

Pigeon River Country Association

Newsletter

Winter/Spring 2025



Ice storm recovery in the Big Wild

Pigeon River Country found itself at ground zero during northern Michigan's ice storm of the century.

Between March 28 and 30th, 1 to 1.5 inches of ice covered everything in a 12-county area, affecting nearly one million acres of state forest land; over 3,400 miles of state forest public roads; over 1,200 miles of administrative access roads; over 4,000 miles of trails; and 122 boating access sites. The storm also had severe impacts on power lines and communication towers, making initial recovery efforts incredibly difficult.

Emergency response efforts began immediately after the storm hit, but damage to the forest is extensive and recovery protocols will remain ongoing well into the foreseeable future. Forest access, including

the PRC road network and pathways, as well as river passage via canoe and kayak, remains substantially compromised.

The storm's long-term ramifications on Pigeon River Country remain unknown.

"I've never seen a department-wide response of this magnitude," DNR Ice Storm Response Team Public Information Officer Kerry Heckman said. "This is one of the most massive disasters we've ever dealt with. Nearly a quarter of Michigan's state forest system was impacted by the storm – almost a million acres. And the PRC was right in the heart of it."



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“Everything within the ice storm impact area has been touched in some way,” Kerry Heckman continued. “Our response has been proportionate to the size of the impact from the storm.”

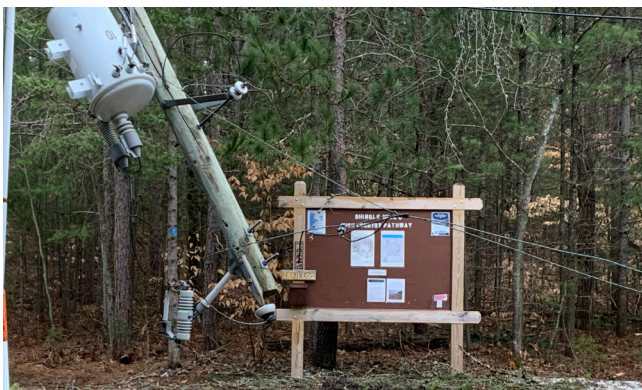
She went on to say that some areas in the PRC may take generations to return to looking like they used to.

“A lot of people are struggling to grasp the sheer magnitude of this event,” she said.

FRD Forest Planning and Modeling Specialist Dan Heckman said it is important for PRC stakeholders to understand that the ice storm did not come with any extra money or resources, including staff, to deal with its aftermath.

“We need folks to show some understanding,” Dan Heckman said. “There are 3,400 miles of road that were impacted. That’s like going from Mackinaw City to Miami Florida and back. And of those impacted roads, over 1,000 miles are impassible. So imagine going from here to the Florida State Line, but the roads are [blocked] and need to be opened up.”

Dan Heckman said that over 200 miles of state forest road have been cleared so far.



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“[Keep in mind] this is a couple people with chainsaws, and a bulldozer or front-end loader pushing debris to the side of the road,” he said. “There’s multiple crews doing that but imagine going from Mackinaw City to Flint at that rate. It’s a lot of work, and it’s dangerous and tedious and slow going. These are people who also have their normal jobs, like firefighters and foresters, biologists and technicians. We are all doing the best we can, but [getting everything cleared] is going to take time.”

The forest’s DNR Unit Manager Mark Monroe stressed the importance of understanding the scope of impact the storm had “on everything.”

“I’m not trying to be facetious,” he said. “Every division has been impacted and has been trying to coordinate [recovery efforts], whether that be fish stocking sites, access to the rivers, timber and wildlife cover, all of the campgrounds that are shut down, all the hiking trails and horse trails that are shut down, fire [and law] access... Every single thing in the Pigeon River Country has been affected. It’s so encompassing.”

Monroe said it is important for PRC stakeholders to remain patient with the timeline of recovery efforts in the wake of the storm.

“Everything is very slow going,” he said. “It’s an immense project and an immense disaster [...] We are opening everything as quickly as we can. Just know that some of your spots may not be [immediately] accessible. We will get to all of them, but it will be quite a long effort.

“We ask that folks remember to have patience when they come here, not only with the DNR’s response, but with the community as well,” Monroe continued. “This storm has

impacted everyone. Folks went without power for weeks on end. Properties were totally destroyed. Have compassion and have patience as we recover.”

