

Old Man and the River



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Michigan's Black River is home to native brook trout, the beneficiary of habitat conservation work of the Alpena Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office.

"Do you know what it's like?" I said. "It's just like when we were kids and we heard about a river no one had ever fished out on the huckleberry plains beyond the Sturgeon and the Pigeon."

"Were they big trout?"

"The biggest bloody kind."

— Ernest Hemingway, Green Hills of Africa

When a hunting companion tells him of a great, little-known place to kill antelope, the narrator of *Green Hills of Africa* is triggered into nostalgic reveries of childhood experiences fishing the Upper Black River in Michigan's Lower Peninsula. Fed by groundwater recharge in the silt-laden lowlands, the river leisurely wanders through marsh and forested flatlands—a part of Michigan once known as the Pine Barrens—before emptying into Lake Huron. Hemingway, who spent plenty of time casting flies in its frigid

waters, devoted ink on more than one occasion to this meandering muse.

But the writer's immortalized love for the river is rivaled by that of 96-year-old Robert "Bud" Slingerlend, who has worked diligently in recent decades—with help from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Alpena Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office—to keep the Upper Black the way Hemingway would likely remember it: one of the finest native brook trout fisheries.

“I started fishing the Upper Black in 1949,” says Slingerlend, “and it was the best brook trout fishing I’d ever come across—and I’d been fishing since 1920!”

A founding member and longtime chair of the Upper Black River Council, established in 1993, Slingerlend oversaw efforts of a partnership to restore and maintain the considerable resources of the Upper Black. Part of the only watershed in Michigan’s northern Lower Peninsula managed exclusively for brook trout, the river features—at the top of the food chain—a brookie population thought to be an Ice Age relict. The river’s lower reaches support a population of state-threatened lake sturgeon. The upper reaches provide habitat for the federally endangered quarter-inch-long Hungerford’s crawling water beetle, found here in addition to only three other rivers worldwide.

But conserving the ecosystem has not been simple. After overharvest of the area’s enormous timber resources at the turn of the 19th century and the widespread stream bank erosion that resulted, impediments to the river’s flow now represent pressing challenges. In a rural area dominated by state land, the network of dirt roads lacks adequate ditches and sediment basins, and culvert are small and aging. With rain and snowmelt,

water flows over roads picking up silt, sand, and pollutants, which often flow directly into the river at road crossings. In addition to sedimentation and erosion caused by inadequate culverts, the increased water velocity through culverts makes passage of fish yet another challenge.

Thanks to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s National Fish Passage and its Partners for Fish and Wildlife programs, funding has helped address some issues. Since 1998, the U.S. fish and Wildlife Service contributed nearly \$475,000, matched by more than \$900,000 from state and private funding, which has enabled a dam removal, several road crossing projects, and many other major improvements. More than a dozen road-impaired stream crossings have been



Courtesy Robert Slingerlend

Michigan State Representative, Robert “Bud” Slingerlend, circa 1964, was a founding member of the Upper Black River Council in 1993.



Charles Krueger Ph.D./GLFC

Native brook trout abound in the Black River.

restored, opening 35 miles of river to fish passage while eliminating tons of habitat-choking sediment. Of those sites, 11 included culverts or bridges that were replaced with larger structures to allow for a 100-year storm event.

“Fisherman report catching larger fish,” says Alpena FWCO biologist Heather Rawlings. “The most dramatic results for the brook trout population is in the headwaters of the main branch.”

