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A Good Cut

Restoring the heavily harvested forests of Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

By Ginger Strand
Photographs by Drew Kelly



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Jon Fosgitt strides into the forest outside Newberry, Michigan,

as a cold rain slicks his shaved head. "I expect great things from this gap," he says, indicating a clearing of sawed-off trees.

This part of Michigan's Upper Peninsula is farther north than Montreal, and it feels like it. The wet October air already has a wintry chill. But nothing dampens Fosgitt's boundless enthusiasm for trees.

"Look at that white pine!" he cried on the way here, slamming on the brakes of his pickup. "That's a dandy!"

Fosgitt is a tree-like presence himself, large and firmly planted, which is one reason his excitement about this forest clearing seems surprising. Sure, there's a single towering white pine, but the rest of the space, 120 feet in diameter, is littered with tree stumps and piles of limbs. This is the site of a logging operation. And not just any logging operation, but one conducted on land owned by The Nature Conservancy, for which Fosgitt works as a forestry consultant.

Kevin Russell, a wildlife ecology professor, tramps into the clearing and nods in agreement with Fosgitt's assessment. He hunches over in his raincoat to examine a thicket of waist-high saplings. White pines. Michigan's most-storied tree, the white pine was logged nearly to local extinction in the 19th century. The trees are regenerating naturally here. And although it's hard to believe that these treelets might one day tower to 150 feet, that is exactly why Jon Fosgitt created this gap.

"You've got some deer browse," Russell says, pointing to some gnawed-down saplings. Russell is here as an auditor for the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the world's most recognized timber-certification agency. An FSC stamp guarantees that a timber company harvests trees sustainably, pays a just wage, adheres to safety standards and maintains wildlife habitat. Even when the timber operation is run by the Conservancy, Russell's job is to take nothing for granted. He's on the lookout for signs of overharvesting or collateral damage. He's making sure that logging roads have been constructed with care and waterways are not being polluted.

While the Conservancy's parcel of commercial timberland in the Upper Peninsula (U.P.) is relatively modest—just a little more than 23,000 acres—the organization purchased an easement to protect 10 times that much land. The easement guarantees that the land will be sustainably logged in perpetuity.

To some, it may sound like the Conservancy has forgotten its mission. No one disputes that when all the acres and accompanying restrictions in the agreement are tallied, they add up to the biggest conservation deal ever inked in the state of Michigan—hence its nickname, "the Big U.P. Deal." But logging is not some

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"For The Forestland Group, sustainable logging isn't merely a nice thing to do for the planet; it's also a smart thing to do for business."

Shawn Hagan, head of The Forestland Group's operations, Great Lakes region.

ugly downside to an otherwise sweet agreement. It's at the very core.

Clearly this is not preservation as usual. This is something else—something that Fosgitt sees as not only the best thing for conserving forests in the U.P., but as a step toward revolutionizing logging practices and improving forest health nationwide.

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