Monroe said that, in the immediate aftermath of the storm, the department’s first priorities were to ensure the protection of life and property; to provide support for department employees; and to start looking at recovery objectives.

“Once we got everyone squared away, we were able to get someone into the office,” Monroe said. “Our fire officer Sam Black cut his way in from Song of the Morning Ranch to the headquarters to make sure the generator was running.”

According to PRCAC Member and Resource Use & Extraction Committee Chair Sandy Franz, the Pigeon River Country Headquarters and Discovery Center were each without power for 18 days.

“The generator kept the heat and everything going,” Franz said. “We were lucky not to have any huge branches pierce the roofs of either place. It took days to clear Twin Lakes Road.”

After the road was cleared, Monroe was able to get out to the Headquarters to change the

oil in the generator, which had been running for nine days.

“It continued to run for the remaining nine days with regular maintenance,” Monroe said.

It wasn't only the Headquarters and Discovery Center that went without power in the forest. Oil and gas companies operating in the PRC didn't have electricity, either.

“We talked with Lambda Energy Resources about what we could do to facilitate getting those [wells] running,” Monroe said. “They were able to get some very low noise generators out there and get production back up. They only ran those for about a day, and then electricity was back up. But that was just another thing that was put on our plates.”

After addressing life and property, the department began turning their attention to forest resources.

“We started doing aerial flights that first Friday after the storm, seven days in,” Monroe explained.

These surveillance flights provided the department with some initial starting points to help prioritize its exhaustive, extensive, and all-encompassing list of recovery efforts.

Teamwork

Governor Whitmer declared a state of emergency on March 31. This placed the Michigan State Police Emergency Operation Center at the helm of storm response efforts, in tandem with the Michigan National Guard, which Whitmer deployed across northern Michigan on April 1.

“MSP worked with a lot of different entities, in this case 12 different county emergency



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operation centers, the National Guard, DNR, and MDOT,” Kerry Heckman said.

“Each group had their own specific mission, with the larger state emergency operation center overseeing those efforts,” she continued. “In this situation, the State Police oversaw the entire incident, and we were one of the entities that were assisting.”

According to Dan Heckman, MSP’s objective was to work with and coordinate National Guard troops to clear roads leading into communication towers used by emergency responders, so that maintenance and refueling of generators powering those towers was possible.

“A group of people with normal day jobs were assembled into the management teams,” Dan Heckman explained. “That became their primary focus – To clear roads and get [communication] towers in functioning order, and to make sure the generators were maintained and filled with fuel.”

Kerry Heckman said that, while the emergency situation itself differed from the sort of response efforts the DNR are used to overseeing (since they are usually in the command seat), the functions of most of the people involved remained generally the same.

“What you’re working and focusing on survives regardless of what the incident is, or who is managing it,” she explained. “That’s one of the nice things about the incident command system. It brought structure and order to a really chaotic situation.”

Dan Heckman echoed these statements.

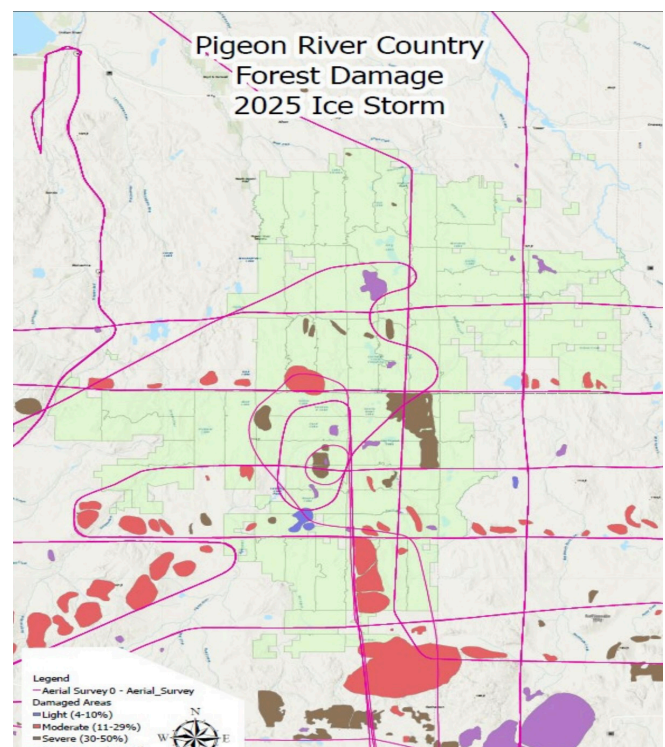
“I was brought into the team to help provide some order to the chaos, as the plans chief,”

he said. “A lot of the work that had to be done across all the state land falls within our normal responsibilities, but the scope at which things happened, and impact and the rate at which things needed to happen, was far different.”

