

Oregon's fire lookouts still play important part in detecting wildland blazes

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The Green Peter Lookout is perched above the eastern Willamette Valley at 3,977 feet.

Fire lookouts have been standing guard over the nation's landscape for more than 90 years. Thousands used to dot the

western terrain, while today, only a handful are still operational.

Together, ODF and the state's three forest protective associations staff about 30 lookouts each summer. Even the increased use of airplanes and high-tech gadgets hasn't totally extinguished the need for someone perched on a hilltop to spot that first small puff of smoke.

For the past 14 summers, Ken and Colleen Struck have been perched atop Soda Mountain (6,091 feet in elevation) 13 miles southeast of Ashland. Close to the California border, the pair reports fires to ODF and the California Department of Forestry. Ken said that while some folks might consider the job of a lookout boring, he finds they have plenty to keep them busy, including numerous drop-in guests.

"We average about two visitors per day. They hike or drive in. They come from everywhere, including one person who was from Paraguay. On one Sunday we had 21 people sign the guest book," he said.

Ken, a retired member of the Medford Fire Department, said he fought fires on the ground for 25 years but it's different now that he's "spotting and plotting" them.

"In structural fire fighting, you can go from sound sleep to a rooftop in three to five minutes. Here, once you spot a smoke, it can take crews 90 minutes to hike into a location," he said. "It's neat to get a jump on a smoke, to see how small you can hold the fire."

The Strucks are at Soda Mountain from mid-June through mid-October, hauling their belongings up and down the rough mountain road. While they have electricity and propane, they don't bring a television, just books and a radio.

One thing Ken has noticed over the years is the development in California, as the land has gone from darkened desert to homes with yard lights. Come June, the Strucks plan on returning to Soda Mountain for another year of visitors, wildflowers, wildlife and wildfires.

The Soda Mountain Lookout was constructed in 1933 as an L-4 cabin. L-4s are 14-foot by 14-foot cabins with heavy shutters hinged above the windows. The shutters are open in the summer to shade the windows and closed in the winter to protect the glass from the wind and snow. The first L-4s had gabled roofs.

The current 10-foot wooden tower was built in 1962. Soda Mountain is listed on the National Historic Lookout Register, which is a private initiative sponsored by the American Resource Group and supported by volunteers.



Jane Crocker-Strom, Green Peter Lookout on the Linn District, peers through a "fire finder" looking for smoke from wildfires.

Still operational after all these years... Some ODF and FPA lookouts

Most lookouts have undergone numerous transformations to become the structures they are today. Some started as “rag camps” consisting of a pup tent next to a tall tree. Others have been updated, rebuilt or replaced. Although many lookouts have been abandoned, destroyed in windstorms or are kept for emergency use only, many are still in use. Some of are listed below.

Baughman Mountain

The first lookout consisted of a crow’s nest — a partially enclosed platform similar to those on ships’ masts — built in 1925. That was later replaced in 1933 with a 20-foot wooden tower, and finally with a 50-foot steel live-in tower in 1953. This Douglas FPA tower sits at the 2,866-foot elevation, 12 miles northwest of Roseburg.

Bland Mountain

Douglas FPA also staffs this lookout about 11 miles southeast of Myrtle Point at the 2,696-foot elevation. The 20-foot live-in tower built about 1947 had a recycled steel structure placed under it in 1996.

Chase Mountain

This 20-foot structure is located 14 miles southwest of Klamath Falls. Sitting at 6,394 feet, Chase was first constructed in 1928. In 1951, the lookout became a 20-foot cabin constructed by Holland Sheet Metal.

Dutchman Butte

Another staffed Douglas FPA tower, this unconventional 15-foot, three-legged structure is located 21 southwest of Myrtle Creek. At the 3,907-foot elevation, it was originally built in 1936 as a 12-foot tower.

Foley Butte

Located on the Central Oregon District, 15 miles north of Prineville, this 1953 L-4 type cabin resides at 5,884 feet. Foley Butte Lookout began as a crow’s nest in 1932 and later became a 60-foot tower in 1934.

