ronald Bloomfield, collections manager for the Museum of Cultural History at Central Michigan University. He was evaluating the center for an American Association for State and Local History Leadership in History award.

“The snow was several feet deep when I visited with two Central Michigan University Museum Studies students,” he writes, “and all three of us felt as if there were some inexorable power urging us to step outside and explore.” That sentence alone spoke volumes to the steering committee that guided the center to its opening in 2018, because the most cautious concern about opening the center was that such a building might detract from the real value of the forest as a very remote presence on a busy planet.

Bloomfield writes, “One of the strengths of the exhibit is the use of diverse and strategically placed quotes. While Hemingway and Jimmy Carter are arguably the most universally famous individuals quoted, others” add context. “It is through the use of quotes that the viewer experiences the topic through the lens of a real person.” This oral history “represents an untapped resource” that he hopes will become more widely a part of the public record.

Overall, he said, “It was a small group of dedicated individuals with slim resources, who used tenacity, incredible vision, drive, and skills they did not even know they possessed to accomplish the lofty goal of preserving a building from decay and creating a truly unique experience.” Bloomfield, who has been a museum professional and public historian in Michigan for more than 25 years, calls the Discovery Center project “varied, thorough, meticulous, and accurate.”

His was not the only warm letter received. “The Discovery Center demonstrates the relevance of history,” a letter from Sarah Waters says, “and showcases how the public can make use of the past in discussions of the present and

future. The exhibit fosters an appreciation for the land, the wildlife, and the history of the PRCFS while reaching out to a new generation of stewards for the largest tract of wild land in the heart of Michigan's lower peninsula."

Sarah Waters is the Education & Outreach Coordinator for the Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary in Alpena, run by the U.S. Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Office of National Marine Sanctuaries. She visited to provide a review as well for the AASLH award.

"I found an outstanding level of scholarship forming the groundwork for the restoration of the building and the other exhibit elements," she writes. "Because of this," she says, "the exhibit excels at providing visitors with historical connections to PRCFS at multiple levels, weaving stories from one room to the next." She notes that the team "also built a diverse group of community members that formed a new network of supporters."

She observes "the glow of the fire, the sunlight through the windows, the smell of the logs, the red plaid coat on the chair in the forester's office, the elk antler-fall mounted on the wall," and says that the "workmanship on the restoration is beautiful, detailed and accurate," the design "well-planned ... despite the challenges of the small, multi-roomed historic home with many windows. The story concepts are organized well and arranged so that visitors are not limited to a rigid path through the house." And the text "is interesting, descriptive, and clear."

The center also "hits the mark in avoiding 'museum fatigue' by providing plenty of comfortable seating, appropriate lighting, and areas to relax and reflect." The video displays, she said, "punctuate the space in a way that compels the visitor to keep exploring or stay and dive deeper into the story." Waters has worked as an archaeologist for cultural resource management firms headquartered in New Jersey and Michigan and has managed the Thunder Bay sanctuary visitor center exhibits since 2008.

All volunteer

The Discovery Center has no paid staff. Volunteers work throughout the year to maintain and staff the building. It will be open spring through fall, starting May 4, on weekends, Saturdays 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Sundays noon to 4 p.m., and some Fridays to be posted on the website www.pigeonriverdiscoverycenter.org Admission is free and donations are encouraged. The center is actively recruiting volunteers looking for meaningful work to match their time, talents, and interests.

The Discovery Center is located 12 miles east of Vanderbilt at 9984 Twin Lakes Road, directly behind the forest headquarters building, housed in a log structure built in 1935 by the Civilian Conservation Corps.

Clearing the pathway

The Pigeon River Country Association has called on supporters to help clear the High Country Pathway of brush and fallen trees in one day, May 4. Shortly after 8 a.m., groups of two or three volunteers each are to head to an assigned 2.5-mile section of the 80-mile pathway to clear winter debris.

The association's popular High Country Pathway map describes the path as one of the Lower Peninsula's best near-wilderness experiences, featuring scenic outlooks, rivers, creeks, and meadows, and the opportunity to get up close with a remote northern forest. The route circles through the Pigeon River Country State Forest and into further miles of surrounding natural terrain.

The spring maintenance day is a project of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources Parks & Recreation and Forest Resources divisions, with help from organizations such as mountain biking and hunting and angling groups, hiking and kayaking groups, Huron Pines, Friends of the Pigeon, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, and the PRCA. After the estimated three to four hours of trail work, volunteers will return to PRC headquarters for a barbeque.

Stargazing in the forest

An astronomer, Patrick Stonehouse, will lead “An Evening Under the Stars” for anyone wanting a guided view of the heavens from 9 to 10:30 p.m. near the Discovery Center on Saturday, May 11. The center, located behind Pigeon River Country headquarters, will open at 7 p.m. for the gathering.

A fine 10-inch diameter telescope donated to the Discovery Center will be set up for the viewing, which will be rescheduled if severe weather or heavy clouds occur.

Participants are encouraged to bring a camp chair, blanket, small flashlight with red lens, and, if they have them, their own telescopes.

Youngsters peer into what owls eat

Some 33 students and 13 parents/chaperones spent an afternoon of spring break prowling mysteries of the forest at the Pigeon River Country Discovery Center. The March 25 event included hefting forest fire fighting equipment, hearing about the forest around them, and dissecting pellets from owls to discover what the birds ate from identifying scraps of bones.