Dan Heckman said that, despite all the moving parts, this unified command approach across the DNR’s separate divisions has been very effective.

Over 200 people are now working under the FRD and PRD’s collaborative “DNR Ice Storm Response Team” – a separate, ongoing operation that began while the department was still working under MSP and National Guard.

Dan Heckman said the team is made up of a combination of Incident Management Team members and department staff.



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The Ice Storm Response Team continues to operate with representation across the divisions under a unified command approach.

“I don’t think we could do this effectively any other way,” Dan Heckman said.

Jeffrey Clarke, PRD Supervisor for Otsego Lake State Park unit, said the amount of work the DNR has already accomplished in the PRC is “incredible.”

He explained that the PRD’s first priority was to address recovery efforts elsewhere in state parks, “because we have incoming reservations,” followed by state forest campgrounds in the area, and finally trail networks.

“We are slowly getting to the point where we are transitioning over to the trail aspect,” Clarke said, “But we’re right at the beginning stages of that.”

Critical technology

In-house GIS and mapping specialists acted quickly in the immediate wake of the storm to create the DNR Ice Damage Assessment Tool – a phone application that allows damage and recovery data to be recorded, utilized, and updated as needed.

“We identified a need to assess damage to roads, timber stands, trails, and other recreational impacts,” Dan Heckman said. “We are [continually] tracking our efforts. The ice storm tracking database is populated by folks in the field, and it gets automatically updated so we can display that and take snapshots to show work over time, to show our progress and to prioritize our work and have that sent out to all field devices. That is happening with roads, trails, state parks, boating access sites, etc.”

Kerry Heckman said that the DNR Ice Damage Assessment Tool played an essential role in addressing several early priorities like providing data on access to fish stocking sites to the Fisheries Division and getting access to critical planting areas for seedlings.

In fact, Dan Heckman said that 3,776,500 tree seedlings, mostly red pine, had to be planted across 4,220 acres of planting sites within a week or two of their delivery, shortly after the storm hit. This meant that all the state forest roads leading to those planted sites had to be cleared immediately. The assessment tool allowed progress to be tracked and updated in real time, so that planting crews could get to work as soon as possible.

“Both of those priorities (fish stocking and tree planting) have already been addressed,” Kerry Heckman said. “That tool has been really essential.”

Damage to trees

Of all the damaged species of trees in the PRC, red pine stands in the forest accumulated the most damage.

“Because red pines are softwoods, they were just decimated by the storm,” Franz said.

Dan Heckman said the higher level of damage to red pines is primarily related to that species’ physiology and structural resiliency but explained that the DNR’s stand management also had an impact.

“If we have been thinning a stand, and there are wide open spaces around each crown to encourage growth, it gives those crowns space to bend over before it contacts another tree that might have supported it,” he said. “So the more space between trees,

the farther a tree can bend over, and eventually snap.

“If you look at a dense stand, you saw mortality lower in red pine stands that hadn’t been thinned. The stands we’ve managed had more widespread damage than stands we hadn’t managed.”

Dan Heckman went on to explain that lowland conifer, spruce, and balsam fir tended to be more resilient to the ice, perhaps because those types of wood are more flexible.

“The tips of some of those trees will break off, but [comparatively] they’ll be fine,” he said. “We didn’t see nearly as much damage there.”

Unfortunately, northern hardwoods didn’t fare as well.

According to Dan Heckman and Monroe, elevation factored into the extent of ice damage to specific cover types, with stands at higher elevation and lower temperatures accumulating more ice on their branches than stands at lower elevation.