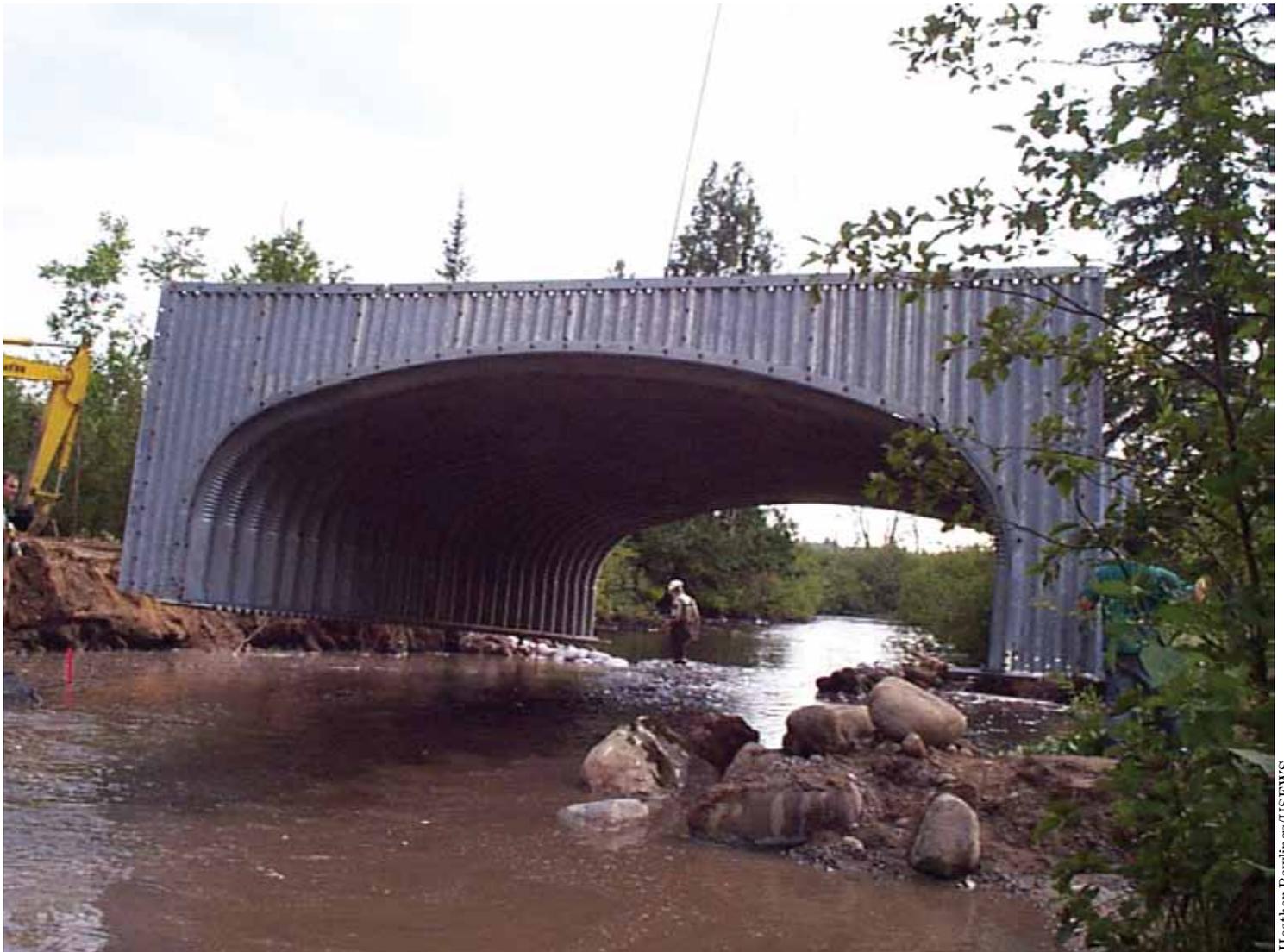
Here in 1999, road approaches were modified, the road surface was hardened with sealant, and a pair of culverts were replaced with a single, large bottomless culvert. Before improvements were made, the number of 8- to 9.9-inch trout averaged about 52 trout per mile, according to surveys. Afterwards, the numbers almost tripled to 136 trout per mile.

“Numbers were also higher upstream of the crossing, indicating modification may have improved fish passage to the extent that this large

section of the river has benefitted,” says Rawlings.

