**Showcasing the DNR: Commemorating 100 years of the Pigeon River Country**

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On July 26, 1919, Ernest Hemingway – then a young man recovering from his experiences in the Spanish-American War – said of Michigan’s “Pine Barrens” east of Vanderbilt, “That Barrens Country is the greatest I’ve ever been in.”

A hundred years later, we call the place where Hemingway loved to fish and camp “Pigeon River Country.” And thanks to the passion, work and stewardship decisions made by many people over the decades, it remains an extraordinary outdoor treasure.

At 107,600 acres, Pigeon River Country is the largest block of contiguous undeveloped land in Michigan’s Lower Peninsula — 12 miles wide and 20 miles long — half the size of New York City.

This is a forest where logging, hunting, camping and horseback riding occur, and yet a “Big Wild” where you can sometimes sense only the sounds of nature and the smells of earth, sky and water.

**Pigeon River Country's uniqueness**

The 100-year history of the Pigeon River Country is told in the forest’s Discovery Center, opened a year ago by a group of dedicated volunteers. The interpretive center is housed in a historic home that was used as a residence for the forest supervisor until the early 2000s.

“We knew we wanted to tell the history, because the history is so important,” said volunteer Sandra Franz, who was on the committee that brought the Discovery Center to life. “We also wanted to inform people who come out that it’s not a state park. It’s a state forest, and here’s what makes the Pigeon River Country unique as a state forest.”

One of those things is the elk herd. Many people visit hoping to see elk and hear their bugle-like calls. The Pigeon River Country’s rich history also makes it unique, while tying into the overall fabric of Michigan’s lumbering and natural-resources heritage.

A century ago, Michigan set aside the 6,468 acres of tax-reverted lands that would become the nucleus of the Pigeon River Country State Forest. The land had been logged, some of it burned by forest fires, some of it cultivated by farmers who soon learned that it was not good crop land. The forest continued to expand, mostly with lands purchased with deer license revenue.

Elk disappeared from Michigan in the late 19th century due to unrestricted hunting and loss of their habitat. In 1918, seven Rocky Mountain elk were brought to the area that would soon be the Pigeon River Forest.

The herd grew steadily, but poaching and diminished habitat quality reduced its numbers from 1,500 in the early 1960s to 200 in the mid-1970s. Since then, careful management of the open areas and forests that the herd needs to thrive has helped it grow to more than 1,100 animals.

**The forest's first champion**

P.S. Lovejoy was the first champion of the “P.R.” as he called it. One of the first students in the University of Michigan’s School of Forestry, he advocated for the forest long before he became the state’s first Game Division chief:

“Don’t we all want, yen for, need, some considerable ‘getting away’ from the crowds and the lawnmowers and the tulips? … Isn’t that [the] yen for the Big Wild feel and flavor? I claim it is. …

I figger [sic] 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. I don’t want *any* pansies planted around the stump.”

Lovejoy’s legacy is large within the forest, Franz said. His influence extended not only to the overall concepts that led to how the forest was developed, but also to the smallest details.

Look overhead at the beams in the Discovery Center, for example. Lovejoy came around as it was being built by members of the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s. On one visit, he objected to the fact that the beams were machined rather than hand-hewn.

“He had the carpenters take their axes and put chop marks in those beams to make them look more rustic,” Franz said. “He had large ideas about land use but also small ideas about details.”

**Forest management and public input**

From its beginning, the Pigeon River Country forest has presented its managers with conflicting interests and hard decisions on how to balance recreation, economic development, good forestry and natural resource preservation.

People have always taken an interest in the forest and played a role in its management.

When lawsuits were filed over oil and gas drilling in the forest in the early 1970s, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources put a special management plan in place for the forest. Starting in 1974, the DNR appointed a citizens’ advisory council to provide input on managing the forest.

Those who love the forest celebrate its diversity, from upland deciduous forests to lowland conifers, from remote swamps to grasslands. But at the heart of their passion is the peace and solitude of the forest, its moments of bright sunshine and dramatic storms, its ability to inspire connection to a wider world and to heal.

**Pigeon River Country Discovery Center**

Inside the Discovery Center, the welcoming fireplace invites conversations like those of early conservationists Herman Lunden and P.S. Lovejoy.

There’s a lot more to see here too. An elk peers out from a box car. The small office of the park forester has artifacts donated from his family, and the kitchen – large enough to cook for a family of seven, guests and work crews – now houses hands-on activities for children of all ages.

The family’s bedrooms tell the stories of Hemingway, the rich experiences offered by the forest and the memories that have been made there.

And from there, in the words of Ford Kellum, who quit his job working for the Michigan DNR to fight against oil drilling in the Pigeon River Country: “You’ve got your free-flowing rivers. … You’ve got lakes that have no cottages around them. You’ve got trail roads that are just two ruts. You’ve got the big trees; virgin or not, they’re big. … It’s pretty. And you can get back into some of these places and have solitude. People need a little of that.”