“The higher elevation [cover types] may have received more ice, and that happens to be where most of our hardwoods grow,” Monroe said. “It is warmer down in the swamps, and I don’t think the ice accumulated as much in those areas, so they saw less damage. I don’t think we can attribute it to one species surviving better than another, so much as where the ice formed on the landscape.”

Various disease processes, and the influx of parasitic insects, are driving the department’s reaction time to get as much wood salvaged as possible as quickly as possible.

Franz explained that a lot of the PRC’s hardwood value as a commercial crop will be reduced because, as the water gets into the heartwood, it discolours the wood and makes it less valuable.

The damage to red pines is so severe that most of it can only be sold for salvage, at a steep discount.

To complicate matters even more, that particular species has to be cut and carted off to mills within 60 days of acquiring damage, or pine bark beetles infest the wood and render it utterly valueless.

“We are still assessing what the timber damage impacts will be,” Kerry Heckman said. “We are in the middle of putting up salvage timber sales, especially for the red pine. That’s been our top priority, so that we don’t lose more value from that timber, and so that we don’t have impacts on other trees that are also stressed as a result of this.”

But pine bark beetles aren’t the only species threatening to violate damaged timber in the PRC.

Oak wilt was identified and treated in the PRC last year. The DNR carried out a timber sale, did root grafts, and burned the tops off of the affected trees. Unfortunately, the ice storm provided oak wilt with an additional entry point into the forest.

Mark Monroe said it’s a good thing the DNR got ahead of last year’s oak wilt patches, as failing to do so would have resulted in compounding negative impacts.

“The oak wilt that was found in the PRC last year was mitigated,” Monroe said. “It’s good that we got on top of that because it decreased a heavily impacted area. If we

hadn't done that, it would be an avenue for even further spread.

"Undoubtedly, we acknowledge that there probably will be more, because there are a lot of limbs hanging in trees and as they fall out and rip the cambium, they create an open wound, and that's the vector for disease transmission. But we'll just keep monitoring it and treating it accordingly."

Effects on funding and forest management

The long-term financial impacts of the storm's impacts on timber sales remain unknown, but the budget implications, particularly for the FRD, are not good.

"On tax reverted land, our timber revenue goes into a forest development fund," Dan Heckman said. "That's what the FRD's budget is based on."

According to Dan Heckman, timber revenue also feeds Pittman Robinson acquired lands, which means the DNR's Wildlife Division will also be impacted by reductions in timber revenue.

"The stumpage price is about 50% less than what it would normally be," he said. "If you compare this to a normal scenario, the same volume [of harvested timber] would have been stretched over probably twenty years."

Dan Heckman said the FRD will have to modify future forest management plans to address the impacts of the ice damage and salvage operations. However, it remains unknown exactly what those modifications will be or how they will be enacted.

"Before the storm hit, we were in the final stages of releasing a final draft of a state forest management plan," Dan Heckman

said. "We were going to release it in June or July, but we have paused that, because this ice storm affected nearly a quarter of our state forest lands.

"We are going to go back to the drawing board to get a better handle on how much damage there is and what the impact from that damage is, to come up with a plan to modify things and absorb that damage into a [new] plan for long term sustainability."

Potential fire hazards

Excess woody debris and dead standing timber resulting from the ice storm substantially increased the risk of wildfires for years to come.

"Conifer branches will dry out the fastest and are a risk for fires this year," Kerry Heckman said. "For the rest of the debris, like northern hardwood trees, the concern is more for future years."

Kerry Heckman explained that certain species, particularly hardwoods, still have a lot of moisture in them, meaning they aren't necessarily an immediate threat, but that they could become one as years go by.

"Given the sheer magnitude of this, it's not possible for us to clear all the debris from the forest floor," she said. "A lot of it will rot, which will be beneficial for future productive forests. But this is something that will continue to be on our radar as we get into future fire seasons."

Dan Heckman stressed the point that we have complete control over human-caused wildfires.

"We can all work to reduce the risk of a wildfire starting," he said. "Make sure fires are extinguished fully, by using water, stir it

around, put more water on it, and feel it with the back of your hand to make sure there's no heat there.

"Especially in the PRC, with the recreation influence, that's a really important factor. It's probably our number one [fire prevention measure]. The other thing is we can get our roads opened up so we have access to wildfires to quickly respond to them to keep them small. Lightning strikes are going to happen. We see that every year."