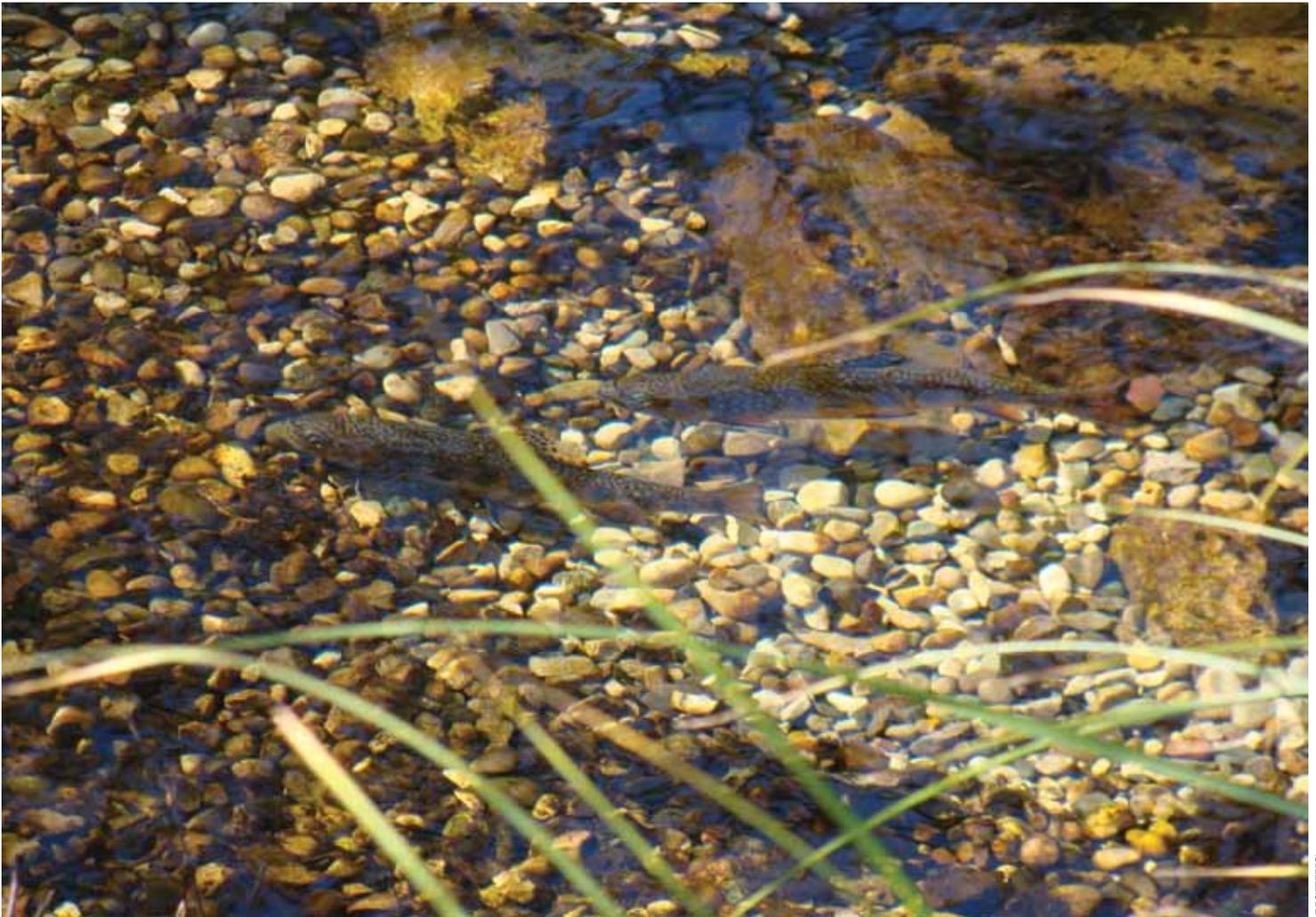
Also, since 2001, a summer work crew, of between three and five students, has worked on strategically placing woody debris into the watershed in order to create diverse in-stream habitat that offers protective cover for young trout and encourage growth of algae and other tiny organisms fundamental to the diet of countless aquatic species.

Another consideration of the work is the Hungerford’s crawling water



Heather Rawlings/USFWS

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s National Fish Passage Program helped ensure that culverts and road crossings are adequately designed so as to allow fish to move about to important habitats throughout the year.



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Gravels free of sediment are needed by brook trout to successfully reproduce. The light-colored stones indicate that they have recently been turned over by these spawning fish, their fertilized eggs lying in the spaces between the rocks. Brook trout spawn in the autumn of the year.

beetle. When work takes place in areas where the rare bug lives, the crew makes a wide berth; on the other hand, biologists are hopeful that the crew's work placing woody debris in sites where the beetle does not occur may eventually attract the species.

Additionally, the crew helped remove problematic beaver dams, repair stream bank erosion sites, and assist in the 2010 creation of artificial spawning habitat that features three stone and gravel riffles that mimic ideal trout spawning conditions.

Like a tributary that feeds a larger stream, the work stemming from the two U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service programs feeds a much broader effort, the focus of more than half a dozen government agencies at all levels, several nonprofits and other organizations, and scores of landowners. Yet so much of the collective force of the partnership can be traced to a single source, the man who became rooted to the banks of the Upper Black long ago.

After the brook trout fishing had made such a profound impression on him, Slingerlend built a little

cabin along the river in 1950. By around 1970, he noticed that "the fishing had gone to pot," and shared his observation with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. That was the beginning of what would become intensive conservation work here. But it's only one chapter in a story that opens with remarkably inauspicious beginnings.

