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## **Good Tidings of Great Joy!**

Look under the tree. Or better yet, on the eastern edge of the Pigeon River Forest. You've just been given 8,844 acres of forest (aka 13 square miles), 14 miles of trout streams and three lakes. Merry Christmas!

There is no punchline. For those of us who have explored the beauty and diversity of the Pigeon River Country, this is an unbelievable gift. But it's true, and it's yours to go out and explore this very Christmas day. You'll be able to hunt, fish, hike, snowshoe, ski, kayak, birdwatch and bike this land. It's been about five years in the making, but the Black River Ranch has just become public property and expanded the PRC by about eight percent of its total area which now sits at just under 120,000 acres.

You might start by checking out the lakes. At 150 acres, Silver Lake is the biggest of the three. A much smaller Dollar Lake is nestled in the woods to the south of it and an even smaller lake is north of Silver, but appears to be unnamed on any maps I can find. Public access to the Black River will be hugely expanded along with a big portion of the East Branch of the Black as well as Stewart Creek. If you've got legs and lungs, you can climb to the top of Bugle Hill, the area's highest elevation, named for the resident bull elk that make their voices heard in September and early October. Putting in mildly, there is a lot to be explored in 2026, and it's a gift that will never be taken away.

What might be taken away are the beautiful cabins and historic lodge built in 1920. However, you will have a say in that. Those buildings could be preserved in compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act. The DNR will create an access plan which will be shaped by public input during 2026 and which should be finalized in 2027. If you're interested, contact Mark Monroe at 989-983-4101 to become involved with the Pigeon River Advisory Council and to be kept abreast of opportunities for public input regarding the use and future of the Black River Ranch property. Another good contact within the DNR is Kerry Heckman, Forest Land Administrator. She was the lead person for the state on this project and can be reached at [heckmank1@michigan.gov](mailto:heckmank1@michigan.gov)

If you want to write thank you cards for your \$17 million gift, you should start with the DNR because they footed the biggest chunk of the bill. However, the Little Traverse Conservancy forked out \$400,000 along with \$250,000 each by both The Nature Conservancy and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. The J.A. Woollam Foundation, an environmental conservation and science education nonprofit out of Lincoln, Nebraska chipped in an additional \$100,000.

You can argue preservation vs. conservation (and there is value in both), but the fact of the matter is that the DNR's portion was funded with \$10.6 million from the Federal Forest Legacy Program and \$5.3 million from the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund. This money came from oil and gas revenues from state land leases and federal offshore leases.

None of this would have happened, however, without trusting relationships, and that's where the Little Traverse Conservancy came in. I had the pleasure of talking with Kieran Fleming, Executive Director of LTC. He explained that owners of the Black River Ranch came to LTC years ago to explore ways to preserve and protect their land. What they did on a large scale, you can do on a smaller scale. Maybe you're thinking of giving a gift of your own this Christmas day.

Fleming explained there are three ways the conservancy can help (and depending on where you live, we may be talking about the Grand Traverse Conservancy or the Leelanau Conservancy instead of Little Traverse). First, the conservancy can assist in the sale of your land, which is what they did with the Black River Ranch. By securing an option to buy the property themselves, that allowed the state to apply for federal funds. The conservancy can help landowners navigate the process of selling to the state, which can be a very unique and time-consuming process.

The second way the conservancy can help is by buying the land themselves (Of course, donating it is a great option too. It's one that many land owners have traditionally done.) That's what you see with all the conservancy signs and land that is open for public use.

But for every acre that is owned by the conservancy (and the Little Traverse Conservancy owns between 28,000 and 30,000 acres of land) there is a little more than one acre that has been protected by a conservation easement. You won't know it, and you won't be able to use it because it is still privately owned by a family, but 100 years from now it will still be a forest or a field, not a subdivision or parking lot. That's because the conservancy has helped purchase a conservation easement that will protect the character of the land forever.

The way a conservation easement works is this. Supposed you have \$100,000 worth of farmland that you want to remain farmland with maybe the ability to build one more house on it in the future. Someone looks at how much that land will be devalued if it can never be developed into a subdivision or commercial entity. With that restriction, maybe now your land is only worth \$40,000. The conservancy essentially pays you all or a portion of the \$60,000 devaluation from putting the land into a conservation easement. In essence, you can have your cake (your land is protected forever) and you can eat it too (you still get a healthy chunk of money for it while you or your children are still alive.)

It simply starts with a conversation – a conversation among spouses, family members or hunt clubs which then branches out to members of the conservancy. This Christmas day, I'm so thankful that the owners of the Black River Ranch had a conversation. It was obviously a meaningful conversation, more than likely both joyful and sad. It must have been hard to turn over the land to the DNR that they had so beautifully, carefully and scientifically stewarded for over 100 years. The only thing you can say to a gift like that is thank you. And the only way we can honor their decision is to love the land as much as they did.

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