Dan Heckman said his biggest concern is a fire starting in a remote location of the forest, because there is still so much debris covering so many of the PRC's fire roads.

"You can imagine trying to work our way in there with a chainsaw just to get to the fire," he said. "That's going to be a challenge, and it's on everybody's radar."

To mitigate the risk of such fires, Dan Heckman said the department is probably going to turn to aerial resources quicker than usual.

"If we are having trouble getting to a fire, we will probably do [aerial] bucket drops or use scooper planes to release water over the fire," he explained. "Those resources are sitting at the Gaylord Airport right now, ready for this kind of extended dry period that we have coming up."

Staying safe in the forest

Kerry Heckman said it is important for people to keep themselves safe when they are out and about the forest this year.

"There are still a lot of hanging branches and leaning trees that can come down without a lot of notice," she said. "There is a lot of debris on the forest floor, so it's difficult to

just walk through the forest in a lot of areas. We don't want anybody to get hurt. Look up more than you might have in the past."

"With that said, there are some benefits like there will be with any natural disturbance. There are wildlife that will thrive as a result of it, and the forest will come back. It will just take time."

Jefferey Clarke said that folks should remember just how much damage there is, and that some places were hit worse than others, meaning a lot of places might not be as accessible as they were before.

"We are working on the trails and getting those clear, but it's going to be a slow process," he said. "We just ask that people stay mindful of all that and watch out for hazards as they traverse through the forest."

To stay up-to-date with storm response efforts, visit www.michigan.gov/dnrstormresponse.

Oil spill in the PRC

Lambda Energy Resources discovered on April 16 that one of their oil flowlines, located four feet below grade at T33N, R1E, Sec. 14, was leaking.

A thin layer of the mixture spread over about an acre of coniferous wetland, about 1.25 miles south of the nearest bank of the Black River.

EGLE Public Information Officer Josef Greenberg Stephens said that Lambda calculated that an estimated 100 barrels of condensate, 110 barrels of brine, and 11 barrels of crude oil were released from the flowline.



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Heading northwest from the point of rupture, the affected area is about 150 yards long, according to Stephens.

“Lambda discovered it during routine flowline maintenance, when they noticed a lack of oil returns,” Stephens said. “They immediately shut down the compromised line.”

Stephens said that Lambda has since removed 2,500 barrels of groundwater and contaminated product mix, as well as 1,500 cubic yards of impacted soils.

“What was really tough about this response was that it was right in the shadow of the ice storm,” Stephens said. “The actual location of the leak is significantly remote. It’s difficult terrain. We had to create roads so that heavy machinery could get in there and start addressing the issue.”

Stephens said that released organic chlorides and benzene could impact soil and water quality in the immediate region.



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“Monitor wells have been installed,” Stephens said. “We are still delineating the path of the crude oil. We are trying to figure out its direction. We have a DNR drone to do aials with.”

According to Stephens, there are no stream features in the area, but some moss and smaller trees are showing significant impact from the spill, with noticeable browning on many of the trees.

“There was no threat to public health because there are no water wells in the immediate area,” Stephens said. “There is also no [immediate] threat to wildlife

because the crews are out there working and are keeping the wildlife out.”

The cause of the leak is still under investigation.

According to an EGLE press release, “Remedial activities will continue until analytical sample results confirm that removal of oil and brine is complete.”

To stay up-to-date on this issue, visit <https://www.michigan.gov/egle/about/organization/geologic-resources-management/incidents>.

Cornwall Dam renovation underway

Construction of a new dam structure at the Cornwall Flooding berm will commence this spring.

Taplin Enterprises were hired to begin the repair process shortly after Memorial Day weekend. Construction is anticipated to extend well into the fall.

Huron Pines Associate Director Lisha Ramsdell said the flooding’s water level will be drawn down an additional foot before construction begins.

“Per EGLE’s permit, the dam can be drawn down up to seven feet,” Ramsdell said. “Last year it was drawn down about six feet.”

Once the new structure is built, Taplin will start decommissioning the old structure.

According to Ramsdell, not every part of the original dam will be removed.

