



THE NORTHWEST Montana Chapter of the Forest Fire Lookout Association aims to keep the area's fire lookouts, including the Porcupine Ridge Lookout in Glacier National Park, in good shape. (photo provided)

Lookout legacies

Local group helps preserve area's historic fire-spotting structures

By JEREMY WEBER
Daily Inter Lake

They stand as silent sentinels atop the pinnacles of many of Montana's mountain peaks, extending into the heavens to keep an ever-vigilant eye on the valleys below during the fire season.

Each winter, Montana's surviving fire lookouts find themselves in a losing battle against the elements and time, but one Kalispell-based group is fighting to preserve these historic treasures.

Since 2013, the Northwest

Montana chapter of the Forest Fire Lookout Association has partnered with area agencies to help restore and protect fire lookouts in Glacier National Park, Flathead and Kootenai national forests and other areas under the protection of the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation. Many of the structures are not being maintained because of budgetary restraints being faced by the agencies that manage them.

"Many of these sites are no longer being staffed as fire lookouts, but they are historic and need to be

saved," Chuck Manning, chairman of the Northwest Montana Forest Fire Lookout Association, said. "We are trying to preserve that image that has lookouts topping many of the mountains in Montana. It's part of our state's history and its legacy."

Providing the manpower, and sometimes a portion of the funding, the group strives to do at least one project for each agency every summer, having completed more than four dozen assessment and restoration projects in the past seven years. From Jumbo

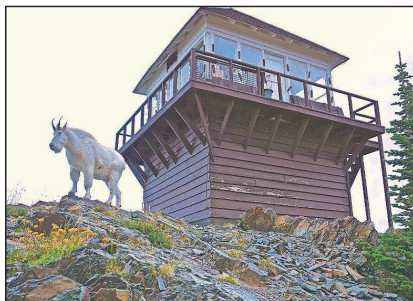
and Mud Lake lookouts in the Bob Marshall Wilderness to the Huckleberry Ridge and Porcupine lookouts in Glacier National Park, the Northwest Montana Chapter is turning back the hands of time to make sure future generations can enjoy and benefit from the lookouts that have watched over Montana for decades.

MONTANA ONCE boasted 639 fire lookout structures, but is now down to just 130, according to the

See LOOKOUT, C3



CHUCK MANNING and members of the Northwest Montana Chapter of the Forest Fire Lookout Association use a variety of skills to complete projects in woodworking, painting and more. (photo provided)



MOUNTAIN GOATS were constant companions this summer as members of the Northwest Montana Chapter of the Forest Fire Lookout Association repainted sections of the Mount Brown Lookout in Glacier National Park. (photo provided)



THE NORTHWEST Montana Chapter of the Forest Fire Lookout Association has done a number of projects this summer, including repainting the exterior of the Mount Brown Lookout in Glacier National Park. (photo provided)



MARK AND Karen Sheets refurbish original windows from the Mount Wam Lookout in the Kootenai National Forest. (photo provided)



THE PORCUPINE RIDGE Lookout in Glacier offers maintenance workers sweeping views of the park's landscape. (photo provided)



MATERIALS FOR restoration projects are carried to fire lookout sites via pack animal or helicopter. (photo provided)

LOOKOUT from C1

National Forest Fire Lookout Association. Only 40 of those are staffed during fire season.

The work is tough, as are many of the climbs, with materials often having to be transported by pack animal or helicopter. Once on site, the 14-by-14-foot lookouts provide cramped working and sleeping spaces for the small crews that rotate regularly throughout the projects that take extended amounts of time. Coordinating and working alongside the agencies that own the lookouts, the Northwest Montana Chapter's crews race the clock to complete each project, or as much as possible, each summer before Montana's harsh winter season forces them back down the mountainside.

"We only get a short window each summer to do all of this work because of the altitude. Lookouts exist in a harsh environment where we can see 50



WHILE NOT currently staffed, the fire lookout on Heaven's Peak in Glacier National Park was assessed for maintenance needs this summer. (photo provided)

mile-per-hour winds, frost, ice and snow buildup in the winter and lots of other things that eat away at them constantly," Manning said. "These projects take a lot of coordination between different agencies. Getting materials to a lookout, be it by pack animal or helicopter, can be a tough undertaking where costs add up quickly."

Volunteers quickly learn to be jacks of all

trades, laboring alongside agency workers to complete a variety of tasks that have included replacing siding, decking and roofing as well as painting and the removal, restoration and replacement of original windows.

FOR MANNING, the fascination with fire lookouts began in 2012 when he and his wife answered that call of Flathead National Forest's Leif Haugen,

who instituted a volunteer program to help staff his underfunded fire lookouts. That summer, the Mannings spent a week staffing a fire lookout and fell in love with the solitude and peacefulness of the adventure.

"Being at a lookout is very peaceful. We are working and don't get a lot of down time to really enjoy it, but when you are staffing a lookout, it is another experience

entirely," Manning said. "There is such solitude and quiet. It's not for everyone, but for those who enjoy getting away from it all, it's a great experience."

When the volunteers and paid staffers got together for a gathering that fall, the idea for the Northwest Montana Chapter of the Forest Fire Lookout Association was born.

After contacting the national organization and learning that all funds raised by the group locally would be used for local projects, the Northwest Montana Chapter was formed.

The group quickly entered into an agreement with the Flathead National Forest to help look after their fire lookouts beginning in 2013, soon followed by agreements with Glacier National Park, Kootenai National Forest and the DNRC.

What started with less than 10 members has now grown to an organization of more than 100, with 25 to 35 active members who work on projects each summer.

With the help of

membership dues, donations and fundraising efforts, the group raises the money to help agencies pay for restoration projects, when needed, putting in as much work as possible from the first signs of spring in May until the snows force them off the mountains in September. It is a labor of love, but Manning said maintaining Montana's fire lookouts helps everyone.

"Fire lookouts are an important piece of Montana's history and are still very useful in fighting fires and as communications relays today," he said. "It is important that we take care of them so they can continue to be utilized by future generations."

For more information about the Northwest Montana Chapter of the Forest Fire Lookout Association, visit the website at www.nwmt-ff-la.org or find them on Facebook.

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