



## *Conserving the Forests, Lakes and Streams of Northeast Michigan*

### **Conservation Project Reaches Major Milestone: 10 years, 100+ landowner site visits**

Imagine you're out for a hike in a lush wilderness where pine and oak trees soar above you, and where cold, clear rivers revered by fisherman across the country bubble as they slide majestically by. You bend down to change the lens on your camera so you're ready for that perfect shot, and when you stand back up again you find yourself face to face with an elk! It almost sounds too good to be true but Arch Reeves doesn't have to imagine what that might be like, because he has lived it. His eyes twinkle as he lets out a soft chuckle. "To this day I haven't figured out how my wife ran away that fast!" he says. It is moments and memories like this that keep Reeves heading out to the Pigeon River State Forest almost every day of the year.



Born and raised in Wolverine, Reeves spent much of his time in Pigeon River country observing the wildlife that lived there and over time, acquired a deep sense of understanding for what a large, undeveloped piece of wilderness meant to those creatures and to the people of his community. He came by his love of the outdoors as honestly as his father, a local Conservation Officer. He helped instill a sense of appreciation for the outdoors and outdoor recreation in the young Reeves. After a period of time in the service, Arch headed back to northern Michigan and worked for the Michigan Department of Natural Resources in both their Forestry and Wildlife Divisions. He did what most of us dream about. He found a job that incorporated his passions- hunting and being in the outdoors.

Even after he had retired, Arch stayed involved in conservation issues involving his community and beloved Pigeon River Country State Forest by chairing the Wildlife Committee of the Pigeon River Country Advisory Council, a group that in 1999 brought together local resource groups to concentrate their efforts on protecting the lands surrounding the state forest. These parcels buffering the forest serve as important corridors, necessary to meet wildlife habitat and survival needs. The Pigeon River Country Advisory Council saw that people living in these areas needed help solving wildlife and habitat management issues and they knew they could forge partnerships between the community and resource professionals to meet this need.

The Pigeon River State Forest is the largest piece of contiguous undeveloped land in Lower Michigan covering 105,049 acres. It is home to an abundance of wildlife such as deer, bobcat, and bear, and is the heart of the state's elk herd. Three blue-ribbon trout streams flow through this wilderness as well. The Pigeon, Sturgeon, and Black Rivers are known throughout the country for their clear, cold water and excellent trout fishing. Despite the protection of all of these elements within the state forest boundary, the land surrounding it is just as important to the health of the creatures and watersheds that coexist there. In late 1999, facing increased pressure from development, a plan was created to protect these areas.



In the beginning the project “was like a turtle,” says George Barker a Gaylord native and one of the original resource partners invited to participate in the planning, “now it’s more like a hare.” Barker was the Chairman of the Otsego Wildlife Legacy Society when the project first started and was a logical partner to help the Wildlife Committee. Barker, like Reeves also grew up exploring and hunting in Pigeon River Country. He feels deeply that protecting the forest’s borders is a chief priority in conserving this pristine natural area.

Early on, the project was faced with funding challenges and the need to develop closer relationships with private landowners. At first, very few private landowners were willing to allow someone to talk with them about land management options. “The biggest challenge was deciding and realizing that something really could be done. I really thought the project was going to die, several times,” says Reeves.

Fortunately, the project did not die. In fact, it started to gain speed as local nonprofit conservation organizations became more involved and took the lead on some of those funding and project management challenges. In 2001, Ty Ratliff a Land Protection Specialist with Little Traverse Conservancy in Petoskey became Co-Chair of the project along with Brian Mastenbrook, a Michigan Department of Natural Resources Wildlife Biologist, and the Pigeon River Habitat Initiative partnership was born. Currently, the partnership includes state and federal agencies, nonprofit organizations, and concerned citizens, all with an interest preserving the ecological integrity and wild character of Pigeon River Country.

“The work being done by the Wildlife Committee to protect the private lands surrounding the Pigeon River State Forest was a logical fit with our mission,” said Ratliff. Little Traverse Conservancy serves Cheboygan County, where a number of parcels identified as a priority to protect are located. “The Pigeon River Habitat Initiative is identified in the Conservancy’s strategic plan, and because it is an area of focus the Conservancy is more apt to spend time, money, and resources on any potential land conservation opportunities and partnerships.” Another partner in the Initiative is HeadWaters Land Conservancy, based in Gaylord. HeadWaters is also committed to bringing funding into the region and to advance land protection efforts in the buffer zone around the state forest. Like Little Traverse, many of the priority parcels fall within their service area which includes Otsego, Montmorency, and Presque Isle counties. With both Little Traverse and HeadWaters Land Conservancies involved, land protection efforts have improved around the entire boundary of the Pigeon River State Forest.

These efforts were given a major boost in 2004 when Huron Pines, a conservation nonprofit based in Grayling, undertook the task of coordinating habitat enhancement work on private lands, overseeing project management, employing a Habitat Specialist, and handling fiduciary responsibilities for the project. This was a “gigantic move,” states Barker. He cites the Initiative’s increased credibility and establishment of strong landowner participation with Huron Pines’ involvement.



Landowner participation is a keystone of the Pigeon River Habitat Initiative. Their voluntary involvement requires a lot of trust so a contact person was crucial to creating a link between private landowners and agencies conducting land protection work. “In June 2005, we began contacting landowners in the priority areas to conduct site visits and discuss personal goals and desires for their property”, explains



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Habitat Specialist Eric Nelson. “We can help interested landowners learn about resource conservation and how to apply these techniques to their property.”

Since the inception of the project in 1999, the Pigeon River Habitat Initiative has seen great success. To date, 102 site visits have been conducted with private landowners in the buffer zone lands, wildlife plantings have been completed on 208 acres, Forest Stewardship Management Plans have been placed on 3,079 acres, and 10 conservation easements have been secured permanently protecting 2,889 acres. Executive Director of Huron Pines, Brad Jensen says, “Our voluntary program continues to be an effective way to help people, help the land.” This work is vital to the protection of this unique piece of wilderness in northern Lower Michigan and to the wildlife and rivers that exist there.

Wildlife and rivers don’t stop moving at the borders of the state forest and will need continued protection. The achievements of the Pigeon River Habitat Initiative show that the communities surrounding this beautiful land understand they must become active in land protection efforts to ensure that this piece of undeveloped wild land exists for generations. “People still have a desire for land like that. People still want to do things on their own, and discover things on their own”, says Reeves when asked why the Initiative is so important to the area. “You should still have a place where you can go and get lost.”

Continued funding will help to bolster future efforts and the conservation toolkit of services that is needed. Key funding for the project has come from the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Michigan Department of Natural Resources, Charlevoix County Community Foundation, Dart Container Corporation, and the Rice Family Foundation.

Please contact Eric Nelson at 989-344-0753 ext14 or [eric@huronpines.org](mailto:eric@huronpines.org) if you are interested in learning more about the Pigeon River Habitat Initiative, scheduling a free site visit, or making a donation to the program.

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This article was compiled by Huron Pines AmeriCorps member Abigail Ertel, the Land Protection Specialist serving with HeadWaters Land Conservancy. Huron Pines AmeriCorps is supported in part by the Corporation for National and Community Service, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, DTE Energy Foundation, Huron Pines and contributions from host sites. To learn more about the Huron Pines AmeriCorps program, please visit [www.huronpinesamericorps.org](http://www.huronpinesamericorps.org).