

Pigeon River Country Association Newsletter

Summer 2020



Pandemic leaving its mark on forest

Perhaps the most visible sign of the covid-19 pandemic in this northern Michigan forest was the uncut grass in the campgrounds on June 15 as they reopened to campers. But the grass was soon to be mowed as staff began catching up from months of shutdown. As with the pandemic itself, the effects are real enough but for the most part not in plain view.

The forest goes on living minute by minute, while plans and projects slowly begin to regain their vitality. We offer a few glimpses into what's going on.

Camping: Easing back to normal

“For the most part, everything is back to business as usual for visitors,” Kelly Kinser of the DNR Parks and Recreation Division says.



A lone family from Grand Rapids area set up at Round Lake Campground on first weekend of reopened camping. Pigeon Bridge Campground similarly had one campsite occupied.

Photo by Dale Franz

“Campers still register for their sites through our self-registration system as usual. Elk Hill equestrian campground is still available for reservations but all other campgrounds are first come first serve. Currently the Recreation Passport is being waived for all facilities but we anticipate that being reactivated shortly. Signage is posted on the self-registration bulletin boards with all of that information.”

Group campgrounds were to open June 30th. “Everywhere is still subject to the current Executive Order though, including wearing of face coverings, social distancing and groups sizes,” she said.

“We are still a little behind schedule as far as getting sites mowed and cleaned. Due to the hiring freeze we were much later than usual in getting our staff back to work. We expect to have everything back up to our normal conditions shortly.” Kelly said Parks and Recreation Division was able to get an exception to the hiring freeze, albeit a month behind schedule. “We wouldn’t have been able to run our facilities [statewide] without help.”

Since conditions in the covid-19 pandemic remain fluid, anyone planning a visit to the Pigeon or other state facilities is advised to check for updates first at [DNR COVID-19 response page](#)

Buildings: Staying closed

The forest headquarters building and the nearby Discovery Center remain closed, headquarters indefinitely and Discovery Center until at least Sept. 1, 2020. The Discovery Center website notes: “Although this lovely log cabin is closed to visitors, its security monitoring and maintenance routines are active. The Discovery Center is being cared for during this hiatus.

“And the land endures. The seasons progress, the days get longer, the animals raise their families. We hope you can get out to experience the serenity and constancy of the Pigeon River Country during this period of human uncertainty and anxiety.” The website: <https://pigeonriverdiscoverycenter.org/>

Annual meeting canceled

The board of directors of the Pigeon River Country Association voted to cancel the July 11, 2020 annual meeting due to the pandemic. A rescheduling may be possible as conditions allow. Don’t forget to renew your membership; they come due June 30.

Well pads: Treeing up

Twelve staffers from Huron Pines and two AmeriCorps members installed plants at two old oil/gas well pads on June 14, one on the west side of Bobcat Trail (north of Hardwood Lake Road) and the second at the north intersection of Tin Shanty and Lost Cabin Trail. It was the first time this year the staffers could work outside together. They said the weather was perfect.

Michigan’s Wildlife Habitat Grant and Invasive Species grants are currently suspended. The Pigeon River Country Association funded the entire \$2,325 for planting and maintaining the trees and shrubs aimed at returning the two well pads to conditions before drilling took place decades ago. The crew installed 10 different deer/elk exclosures—areas fenced to keep the browsers out. Each exclosure had 20-30 different plants in them. Staffers then began visiting the sites several times a week to water the plants in the hot, dry conditions that followed.

The plants: 75 six-inch to twelve-inch bare root (service berry, hazelnut, and American plum), 188 one-gallon containerized tree and shrub saplings (black chokeberry, flowering dogwood, huckleberry, low bush blueberry, fragrant sumac, American hazelnut, downy arrowwood, and pasture rose), and 40 five-gallon trees (white oak, bur oak, and tulip poplar).



Josh Leisen, senior project manager for Huron Pines, at the well pad planting. Josh is coordinating the “tubes” replacement and Cornwall Flooding dam renovation projects. *Photos courtesy Huron Pines*



Plantings at old oil well pad are fenced in what are called exclosures to protect the plants from browsers.

Projects: Mostly stalled

Lisha Ramsdell, Associate Director of Huron Pines, provides these updates:

For **Cornwall Flooding** we received word in early June that the suspended grant has been reinstated, a decision made shortly after dam failures and flooding near Midland. The engineer has been reengaged. The permit to replace the Cornwall Flooding control mechanism is expected to be submitted in July, to be followed by construction bids for work to be started and completed in 2021. “We are also working with the DNR and the Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy (EGLE) to submit a FEMA application for the site.