Stewart Smith, PRCA president, noted afterward that “this is the true purpose” of opening the Discovery Center. The event came nine days after the third annual Owl Prowl attended by 30 people. Children at the Owl Prowl were led on a short walk near the Discovery Center and the adults then hiked 1.4 miles of the Towerman’s Watch Trail calling for owls. Rudi Edel reports a barred owl returned the call from across the river to the north.

Owl Prowl was hosted in partnership with the DNR, AmeriCorps, Huron Pines, and Headwaters Land Conservancy. Samantha Peterson from AmeriCorps spent many hours organizing the event. Andrew Dennhardt, a biologist from Michigan State University, talked about the varied characteristics and habitats of owls in the forest.



Learning about the forest
Photo by Rudi Edel



Flexing a firefighter's muscles
Photo by Rudi Edel



Sorting bones and skull fragments
Photo by Rudi Edel

An increase of ticks

Hikers in Pigeon River Country report regularly finding 10 or 20 ticks attached to their bodies and clothing after an hour and a half walk, and sometimes as many as 50 ticks. “The tick population has definitely increased the last few years,” Joe Jarecki reports. He and his wife, Judi, find them as early as April and on until late fall.

Association member Tom Cichonski recalls finding a tick on his neck after hiking in the PRC about 15 years ago. “The problem seems to have steadily worsened,” he said. “I’ve given up summertime hikes, but early last May I still counted 7 ticks on clothing or skin after a 20-mile hike.” Many others report finding numerous ticks in recent years.

A helpful recent brochure about ticks in Michigan is available at DNR offices or online at https://www.michigan.gov/documents/emergingdiseases/resize_307382_7.pdf

It advises how to remove them and what to use, and not use, on the skin. As of January, there are no reports of ticks infected with Lyme disease in the PRC area, though it is present in the Petoskey and Charlevoix County area to the west. Ticks do carry other risks to human health in their bacteria, viruses, and parasites. The brochure reports the “blacklegged tick is an emerging species in Michigan,” one of the most common found on people and pets, by percent, but does not say why they are emerging.

The brochure also advises that clothing be run for an hour or more in a hot dryer to kill ticks that might remain hidden in the materials.

A brochure from Michigan State University at https://www.canr.msu.edu/resources/tick_borne_illnesses_in_michigan_e2765 offers helpful prevention information, including advice to walk in the center of cleared trails, and to wear light clothing so ticks are easier to locate.

Researchers such as Dr. Philip Myers, a zoologist and ecologist who studies small mammal populations in northern Michigan, point to the warming climate. Myers says data shows the northward migration of at least 8 species of rodents. Dr. Leslie Littlefield sees the increases as part of the changing climate and says of the emerging

tick threat: “It’s only going to get worse. So we’re going to have to learn to live with this.” (Myers and Littlefield quoted by naturechangemi@outlook.com)

Motorized access

A television ad invites the audience to “Find new rivers” and “Find new bogs” while showing a pickup truck plowing through water. Actually, such driving is illegal in the Pigeon River Country and throughout Michigan. A variety of rules bar vehicles from the water, and in fact limit all modes of transportation from going beyond the zone of a roadway designated for their use. Vehicles licensed for road use are allowed only within a maximum of 50 feet from the roadway, and specifically forbidden to be driven on any other terrain or water in state forests, including the Pigeon.

Under a recent state law, forest roads of Pigeon River Country will continue to be closed to off-road vehicles (ORVs) because of potential disruption to the many other quieter and less intrusive uses in the historic state forest. But long-time forest users are concerned that the new law puts the forest at risk of ORV violations. There has been some increase in illegal incursions in the PRC since the new law was passed.

Enacted in 2016, PA 288 reversed the long-established way of posting DNR/state forest roads on state land open or closed in the Northern Lower Peninsula, changing it to the same criteria as has been the status in the UP. Previously, a forest road in the NLP was to be considered closed unless it was posted open. PA 288 flipped that criteria, so that now a road is considered open if it is not posted closed, despite the temptation that offers to violators to simply remove the posting and claim the road to be open.

The new law triggered a lengthy review of forest roads. It was deemed appropriate to keep the roads in the PRC closed to ORV usage, part of some 16 percent of forest roads so designated in the Northern Lower Peninsula. The vast majority, 84 percent, of forest roads in the region are designated as open to ORVs. There are no designated ORV trails in the PRC. ORVs are allowed on the shoulder of Otsego and Montmorency county roads outside of the PRC—but not within the PRC—and allowed on the shoulder of all Cheboygan county roads.

Of some 290 miles of mapped county and forest roads in the PRC, about 115 miles are forest roads managed by the DNR. These roads are being posted as closed to ORVs, but some posts have been removed by unknown parties.

There has been a more recent change that eases rules for ORVs. A change to Michigan's vehicle code passed by the 2018 legislature and signed by Gov. Snyder before leaving office took effect March 28, 2019, allowing an ORV owner to obtain a vehicle identification number (VIN) from the Secretary of State upon making certain modifications, such as safety belts, specific horns, lights, and tires. This makes that vehicle legal on all open roads, including all state forest roads within the PRC.

Those street-legal ORVs are bound by the same restrictions as other vehicles and other means of transport aside from movement on foot.

Membership renewal reminder

Membership dues help provide a scholarship to a student intern who assists the forest manager in the summer, and help us protect the wild character of the PRC. Your membership expiration date is on your mailing label or email sending this newsletter. Please keep your membership current. Thank you!



Visit our website at www.pigeonriver.org