Born in a log house in 1915, Slingerlend spent lots of time outdoors as a kid. He was adept at fishing by five and owned his first rifle at ten. "In those days, we fished and hunted for food, not for fun,"

Slingerlend recalls. “My mother would say, ‘Son, we don’t have meat in the house.’ And I’d go out hunting. Shot a lot of rabbits.”

A hobo and transient worker during the Great Depression, Slingerlend lived an early hardscrabble life like something imagined by that other American literary giant, John Steinbeck. “My dad taught me how to hop freights,” he says. And so, after high school, Bud travelled around looking for work, and quickly learned to avoid the Chicago yards, because, as another hobo warned him, the

The Upper Black River Council partners include a multitude of citizens and landowners, county road commissions; Huron Pines; Montmorency Conservation District; Trout Unlimited; Montmorency County Conservation Club; Sturgeon for Tomorrow; Michigan Dept. of Natural Resources; Michigan Dept. of Environmental Quality; Natural Resources Conservation Service; Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council; Northeast Michigan Council of Governments; Michigan Fly Fishing Club; Canada Creek Ranch; Black River Ranch; and the Pigeon River Advisory Council.

“railroad cops will shoot and bury you.”

But at just 76 pounds in a time when there was plenty of competition for manual labor jobs, work wasn’t always easy to secure. Unlike the Joad Family destined for California to escape the Dust Bowl in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Slingerlend “dropped off a freight” in his home town of Morley, Michigan, one afternoon, where an old school teacher spotted him and intervened to help him obtain a college scholarship. Slingerlend thrived at school, especially in math, chemistry and physics. Eventually, he became a chemical engineer for Chrysler in Detroit. Upon retiring from Chrysler, Slingerlend then pursued a career of distinguished conservation work that breaches far beyond the banks of the Upper Black.

Serving as a member of Michigan’s House of Representatives in the 1960s, Slingerlend was involved in the creation of several monumental bills. He wrote one that became the Water Pollution Control Act of 1965, making prosecution for pollution possible for the first time in state history. He also introduced the Bottle Bill, which created a ten-cent deposit/redemption fee for all carbonated beverages sold in Michigan—the highest bottle deposit charged in the country. And because he introduced a special \$500,000 appropriations bill supporting what was largely considered a bizarre plan to introduce salmon to the Great Lakes, he is partly responsible for the tremendous growth of a sport fishery that now generates four to six billion dollars annually.

Diminutive in stature, Slingerlend has what current Council chair Carol Rose calls “the constitution of a

hummingbird.” Rose remembers when Slingerlend, an elk guide well into his 80s, took under his charge a man in his forties and his adolescent son for a winter elk hunt. “There was snow on the ground and the going was challenging for the hunter and his son,” says Rose. “Not so for Bud, who was forced to stop periodically just to let the man, half his age, and the boy, catch up and catch their breath!”

Eventually, Slingerlend arrived at a decision to leave northeastern Michigan to relocate near his wife’s hometown in southern Michigan. He asked Rose to succeed him as Council chair. “Bud was always first to say that he wasn’t a biologist or fisheries professional,” says Rose, “but he always felt confident that the Council would succeed because he surrounded himself with really smart people who were. We continue with that approach by working with experts across various fields, from entomology and wildlife biology to hydrology and forestry.”

Finally, Slingerlend helped the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund acquire a beautiful 80-acre spread that straddles the east branch of the Upper Black; it was the property on which he had built his little fishing cabin six decades ago. It was here that he and his wife had made their home for the past three. It was also where he’d drawn inspiration throughout his career, spending much time walking his land, observing the river and the web of life it nurtures, and, of course, casting for brookies.

“But my legs were starting to give out,” says Slingerlend. “I could still get into the river, but I wasn’t sure I could get out. In any case, even



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The upper Black River winds its way through forested flatlands as it pours toward Lake Huron, providing habitat for fish, wildlife, and people.

though the river gets a lot more fishing pressure, it's a lot better than it was."

Now managed by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, Slingerlend's old property is open for all to enjoy as he once did; he hopes, too, that others will draw inspiration from the river here. It's a fitting legacy for someone who spent most of life devoted to a relationship with the outdoors that is rarely matched, even in great literature. ♦

Learn more about the Upper Black River Council at www.upperblack.org.

Visit the Alpena Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office, here www.fws.gov/midwest/Alpena/.

Learn about the National Fish Passage Program at www.fws.gov/fisheries/fwco/fishpassage/index.html.