

Travel



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Pigeon River Country is a Michigan gem

By Gordon Charles
special writer

Most Michigan maps don't show the Pigeon River Country. Adventurers who happen across it may not even suspect they have discovered something unusual unless they take the time to explore its depth. Then they know they have, indeed, found a gem of the highest quality.

Near the top-center of the " mitten," which makes up the state's Lower Peninsula, it consists of roughly 500 square miles of mostly wild lands. The interior portion of about 150 square miles is more than 95 percent state-owned and has been dedicated for use by the public under rules allowing as many non-conflicting uses as possible. Closest to the four corners are Gaylord, Indian River, Onaway and Atlanta, thus making it easy to reach.

Three lovely rivers — the Pigeon, Sturgeon and Black — originate and include nearly their entire upstream watersheds within this forest. Nearby are headwaters of the famed Au Sable and Manistee rivers. The Black is frequently called the finest brook in the Lower Peninsula.

The Pigeon and Sturgeon also contain these highly prized trout, along with browns and rainbows.

Young vigorous hardwoods, well-mannered with coniferous swamps and sandy uplands are found along the three main streams. All are vital areas: a wildlife, especially during the severe, snow-covered winters so common to the region.

Perhaps highest of the PRC's last 100 years is the fact that the wild life is still there. In the PRC, there is no black bear, bobcat, but caribou, moose, porcupine, muskrat and weasel all co-exist. The PRC is a true gem of the Michigan's. Such species require large blocks of wild quiet habitat, free from the harassments of civilization.

As an area, that was and nobody wanted. Much of it was barren, stunted, a few white pine cover by burning logs. Later it was burned repeatedly by wildfires.

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which swept across Michigan. Early visionary P.S. Lovejoy, a member of the old Department of Conservation, prevailed upon his superiors to begin acquiring land within the tract. Over 13,000 acres was bought with hunting license money, while another 6,000 acres was tax-reverted to the state by owners who felt the land would always be worthless.

THE PRESENT Department of Natural Resources has followed Lovejoy's lead in buying land as it becomes available in the PRC. Realizing that "people pressure" can be a major factor in "loving a beautiful area to death," the DNR adopted a number of restrictions.

Some forest trails have been closed to motorized traffic, including noisy snowmobiles. Enough two-tracks remain open for the general public to enjoy drives through the forest and, for those who wish to explore farther, a number of hiking and cross-country ski trails are available for foot traffic.

It is thus possible for the lucky motorist to catch an occasional glimpse of an elk or other large wildlife, right from the comfort of a car. Best results, though, come from following one of the quiet foot trails, no matter what the season.

September is the prime month for elk watchers. The huge bulls are sounding their clarion calls as they attempt to round up their harems of cows. The sound is like none other

and is guaranteed to make the hair stand up on your neck the first time the shrill call is heard.

Within the Pigeon River Country are seven state forest campgrounds with most located on unspoiled lakes or rivers. Several tiny, scenic shoreline lakes are visible from some of the rustic trail roads. A motorist can drive 20 miles in any one direction without seeing a house, village, fence or anything else man-made. There is no other place in Michigan's Lower Peninsula where you can find that. It is a major part of this area's charm and fascination.

THE PRC IS LARGE enough to absorb a reasonable number of visitors seeking a variety of outdoor recreation. Many enjoy just driving the two-tracks to marvel at the scenery and to capture memories with a camera. Fishing, hunting, camping, swimming, boating, horseback riding on a fine trail system are all high priorities. Mushroom and berry picking, bird watching and many northern forest products are all yielded from this same area, usually with reasonably compatible use.

No story about this unique land could be written, however, without mentioning the highly controversial battle between environmentalists and the petroleum industry beginning in the late 1970s. It was then that a rich oil and gas strike was made on state lands within the forest after they had been leased from the DNR.

A decade of court battles ensued. They were resolved only after oil and gas interests were forced to operate in just a small portion of the southern forest under the strict rules in the United States. Work is permitted only during periods deemed least disruptive to wildlife breeding habits. New wells must be screened by natural barriers to maintain the forest in its original pristine condition. It appears to be working well, especially recently since oil work has nearly stopped in the forest, due to the worldwide oil glut.

EXTREMELY HEAVY snowfall in the PRC closes many of the trail roads in winter, although some are kept plowed. This can be a fine time to don cross-country skis for exploring a winter wonderland setting. For the camera enthusiast, elk, deer and other wildlife often offer ideal lens subjects in gorgeous white settings.

Whatever the season, a visit to the Pigeon River Country can provide a powerful, quiet insight into the dynamics of modern-day civilization. For this, you can thank P.S. Lovejoy and others of vision.

"Pigeon River Country: The Big Wild" is a new book by Gordon Charles, author of today's travel feature on this wild area in Michigan's northern Lower Peninsula.

It tells visitors what to see and do there, as well as containing a history of the 12-year struggle to save this special place from ruination by oil and gas drillers. Ford Kellum, former wildlife biologist,



— photos by GORDON AND DOROTHY CHARLES

Whether it be river viewing or nature hikes, PRC has a variety of appeals for the naturalist or the outdoor person. Many enjoy just driving around to marvel at the scenery. Fishing, hunting, camping, swimming, boating, horseback riding on a fine trail system are all high priorities.



felt so strongly about the impending tragedy that he took early retirement from the Department of Natural Resources in order to have more freedom to wage his battle.

His own courage caused others to join and, together, these "little people" made history during their decade of legal battles that eventually reached the Supreme Court.

Printed by Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. of Grand Rapids, it clearly shows why this area is so vital to the future. A bull elk on the full-color cover, is symbolic of what interests visitors to the "Big Wild." The book is generously illustrated with photos taken in the PRC, along with drawings and maps.

Personally autographed copies of the book are available by writing to: Gordon Charles, P.O. Box 285, Honor, Mich. 49640, and enclosing a check for \$8.95, which includes postage.



Two backpackers get ready for a hike through PRC's scenic forestland.

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