



# PIGEON RIVER COUNTRY

## The Natural Setting

Drive four hours north of Detroit, turn right at Wolverine or Vanderbilt and you will soon find yourself in Pigeon River Country—the largest contiguous block of wild country in the lower peninsula of Michigan. This area of approximately 100 square miles is made up of the combined watersheds of the three rivers described in this guide: the Sturgeon, the Pigeon and the Black.

The Sturgeon is the most westerly of these, the three major rivers in Pigeon River Country. It flows north from its source south of Vanderbilt until, after meandering for about thirty-six miles, it empties into Burt Lake near the town of Indian River. During much of this journey it parallels highway I-75 and is readily accessible from the Vanderbilt, Wolverine and Indian River exits. The coldest of the three rivers, it is home to populations of wild brown, rainbow and brook trout. In the middle to late summer, a special spawning run of lake-dwelling browns and rainbows move into the river from Burt Lake. There is an extended season for spring and fall steelhead in the stretch of water from Burt Lake upstream to Wolverine. The Pigeon River, to the east of the Sturgeon, runs from its headwaters, a few miles northeast of Gaylord, for about forty-three miles to its terminus in Mullet Lake, a few miles northeast of Indian River. Its course roughly parallels that of the Sturgeon River, a few miles to its west. In contrast to the Sturgeon and Black, where brown and brook trout predominate,

respectively, the Pigeon has more mixed populations of brown, rainbow and brook trout. The river flows through numerous meadows and mature forestland, but periodic areas of brushy, cedar tangles can be found in marshy areas close to the water.

The Black River is the most easterly of the three. It originates a few miles north of Johannesburg in Otsego County and flows northwest into Black Lake near the city of Onaway, then out again until it finally joins the Cheboygan River a few miles west of Cheboygan. Its many bends and abundant streamside vegetation provide good habitat for its population of brook trout.

Miles of trails, dirt roads, rustic campgrounds and gas and oil wells crisscross the Pigeon River Country. It remains sufficiently rustic and wild, however, that it is home to the largest elk herd east of the Mississippi, an abundance of whitetail deer and significant numbers of black bear and bobcat. Approximately one hundred species of birds inhabit the area, including bald eagles, great blue herons and pileated woodpeckers.

Vigorous hardwoods, with wetlands, cover the rolling uplands of Pigeon River Country and coniferous swamps line the banks of much of the major rivers and streams. This variegated landscape is the result of over one hundred years of new, managed growth, which has

replenished the area since it was decimated by the extensive clear-cutting of its giant white and red pines in the late nineteenth century.

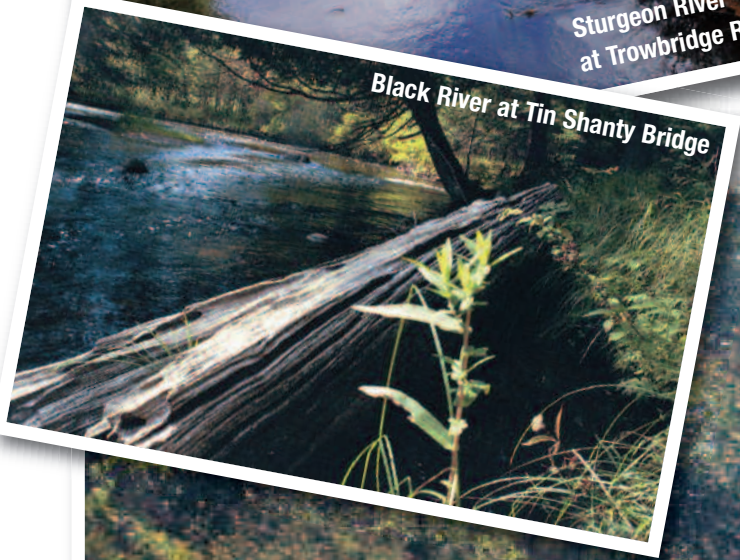
## From Pre-history to the Coming of the Europeans

Before the dawn of recorded history, the Pigeon River Country spent millions of years under glaciers, which, as they receded, carved out the topography of the area with its many lakes and rivers. Many years after the ice retreated, small bands of Chippewa and Ojibwa moved into the area and, for over ten thousand years, fished the waters of the Sturgeon, Pigeon and Black and hunted the adjacent forests until, in the fullness of time, Europeans slowly began venturing into Pigeon River Country.