“The idea is that, once the water levels are brought back up, whatever is left of the old

structure will be about two feet under water,” she explained. “The goal is to have 95% of it done by November. There will likely be some springtime slope restoration and whatnot, but as far as heavy construction, we are shooting for a fall completion.”

While Cornwall’s construction site will not be officially closed, road access heading toward the flooding’s day use area and boat launch will be gated off after Tin Bridge Road to prevent vehicular disturbances to construction equipment.

“It’s okay for people to come down and take a look as long as they stay away from the



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active construction,” Ramsdell said. “We are not telling people they can’t go out there, but we do need people to stay safe and not get in the way or park in front of the gate.”

The Shore-to-Shore equestrian trail, which crosses the berm at Cornwall Flooding, has been rerouted. For the duration of the construction period, horseback riders will take a detour from Osmun Road to Tin Bridge Road – the same route that was implemented last year during the original drawdown.

According to a recent DNR press release, the total cost of the repair is approximately \$2.46 million, with rebuild-specific funding provided by the Great Lakes Fishery Commission; the Michigan EGLE Dam Risk Reduction Grant Program; stakeholders who donated to the Save Cornwall campaign; and various DNR appropriations.

Fisheries Division maintenance requirements for all assets, including dams, is \$175 million, but only \$300,000 is annually available to address them. Fisheries Chief Randy Claramunt said that while the department is going to follow through with its commitment to repair the dam, this fiscal imbalance is “unsustainable,” according to the press release, leaving the status of future annual maintenance costs for the Cornwall dam uncertain.

For additional updates, visit <https://www.facebook.com/groups/savecornwall/> or <https://www.huronpines.org/savecornwall>.

Discovery Center: Our Story Prompts Visitors to Tell Theirs

by Sandy Franz

The PRCA is one of the Discovery Center’s principal partners, leases the Discovery Center premises from the DNR, and supports the Discovery Center in its administration and programming.

A dedicated group of volunteers serves the Discovery Center, some of whom act as volunteer hosts on the weekends we are open. Hosts open and close the building, greet and keep a count of visitors, answer questions, and provide help and information as needed. There is a comprehensive handbook and annual training for volunteer hosts. You can go to our website, www.pigeonriverdiscoverycenter.org, under “contact us” if you want to sign up to be a docent.

We wanted to share the experience of hosting, of what a typical day feels like, for any of you who might want to do it.

The universe has ways of reminding you that the place you’re going is different. First, you lose radio signal driving out to the forest. Time to leave those temporal concerns and distractions behind and settle, slow down, empty out as you approach the forest. As you step out of your car, you realize the Pigeon really is one of the quietest places you’ve ever been. The air is clean, and the noise you at first mistake for traffic noise is the wind in the magnificent pine trees that shelter the building.

The cabin is calm, as if it has been waiting patiently. It seems to remind you that it has been here since 1935, through all kinds of weather, and it has *seen* things!! The enormous logs keep the building cool, even in the warmest weather. Walking through turning on lights, opening the door, starting

the videos, greeting the elk in the boxcar and the other furry denizens of the Discovery Center has an almost ritualistic aspect to it and brightens and readies the Discovery Center to welcome the day's visitors.

There is some anticipation about what the day will bring. Holidays, weather, myriad other factors determine whether the day will be busy or slow. Both have their attractions for the host. On a busy day you will meet many different people and have the satisfaction that the Discovery Center is being seen and enjoyed. A slow day allows you to sit quietly, look out the windows, soak in the feeling of the building and get reacquainted with its exhibits, and do a little puttering to keep it looking its best. Each day has its own alchemy and you never know what it's going to be.

People react to the Discovery Center in all different ways. Some go from room to room, looking but never slowing their pace. Others stop at most of the exhibits and actually read them. Some visitors will invite conversation and some shun it. Many families visit together, and the children show the same varied reactions, but it's fun when children are excited by the animals or actively engage with the hands-on exhibits. I often wonder: what will they remember? Will this visit shape how they see the natural world? Might it have a life-long impact?

I tell folks we carried the stories of the PRC around in our hearts for 50 years until we created the Discovery Center to tell them. One of the most exciting aspects of hosting is when Discovery Center stories prompt our visitors to tell their own. Many camped here as children with their families, had forebears who owned land and had cabins here, and speak of how time in the Pigeon influenced them for the rest of their lives. You realize then that they've carried those stories around in their hearts, too, and they are eager to tell

someone who will appreciate them. And those stories are *history*. The telling of them is *oral history*.