Green Peter

On the Linn District outside of Sweet Home, sits the Green Peter Lookout. High above the eastern Willamette Valley at 3,977 feet, the lookout was first a rag camp, then a structure was built in 1920 cupola style. This design was first constructed on Mount Hood and consisted of a 12-foot by 12-foot frame house with windows. What made this design distinctive was a glassed-in second story “cupola” used for observation. About 60 of these were built in Oregon and Washington. In 1970, the Green Peter was replaced with an L-4 structure.

Henkle Butte

On the Central Oregon District, five miles northeast of Sisters, sits Henkle Butte at 3,412 feet. The lookout was first established in the 1940s as a 40-foot pole tower, but is now an enclosed three-story cabin built in 1961.

Hogback Mountain

This facility is three miles east of Klamath Falls at 6,200 feet. Hogback began was a 41-foot wooden tower in 1947, was condemned in 1987, and returned in 1988 as a new cabin atop a 30-foot tower.

Kelly Butte

The Coos Forest Protective Association operates Kelly Butte about 24 miles east of

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Coos Bay. Located at the 2,551-foot elevation, this 70-foot live-in tower was built in 1950 by Weyerhaeuser Timber.

Old Blue

In 1955, a 20-foot live-in tower was built at the 2,536-foot elevation about six miles west of Kellogg. This Douglas FPA facility began in the 1920s as three trees topped at 100-feet and tied with an open platform. In the 1930s, it became a cabin with living quarters.

Parker Mountain

Vandals destroyed this lookout in 1996, but it was rebuilt in 1997 as an all-steel 50-foot tower, 24 miles southwest of Klamath Falls. At the 5,200-foot elevation, Parker was first constructed in 1934 and rebuilt in 1956.

Roundtop

This lookout was established in 1934, about 27 miles north-northwest of Medford. Located at the 4,658-foot elevation on the Southwest Oregon District, Roundtop is now a 20-foot timber tower with cabin built in 1973. Roundtop has been a 100-foot observation tower (1934) and a 20-foot L-4 (1950).

Tallowbox

Also located on the Southwest Oregon District, Tallowbox sits about 16 miles southwest of Medford. A rag camp was established in 1918, a cupola-style cabin was built in 1923, and the current version was built by ODF in 1963. Tallowbox is located at 5,023 feet.

White Point

The Southwest Oregon District is also home to this lookout located 23 miles

southwest of Crater Lake. In 1951, White Point was a 40-foot tower, but became a 30-foot R-6 flattop lookout in 1974. The R-6 flattops were first seen in 1953 and became a standard design for the Forest Service. The flattop had a large flat roof on a 15-foot by 15-foot cabin. The windows and living space were enlarged in this design.

ABANDONED

Some state lookouts built over the years and later abandoned include:

Devils Backbone	Spence Mountain
Gill Ranch	Monmouth Bald
Myers Butte	Beach Creek
Gobblers Knob	Nicolai Mt.
Pepper Mountain	Cummings Peak
Green Mountain	Flounce Rock
Table Rock	Prairie City
Grindstone Mountain	Meissner Point
Bald (Hells) Mt.	Sargent Butte
High Heaven	Deep Creek
Euchre Mountain	Akers Butte
Kilchis Mountain	Foulweather

LOOKOUT CONSTRUCTION STYLES

The L-4 Aladdin

These were built between 1933 and 1953 with a hip roof construction. They were manufactured by the Aladdin Company in Portland and Spokane and sold for about \$500. Most than one thousand L-4s were built.

The L-6

This cabin was 8-feet by 8-feet and usually sat on top of an 80-to-100 foot tower.

The Steel Tower

Manufactured by Aeromotor of Chicago (best know for the windmills it made), the steel tower consisted of a 7-foot by 7-foot cabin sitting 35-to-100 feet in the air. Only handfuls remain around the West.