[The plan is to draw down the flooding 7 to 8 feet, not inches as appeared in some versions of our Winter 2019-20 newsletter.]

"Tin Bridge Road Crossing: Associated with work at Cornwall Flooding we submitted a grant to the DNR Aquatic Habitat Grant Program (funding that is provided through fishing license fees) to replace this crossing. Decisions on

grant funding have been suspended so as of now no work will take place at this site.”

A timber cut of up to one and a half miles along **Osmun Road** near Inspiration Point has been delayed. The plan is to remove invasive species, harvest 90-year-old red pine and restore some 200 acres to mixed hardwoods, consistent with the Concept of Management. The invasive species of concern are black locust, Japanese barberry, and autumn olive. Invasives generally tend to displace native species, thus reducing the diversity of plants available to wildlife. The Japanese barberry is also a haven for ticks.

Lisha tells us: “Because of the coronavirus pandemic we are certainly adjusting our work habits and how we implement on-the-ground projects. We have instituted physical distancing protocol per CDC guidelines to keep our staff and partners healthy. These adjustments do impact our efficiency some (no shared equipment, less carpooling, etc.), but we already have a very full field season throughout our region and will get a lot of great things done.

“One of the biggest impacts this has had is canceling over 30 volunteer events and gatherings. Not only do we accomplish a lot through these events, but our staff gets so energized when engaging with the public! It’s been a bit lonely and not seeing our conservation friends and colleagues is hard, but we are all doing our best staying connected to the people and our natural resources.”

The Huron Pines service area covers 4.5 million acres, across 12 counties from I-75 to the Lake Huron coast and from the Saginaw Bay to the Mackinac Bridge.

AmeriCorps: A look inside

Samantha Peterson, a Huron Pines AmeriCorps member, has been serving in the PRC since January 2019. She is from Wyoming, Michigan, near Grand Rapids, and grew up hunting and fishing with her family. Sam has a degree in fisheries and wildlife management from LSSU and has worked seasonally for the DNR at Allegan State Game Area and on Mackinac Island with Mackinac State Historic Parks.

Once arriving in the PRC, she quickly became known as someone who carried out requests and projects reliably and with dispatch, and, even better, took the initiative in tackling what needed to be done. Here is her report:

I am the Huron Pines AmeriCorps (HPA) member serving with the Michigan DNR Pigeon River Country State Forest. This is my second term with HPA in the PRC. My last day is scheduled to be Oct. 24, 2020. I have a unique perspective with HPA as I had one “normal” year and this year has been the year of covid-19.

My first few months in 2019 were spent doing office work and getting ready for projects. In April when the snow started to melt, I pretty much hit the ground running. I spent a little time orienting myself to the PRC and then went right into field work. I started driving the different roads so I would have knowledge on how to get places and the conditions of the roads. I also hiked some of the trails so that I could give visitors accurate answers to their questions about hiking.

Last year was my first year conducting interviews and helping to choose the intern for the summer. Emily Aisthorpe ended up being a great fit for the position. She grew up at the southern end of the forest and spent time in the PRC her whole life. So, she came in already knowing the area and what to expect in the forest. She was able to answer visitors' questions right away.

I helped plan a big volunteer event to clean up the High Country Pathway and helped develop education programs for last year and ran a few of them myself. By fall, getting closer to the end of my service term, I was having trouble figuring out what was next for me. I decided to serve a second term with HPA. This was around the time that Scott Whitcomb accepted his new position in Lansing. He was excited to have me back for another year to continue the work I was doing and to help with the transition of him leaving and a new unit manager coming in. At about this time I was nominated to be the HPA representative as part of Michigan's LeaderCorps for the year. I was hesitant about this position at first, but quickly embraced it once everything started to change due to the global pandemic and as I took on more of a leadership role to help the other members through an abnormal service term.

A lot of my second term was scheduled to finish projects that I started in my first service term. In the first few months I did a lot of computer work. I had my first couple of meetings for LeaderCorps and talked to the new HPA members about my service and the program at the HPA member orientation in January. Shortly after that, the first case of covid-19 was confirmed in the U.S. Things stayed somewhat normal for a few weeks. Then everything changed quickly with new regulations being put into place for DNR employees. The day the "Stay Home, Stay Safe" order was signed, my term changed completely. All employees were required to start teleworking and field work was put on hold.

So, I packed up papers and headed home to turn my kitchen table into my new desk. From there, I worked on different mapping projects and updated the information binders for future HPA members with the PRC. I also updated Facebook entries for the Discovery Center (DC), and provided "virtual visits" for everyone since they cannot visit in person.

