

Greg Frey

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Hemingway's Big Wild

They say if you can't run with the big dogs, stay on the porch. But in the dog days of summer, sometimes even the big dogs don't feel like running. You know the season, and you know the feeling. Cicadas are buzzing, their rhythmic vibration fading into the distance. The air is still, hot and humid. Lawnmowers sit dormant in garages as lush-green lawns of May, June and early July turn to yellowish-brown shredded wheat. You've already knocked off the exciting fishing and camping trips of the season. Mostly, you just sweat and brood, waiting for the first cold night that heralds the arrival of fall.

Perhaps it's because the hex hatch is over on the Jordan and the Boyne seems all too familiar, but this is precisely the time of year I love to explore the Pigeon River Country State Forest. When you step into the PRC, you're not only stepping off the porch, but you're stepping back in time to 114,000 acres of pristine wilderness. At 12 miles wide and 20 miles long, the PRC is the largest chunk of undeveloped land in the Lower Peninsula. It was Dakota Mack, of White Pine Guide Service, who first explored the area with me. He described it as the closest thing to being out west, where you can get lost in the land, both figuratively and literally. "I need places like this," Mack said. He's not alone.

A young Ernest Hemingway agreed. According to the DNR, while recovering from wounds sustained while driving an ambulance in World War I, Hemingway traveled by rail through this wilderness east of Vanderbilt in 1919. He called it Michigan's Pine Barrens and said, "The Barrens Country is the greatest I've ever been in."

Much of the history of the area's history can be learned by stopping in at a really cool log cabin that serves as the DNR's headquarters to the PRC. The PRC originally began over 100 years ago when the state set aside 6,468 acres of tax-reverted land. Elk had once roamed there but disappeared in the late

1800s. In 1918, seven Rocky Mountain elk were reintroduced to the area, and they grew to what is now the largest elk herd east of the Mississippi. The interesting thing is that their growth was not linear. In the early 1960s there were about 1,500 elk, but only 10 years later the herd was down to 200 animals due to poaching and diminishing habitat quality. Today, the DNR estimates the herd at somewhere between 870 and 1,684 animals (Which is kind of funny – there may be half as many elk or there may be twice as many elk. But, in an age of unreliable information it tells you those numbers are probably really honest.) Suffice it to say, there's probably around 1,200 elk based on a 2022 eight-day aerial survey in which 92 groups of elk were spotted with 793 animals actually counted. Those numbers seem to be consistent with surveys going back to 2016, which tells you the elk are happy, healthy and holding their own in the PRC.

One night, coming back toward the headquarters, I came upon a whitetail doe acting strangely. She obviously wanted to cross the road but kept hesitating, glancing around nervously. That's when two bull elk with massive racks stepped onto the road only 40 yards from my truck. They were obviously masters of their domain. The doe fled the scene, and I stared, mouth agape, until they sauntered into the woods. Yes, the PRC is big, and the PRC is wild.

Not only does it house elk, it's home to multiple creeks and rivers, the Sturgeon, Pigeon and Black being the three most notable. As you drive east on Sturgeon Valley Road out of Vanderbilt, you'll first cross the Sturgeon, kind of slow and silty and covered by leaning cedar trees, then the Pigeon, fast, clear and full of riffles as the water rushes over gravel and small stones, before you eventually reach the Black (no longer on Sturgeon Valley Road), which can vary from a narrow tag-alder lined tunnel to shallow, open gravel-bottomed riffles. There's something special about fishing three rivers in the same day, each one having a different feel and producing different results in different conditions. Strangely enough, one of my best days on the Black was after a torrential downpour. Both the Pigeon and the Sturgeon were blown out. I wouldn't have stepped foot in either one for fear of being washed away. The Black was racing as well and normally slightly amber in color, this day you could just barely see your boot in a foot of chocolate-colored water. Figuring our only hope was to throw big streamers, we were delighted to find the brook trout aggressively hitting large, foam-bodied Chubby Chernobyls on the surface. The dirty water actually camouflaged our leaders and our bad casting that often spook these highly sensitive trout in their pristine, clear-water environment.

Since you're stepping off the porch and stepping into the past, I'd highly recommend stepping into any of the PRC rivers with nothing more than a pair of closed toe sandals and quick-drying shorts. There's something pure, simple and refreshing about wet wading a river in late July and early August. Amid the smell of sweet fern on a hot summer day, there's nothing better. And while you're at it, you might even consider fishing full-on old school. That's right – dig out some old Panther Martin spinners from your childhood days or find a short-handled bug net to catch your own grasshoppers. One of my favorite childhood memories was a day when my fishing buddy and I ran out of bait. We resorted to capturing grasshoppers under our baseball caps because we were wildly unsuccessful with hitting them by throwing our shoes.

There are lakes, too. I've never fished them, but I know those who have. Some are perfectly round limestone sinkhole lakes and others with hidden bays and winding shorelines look like they were aimlessly traced by a toddler. They'd fit in nicely in northern Ontario. They're best explored with a float tube or a canoe. Google Maps might get you there in SOS mode, but you'd be smart to carry a compass and a printed map. Most of the PRC is without cell service, which is definitely more of a blessing than a curse.

The PRC is unique, and so are rules about camping and fishing there. Some lakes and rivers require the use of artificial lures or flies only. While I love eating lake trout, salmon, walleye and pike, I always release all the trout I catch on small local rivers, so I don't pay attention to size or possession limits. But beware, a brook trout that is legal to keep on the Jordan may not be legal in the PRC. Either way, if you think of the number of trout you need to take out of a river to make a good meal, it hardly seems worth the trade in potential hook-ups the next time you go.

And I do hope you go. Especially in late summer. I can't tell you how many empty campgrounds I've walked through and how many miles of river I've waded without ever encountering another person. You can break through a northern Michigan tag alder thicket, watch the river open up into a gravel bar riffle as it crosses a meadow flanked by cottonwoods, and you'll swear you're in Yellowstone. But you'll have Yellowstone all to yourself as long as you don't mine a few elk for company.

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