One recent visitor, Victor Lukasavitz, began visiting the forest when he was about 3 years old in 1951. He writes: "I always thought I would become a ranger here in the PRC woods, but the Vietnam War changed all my life directions. . . so I became a civil engineer, recreational planner and a land surveyor."

Like Ernest Hemingway, Lukasavitz found refuge in the Pigeon River Country after war. When he "returned from the military and Vietnam, the PRC was the first place I went and stayed for a while to shake all the stuff out."

He goes on to say: "To this day I contribute the lifelong profession I chose to the fact of the Witness Tree. As a kid I would take lunch and hike to the tree quite often and just sit there."

A new chapter for the PRC

Pigeon River Country became the first state forest to receive an Explorer Guide position from the DNR in November 2024, marking an expansion of the department's long-standing partnership with the Discovery Center.

Explorer Guides are seasonal interpreters and educators previously based only in Michigan state parks. According to Steering Committee Chair Rudi Edel, the Discovery Center's new standing position will drastically increase its training capacity and educational offerings.

Conservation Program Developer Kathrine Benedict was named the Discovery Center's first Explorer Guide, as well as its first ever paid staff member. Up until this

year, the Discovery Center has been an all-volunteer organization.

Since the Explorer Guide position is only active during the summer season, Benedict will work in an adjacent role as the Discovery Center Program Manager during the spring and fall.

"I'm honored to be the first ever staff member," Benedict said. "This is a season of firsts for the Discovery Center as well as for the overall Explorer Guide program. We are the first location to have an explorer guide in a state forest, so the program is branching out from state parks."

The idea that the Discovery Center would be a good candidate for an Explorer Guide position was first raised last year, after the center's membership under Huron Pines' Americorps program ended.

"No longer being a Huron Pines Americorps member limited our options a little bit," Benedict said. "We were searching for ways to fill that gap in our staffing."

Before long, the Discovery Center Steering Committee learned about the DNR's Explorer Guide program and invited Program Coordinator Shaun McKeon to come out and give a presentation on all things "Explorer."

Benedict said that all parties left the meeting in agreement: the Discovery Center would be a great fit for an Explorer Guide position.

"Shaun McKeon was really supportive of doing this pilot of an Explorer Guide based in a state forest," Benedict said. "We are hopeful that this will be a very successful position, and a very successful summer, and that we will hopefully be the first of many explorer guides in state forests."

"This represents a new stage of our existence as an interpretive center," Sandy Franz said. "It is a step in our maturation process. The goal is to continue to have paid staff and to create a strategic plan that will give us a philosophical road map for the future."

While volunteers will continue to be the heart of the Discovery Center, Benedict said she is grateful to be the center's first staff member, and that she is excited to see educational opportunities in the forest expand in this way.

Benedict said she would also like to thank Hartwick Pines State Park Lead Interpreter Craig Kasmer for his role in connecting the Discovery Center with Shaun McKeon, and for supporting the center's proposal to have an explorer guide stationed on site.

2025 Discovery Center programming

Thanks in large part to Discovery Center's new Explorer Guide standing, there will be an exponential increase in offered programs this year, especially for families and youth.

"In addition to the series of programs I piloted last year, as well as our well-loved community events series with guest speakers, I will also be leading what I am calling explorer workshops this summer," Benedict said. "That is really the core of my role as an explorer guide."

Benedict said that no sign-up is required to participate in any explorer workshop program, and that all explorer programs are free admission.

"The goal is to have a program every week at the Discovery Center," Benedict said. "That will be a significant quantity increase and we hope that it will allow more people to participate in more of our programs, like

bird watching, camp cooking, elk viewing, fishing, and stargazing.”

Benedict explained that these new programs are especially tailored to families camping in the PRC, in an effort to help them learn more about the forest, and to increase awareness in the Pigeon’s gateway communities (Vanderbilt, Wolverine, Indian River, Onaway, Atlanta, Gaylord, and Johannesburg).

While all of the Explorer workshops are family-friendly, Benedict said that they are for all ages, not just kids.

“I really do think the content will cover all kinds of things that anyone at any age could learn from,” she said.