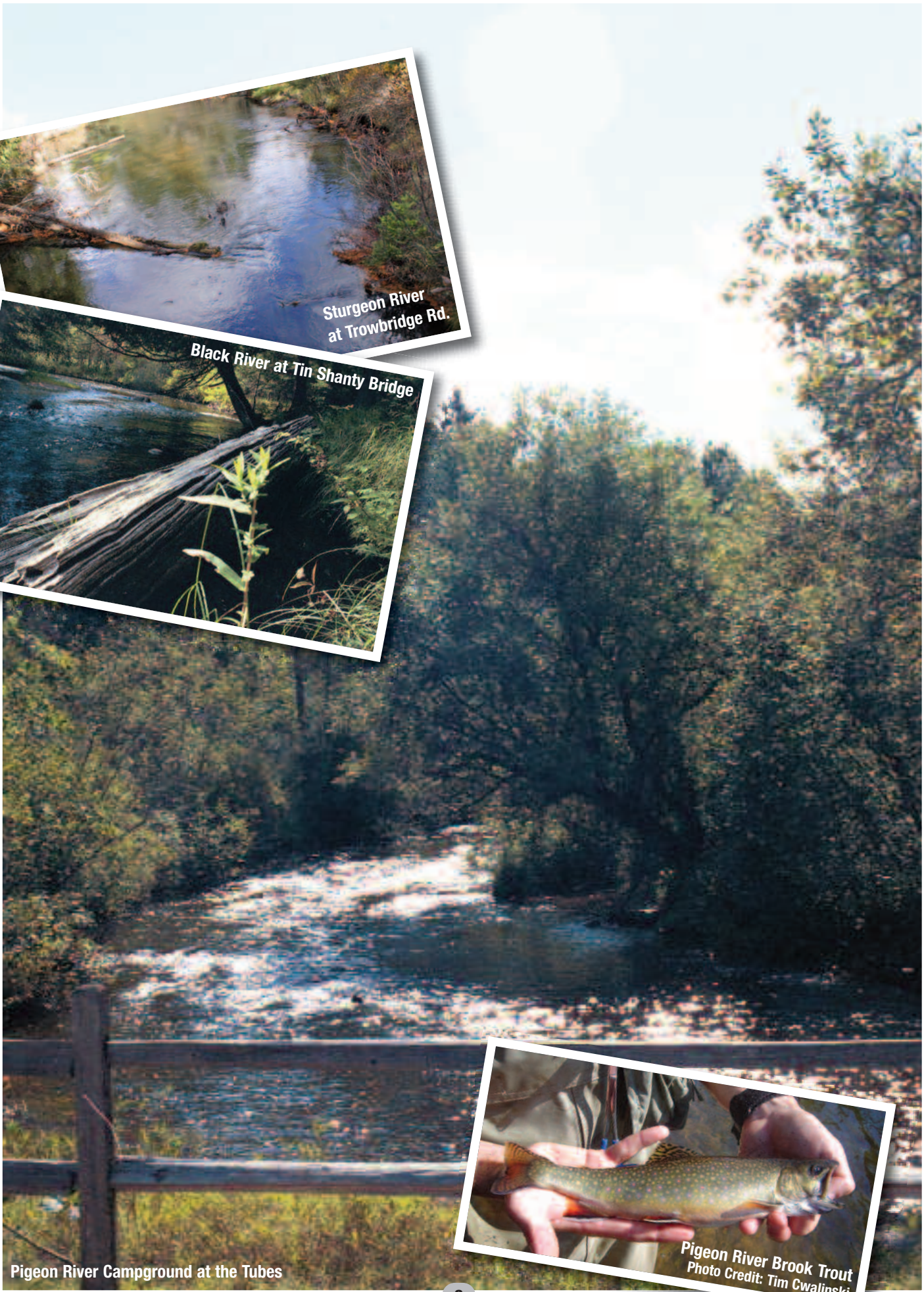
Although French missionaries, soldiers and a few fur traders began exploring the Great Lakes over three hundred years ago, the interior of Michigan above Saginaw remained largely unknown until the 1830s. The French were primarily interested in establishing trading posts and forts on the Great Lakes in order to expand their fur trade. Descriptions of the region as having “impenetrable forests and shaking marshes” discouraged extensive exploration by even the most adventurous. However, in 1836, Henry Schoolcraft, a geologist and Indian agent for the United States government, negotiated the Saginaw Treaty. This added all the land in