Find out more about the Pigeon River Country at [PigeonRiverDiscoveryCenter.org](https://pigeonriverdiscoverycenter.org/) or the [Pigeon River Country Advisory Council](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0%2C4570%2C7-350-79137_79763_79911---%2C00.html) webpage.

Check out previous Showcasing the DNR stories in our archive at [Michigan.gov/DNRStories](https://na01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.michigan.gov%2Fdnrstories&data=02%7C01%7C%7C903cfdbaa7ba487394b408d6141d788c%7Cd5fb7087377742ad966a892ef47225d1%7C0%7C0%7C636718514130661496&sdata=U20ao62kbV%2Fedj3rgGgTm3EA2rfO8hjmbjT4bkWKjqs%3D&reserved=0). To subscribe to upcoming Showcasing articles, sign up for free email delivery at [Michigan.gov/DNR](https://na01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.michigan.gov%2Fdnr&data=02%7C01%7C%7C903cfdbaa7ba487394b408d6141d788c%7Cd5fb7087377742ad966a892ef47225d1%7C0%7C0%7C636718514130661496&sdata=TMCcnU%2FKDgJ3wtETsavS02wg5uONhGtA9r5za9kGouA%3D&reserved=0).

**/Note to editors:** Contact: John Pepin, Showcasing the DNR series editor, at 906-226-1352. Accompanying photos are available below for download and media use. Suggested captions follow. Credit: Michigan Department of Natural Resources, unless otherwise noted.

[**Bend**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/07/04/file_attachments/1242611/Bend.jpg)**:** A picturesque bend on the Pigeon River in Otsego County is shown.

[**CCC**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/07/04/file_attachments/1242612/CCC.jpg)**,** [**Hemingway**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/07/04/file_attachments/1242613/Hemingway.jpg)**,** [**Horsell**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/07/04/file_attachments/1242614/Horsell.jpg)and [**Lovejoy**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/07/04/file_attachments/1242617/Lovejoy.jpg)**:** Infographics on the CCC, “Roosevelt’s Tree Army;” author Ernest Hemingway, who was fond of the pine barrens country along the Pigeon River; the Horsells, the first family in the Pigeon River Country; and P.S. Lovejoy, the first champion of the Pigeon River Country.

[**Center**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/07/09/file_attachments/1244187/Center.jpg)**: The log building that now houses the Pigeon River Country Discovery Center was built in 1935 by the Civilian Conservations Corps as a home for forester William Horsell, his wife and seven children. It has been described as the best, and best preserved, example of CCC architecture in Michigan.** (Photo courtesy of Pigeon River Country Discovery Center)

[**Elk**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/07/09/file_attachments/1244178/Elk.jpg)**:** A Michigan bull elk is shown. Many people visit the Pigeon River Country hoping to see elk and hear their bugle-like calls.

[**Elk release**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/07/09/file_attachments/1244184/Elk_release.jpg)**:** Rocky Mountain elk, originally brought by rail from the western U.S., were introduced to northern Michigan three times between 1916 and 1918. The last release of seven or eight animals near Wolverine was the foundation of today’s Michigan elk herd of more than 1,100 animals. This photo shows elk being released from crates. (Photo courtesy of Pigeon River Country Discovery Center)

[**Lovejoy memorial**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/07/09/file_attachments/1244185/Lovejoy_memorial.jpg)**:** Renowned conservationist Aldo Leopold said, “P. S. Lovejoy sired more ideas about men and land than any contemporary in the conservation field.” Here, Michigan Department of Conservation officers gather at Lovejoy’s 1942 memorial service in the Pigeon River Country. His stone monument, along the Towerman’s Watch Interpretive Pathway, is one of the forest’s iconic locations. (Photo courtesy of Pigeon River Country Discovery Center)

[**Lunden**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/07/09/file_attachments/1244188/Lunden.jpg)**:** Herman Lunden – a lumberman, advocate of reforestation and civic leader – worked closely with P. S. Lovejoy to transfer acreage formerly owned by lumbering companies to the state, increasing the area and quality of the Pigeon River Country lands. (Photo courtesy of Pigeon River Country Discovery Center)

[**Tower**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/07/09/file_attachments/1244174/1920%27s%20fire%20tower.jpg)**: Fire tower design evolved from tree platforms to a three-legged iron tower to a more enclosed four-legged style. The foundation of a three-legged tower can still be seen along the Towerman’s Watch Interpretive Pathway, named for the men who climbed the towers to search for fires. The last remaining fire tower in the Pigeon was taken down in the 1990s.** (Photo courtesy of Pigeon River Country Discovery Center)

[**View**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/07/09/file_attachments/1244190/View.jpg)**:** A trail through the Pigeon River Country State Forest leads to this scenic view.

[**Visitors**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2019/07/04/file_attachments/1242616/Visitors.jpg)**:** People attending a dam removal commemoration near Vanderbilt enjoy a view of the Pigeon River.**/**