Benedict will continue two series of programs that she piloted last year: *Make and Take* and *Ready to Go*, with the former now operating under a different name.

“We recently decided to change the name of *Make and Take* to *Field Trips*, as we feel it is more self-explanatory,” she said. “Both of those programs were a success and I am excited to continue them and expand on them this year.”

While some of the scheduled programs will be delayed due to effects of the ice storm, particularly guided hikes, Benedict said that her plans for explorer workshop programs have not been impacted.

As part of her effort to make the forest more accessible and inviting to youth, Benedict said she will also be putting together adventure kits for kids; essentially backpacks stocked with items to help young adventurers gain more confidence in exploring the forest. She said that families can check out these

kits at the Discovery Center or at forest headquarters beginning Memorial Day.

Additional program details are posted on the Discovery Center’s website, <https://pigeonriverdiscoverycenter.org/>.

New grant awarded to Discovery Center

The Discovery Center is very happy and honored to have received a \$3,150 grant from Awakon Credit Union to support its programs, with a special focus on expanding its youth programs. This grant will allow the Discovery Center to buy more supplies, as well as look toward the future and sustain its staffing for next year.

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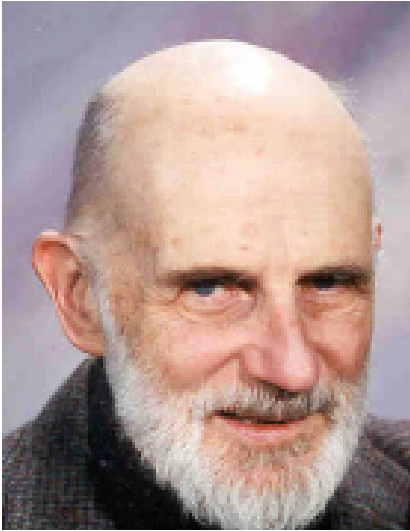
Pigeon River Country Advisory Council Representative: Sandra Franz

Mail Clerk/Assistant Treasurer: Rudi Edel

Director Emeritus: Dale Franz

Newsletter Editor: Michael Breazeale

Director of Communications: Jan Kellogg



Remembering Fr. Rick Kropf

Reverend Richard William Kropf was a priest, theologian, writer, philosopher, and long-term champion of the PRCSF. An inveterate biker, Fr. Rick died on Thursday, October 24, 2024 while riding his bike on a trail in the forest, one week before his 93rd birthday. He served as a long-time editor of the PRCA newsletter and carried the association through many years when there was little activity. The PRCA is very grateful for everything Fr. Rick did to maintain the association and help it become what it is today.

Pigeon River Country Association Meeting: June 21st

You are invited to the annual Membership Meeting of the Pigeon River Country Association (PRCA) on June 21st at the PRC headquarters building of the DNR. The meeting will begin at 12 noon with a luncheon.

Updates from the DNR, Discovery Center and our summer intern will be given. Come by to catch-up with old friends and make new ones!

New acquisitions

In addition to the 440-acre Sturgeon River Corridor parcel (T32N, R2W, Sec 28, Otsego County) that was acquired in June of 2024, the 556-acre Doe Lake property (T33N, R2W, Sec 36, Cheboygan County) is on schedule to be approved for acquisition by the DNR Director at the July Natural Resources Commission meeting. If approved, closing will likely occur in late summer or early fall.

Updated High Country Pathway and Pigeon River Country State Forest maps are now available for \$10. These waterproof, rip-resistant maps were published by the PRCA and are available at <https://pigeonriverdiscoverycenter.org/about-the-prca>, at the Discovery Center, and at Forest Headquarters.

Pigeon River Country Association Membership

Now is a good time to renew or start your PRCA membership. Please join us in helping to protect the Pigeon River Country and its resources and wildlife. Individual memberships are \$20 per year. Family memberships are \$25 per year. Visit our web-site to join or renew at (<https://pigeonriverdiscoverycenter.org/about-the-prca>), or mail a check payable to 'PRCA' to: The Pigeon River Country Association, P.O. Box 122, Gaylord MI, 49734-0122. Thank you!



Visit our websites at
<https://pigeonriverdiscoverycenter.org/about-the-prca>
<https://pigeonriverdiscoverycenter.org>

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