Before the pandemic hit, I helped develop a three-year plan and worked on education programs for the DC, helping to get them scheduled, and flyers made up, printed out, and posted. I had also set up Facebook events and

response forms for each event. Since everything has been put on hold with the DC, our current programs and our three-year plan will more than likely get pushed back a year. We have been looking into the



Samantha Peterson *Huron Pines photo*

possibility of offering some of these programs in a different format, as time and other's schedules allow.

Before the pandemic, I had been interviewing candidates for the PRCA internship and had narrowed the field down to three candidates. Unfortunately, once we were all sent home the decision was made to pull the internship for this year because the state could not, in good faith, ask/introduce new people into the offices with the risk of infection being so high. It was hard to make the calls to our candidates, but they all understood and at least two of them plan to apply again next year. I am hopeful that next year it will be an easy decision and we will have some good candidates to choose from.

After a few months of serving from home, field work has opened back up for DNR staff and I have been able to start checking things off my list. The past couple of weeks I have been helping Greg Rekowski out with a few things in the Storey Lake property by gathering GPS data and photos on electrical boxes throughout the property and GPS and measurements for other structures there.

We carry a handheld GPS unit, turn on a tracking feature, and it makes a route of where you go. The output file can be loaded into interactive maps to help determine which roads are open and closed.

Some of the work I have planned for the next couple of months is:

- Check all traffic counters on a regular basis and replace batteries in them
- GPS roads in Walled Lake
- Walk the perimeter to check fencing and private property signs in Walled Lake
- Finish installing road number posts for newly numbered forest roads in the northeast and southern annexed areas
- Install the new Witness Tree sign and remove the old sign
- Work on some invasive species treatments
- Re-GPS and repaint the blue triangle markers on the Towerman's Watch pathway
- Work on the small residence for future interns
- Prepare information for next year's intern and HPA member

The small residence is a log cabin on the southwest side of the parking lot (off to the left when pulling into the lot for headquarters). This cabin was the dwelling for Jerry Myers until he retired as a fisheries technician in 1975. It was then used as housing for other employees over the years but has since sat vacant when the state stopped providing housing a dozen years ago. The plan now is to finish cleaning and fixing it up so that future PRCA interns can live there during their internship. Since the association and the DNR do not pay for housing for the intern, this would serve as a free housing option for them. The cabin has been cleaned from ceiling to floor and all the things stored in it have been emptied out. I hope to have it ready before I leave for the intern next year.

I am looking forward to finishing out the year and seeing where it takes me next. This has been an amazing experience for me, and the PRC has become a place that I will always love, have a spot for in my heart, and will advocate for.

Management: Sharing the load

A hiring freeze due to covid-19 restrictions has left the PRC unit manager position unfilled as a full-time position. It is being handled by an already full-time employee, first Greg Rekowski and now Cody Stevens. A look at the PRC status follows.

Cody Stevens, unit manager of the Atlanta State Forest, has been assigned the additional responsibility of unit manager for the Pigeon River Country State Forest. As covid-19 restrictions are lifted, he expects to work in the PRC one or two days a week. "For the time being, I'm working from home and only going into offices as needed to sign paperwork," he said. "Unfortunately

nearly all of our FRD (Forest Resources Division) staff are being laid off one day a week until the end of July, so everyone's schedule is pretty full."

Cody worked seasonally for the DNR in 1998 until 2001, when he began his full time forestry career with the DNR in the Upper Peninsula. "I was fortunate and able to move back to my hometown of Atlanta in 2003 as a forester. In 2012 I was promoted to the Atlanta unit manager. I really enjoy the diversity of the job and every day brings a new challenge to work on, and I'm sure the PRC will do the same.



Cody Stevens

“We have great staff in both Atlanta and PRC ... and I truly appreciate their efforts as we work through these unprecedented times. It has been a bit frustrating trying to learn a new unit and not being able to spend more time out in the PRC, but Greg Rekowski, Rick McDonald, and Karen Chapman have really helped cover the important issues.”

He said “the forestry field staff were allowed to work in the field again starting June 1st, but their time at the office will be very limited as they are being encouraged to continue to work from home as much as possible. Karen is continuing to work in the PRC headquarters one day a week to process mail and keep the place running as usual.”

PRC headquarters will remain closed to the public since “we don’t have the staff or supplies available to ensure our users would have a safe/sanitary environment to enjoy, and if anyone who is potentially carrying covid-19 entered the building, it would have to remain closed to all staff for two-three weeks per our current policy.”