Sturgeon River  
at Trowbridge Rd.



Black River at Tin Shanty Bridge



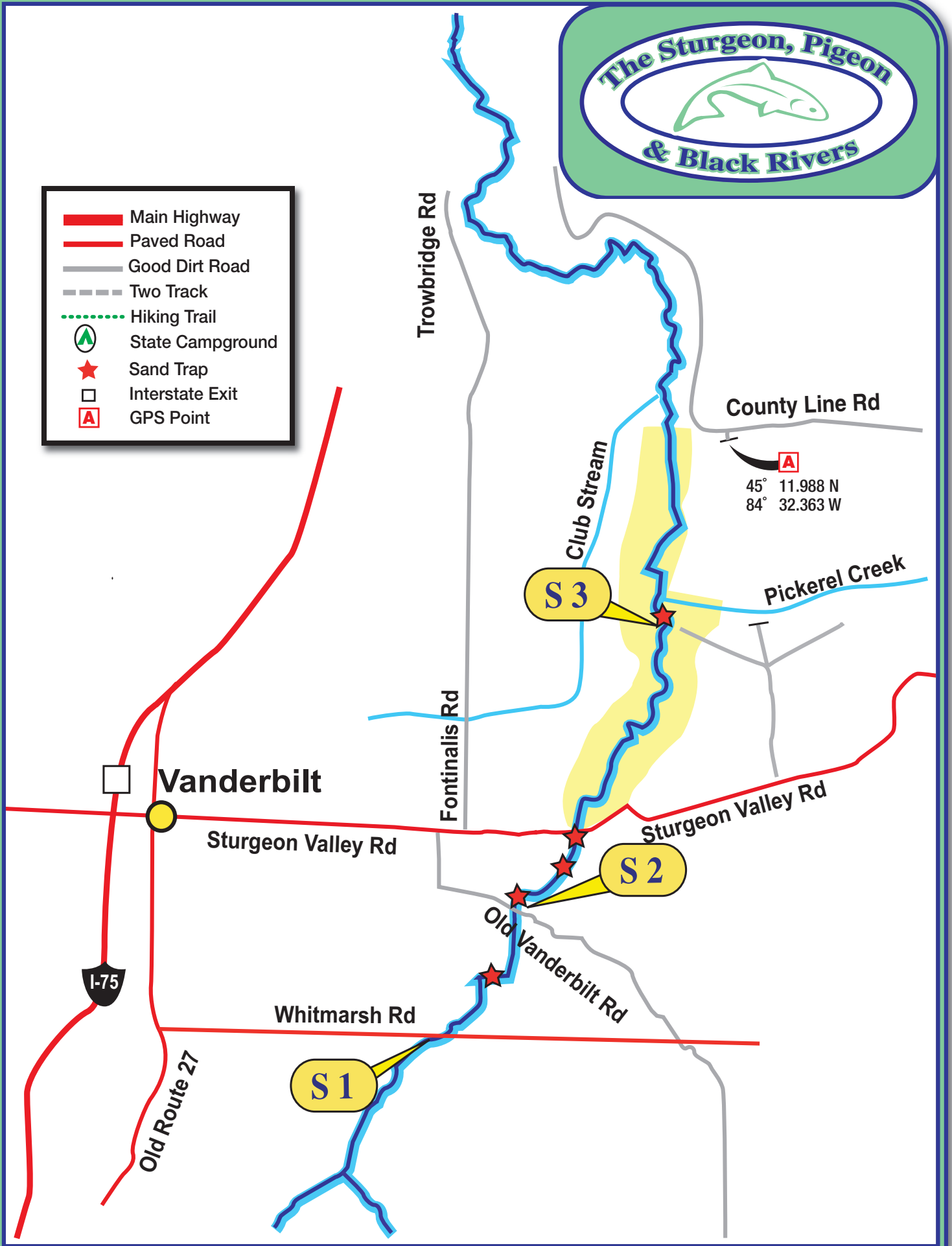
Pigeon River Campground at the Tubes



Pigeon River Brook Trout  
Photo Credit: Tim Cwalinski



- ▬ Main Highway
- ▬ Paved Road
- ▬ Good Dirt Road
- - - Two Track
- ⋯ Hiking Trail
- ▲ State Campground
- ★ Sand Trap
- Interstate Exit
- GPS Point



# Site Descriptions

The upstream portion of the Sturgeon can be reached from Vanderbilt.

## **S 1** Doc Sehls Bridge

Take Old U.S. 27 south for 1.9 miles from the blinker light at the center of town. Turn east on Whitmarsh Road and go 3.2 miles to the bridge.

There is room to park about five cars on the south side of the bridge. Access is difficult, and the land is private on both sides of the road.

This area has some brown and rainbow trout, but consists of mostly smaller fish. Fly casting is difficult to impossible due to overhanging vegetation, numerous downed trees and logs and narrow channels. Watch for the sand trap half way between this site and Old Vanderbilt Rd.

## **S 2** Old Vanderbilt Rd. Bridge

From Vanderbilt, take Sturgeon Valley Road 3.5 miles east to Fontinalis Rd. Turn south and go 0.5 miles to a curve in the road where the name changes to Old Vanderbilt Rd. Proceed east 0.5 miles to the bridge.

There is room to park on both sides of the road and bridge. State land extends upstream on both sides of the river for one-quarter mile. Downstream is private on both sides.

The river averages 30 feet wide. Wading can be difficult, especially at the bridge. The fish population consists of mostly smaller brown and rainbow trout, but during the fall spawning season trophy brown trout can be caught. Fly casting is difficult to impossible due to overhanging vegetation and numerous downed trees and logs. Watch for the sand trap downstream of the bridge.