Cody noted that “the public participation for our inventory process will look different this year. We won’t be holding a public meeting (open house) but we will be taking comments and setting up phone calls/Zoom meetings between Aug. 4 and Sept. 9. The Compartment Review date has also been changed to Oct. 5. Greg and Rick are working hard on getting their inventory and timber done to avoid further delays.” Details about public input are listed at <https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/MIDNR/bulletins/28d6f6d#.XtQVoMVUNc4.email>

Samantha Peterson of AmeriCorps is “doing a great job staying busy and will start working on some invasive species projects over the next few months,” Cody said.

A similar dual-assignment was in place between Joe Jarecki retiring as PRC unit manager in 2007 and Scott Whitcomb arriving about 20 months later. The arrangement was at least in part attributed to a statewide DNR funding shortage. Most of that period Laurie Marzolo, Atlanta unit manager at the time, was assigned to both Atlanta and PRC. Then Dale Garlock, former Atlanta manager and district forest manager at the time, served additionally as PRC unit manager for four or five months until Scott got the job. Scott was also assigned responsibility for the state forest road program during his tenure as PRC unit manager.

Advisory Council prepares for electronic meeting

The Advisory Council will hold its July 23 2020 meeting using video conference format with a phone option for members. It will be its first meeting in six months. Details were still being arranged as we published this

newsletter. The Advisory Council held its quarterly meeting in January but cancelled its April session because of the pandemic. Those hoping to “attend” the electronic meeting can request access information a week or two in advance by emailing the chairman, Paul Rose, at paulrose.appraiser@gmail.com

Wildlife: In motion

To the casual visitor, wind in the trees may be the most noticeable movement in the PRC, along with bird flight and, at the rivers, stream flow. With summer upon us, the whine of a mosquito draws attention to a variety of insects flitting around. We might notice an occasional squirrel or chipmunk darting about. If we are fortunate enough to glimpse deer, or even more rarely, elk, we might count the day as a satisfactory look at a range of forest inhabitants.

There are some among us, however, who are keenly aware of what has escaped that view. Not only are there creatures moving through the forest that we might recognize at a distance if we could only spot them, there are people who study them closely, know where to find them, and periodically match wits with them in an effort to harvest a portion of their numbers sufficient to maintain a healthy balance of the creature in its environment.

We’re talking about a regulated, licensed activity with ancient roots: hunting. Those regulations reveal a surprising array of animals interacting with humans throughout the year. The most active hunting period is fall and winter, when some two dozen species can be hunted, and in some cases trapped. They are: bear, cottontail rabbit and snowshoe hare, crow, deer, elk, pheasant, quail, ruffed grouse, sharp-tailed grouse, fox and gray squirrel, waterfowl, wild turkey, woodcock, and the fur animals muskrat, mink, raccoon, fox, bobcat, badger, fisher/marten, beaver, and otter.

The two-week deer season, starting each Nov. 15, is the best known Michigan hunt. The lottery for elk hunts, with varying dates and quotas depending on herd strength, has a national following.

It is less known that coyotes can be taken year round, along with opossum, porcupine, weasel, red squirrel, skunk, ground squirrel, woodchuck, Russian boar, feral pigeons, starlings, and house sparrows, with a valid Michigan hunting license.

There is also a six-week spring season for wild turkey that just concluded at the end of May. An average of 850 turkeys are harvested each spring since 2010 in the northern four counties at the top of the Lower Peninsula that include the PRC, based on a mail survey that may not be sent out this year due to the backlog of work delayed by the pandemic shutdown.

Brian Mastenbrook of the wildlife division says, “There seems to be a lot of anecdotal evidence that more people used the outdoors more than normal during the pandemic shutdown. I am searching for hard numbers to back up this assumption,” including road traffic counters. A bike shop “reported their bike sales doubled during May when compared” to last year “and also heard the same type of increase from a seller of ATV/ORVs.”

If increased forest visits turns out to be accurate, “I think it would help demonstrate the importance of state land/wild areas/nature to the people of the state,” Brian said.



Wild turkey

Photo by Dale Franz

Hemingway plaque mounted

The Michigan Hemingway Society has been a generous supporter for the Pigeon River Country Discovery Center, donating cash, books, and artifacts. In addition, MHS has designated the Discovery Center as one of approximately 14 stops on its “Hemingway’s Michigan” tour and will include us in its tour brochure. This plaque summarizing Hemingway’s connection to the Pigeon River Country has been mounted outside the Discovery Center by volunteers Bruce and Tammy Kohnert. An official dedication ceremony,

originally scheduled for July, 2020, will be rescheduled when conditions permit.



Due to unforeseen circumstances, we did not send an email alert to the online version of this Summer 2020 newsletter. Instead, the print version was mailed to those signed up for the electronic alert.

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. Please keep your membership current.

Visit our websites at www.pigeonriver.org
<https://pigeonriverdiscoverycenter.org>