## **S 3** Green Timbers (45° 11.988N, 084° 32.363W)

From Vanderbilt, take Sturgeon Valley Rd. 5.1 miles east to the bridge over the Sturgeon River. From the bridge, go 1.6 miles further on Sturgeon Valley Rd. to an unmarked road. Turn north and go 0.6 miles to a fork in the road marked by a DNR sign as a fisherman's access. Turn west and go 0.6 miles to a parking area.

Green Timbers can also be reached from the north along a winding route, using Pickerel Lake Rd. The northern parking area is off County Line Rd. on the Cheboygan/Otsego County line.

Green Timbers is a 6,300-acre tract of public land along both sides of the Sturgeon River, extending for 10 miles downstream from Sturgeon Valley Rd. to the Cheboygan-Otsego county line. This area of the Sturgeon, along with Club Stream, which enters from the west and Pickerel Creek, which enters from the east, hold healthy populations of brook, brown and rainbow trout. The area is managed as a special use area within the Pigeon River Country State Forest. Motorized vehicles are prohibited and wildlife management (including elk) is emphasized. There is a trail system that ranges from well-established to barely visible. There are two dilapidated cabins on the property. Canoeing is not recommended due to numerous deadfalls and narrow spots in the river.

The land within Green Timbers was extensively logged, burned and then grazed by both sheep and cattle prior to the 1950s. Evidence of all three events can be seen today.