

LOOKING OUT FOR MONTANA'S FIRE LOOKOUTS

February 28, 2020 at 9:58 am | By DUNCAN ADAMS The Western News



Swede Mountain Lookout, June 8, 2014. (Chelsea Bowe photo)

Fire lookout towers soar above the timberline and rise in the imagination of those who fantasize about the isolated duty of fire spotters — people whose work can provide stunning vistas and an occasional bone-rattling encounter with high-elevation thunderstorms.

Lookout towers occupying exposed ridgelines take a beating from harsh weather. And many structures have disappeared since the heyday, decades before aircraft and satellites assumed many surveillance duties once shouldered by solitude-tolerant lookouts — known affectionately as “freaks on peaks.”

Some structures in Montana have succumbed to age, weather and pack rats. Others have been razed or intentionally torched.

In 2013, a group of people who felt an appreciation for fire lookout structures and mourned their passing formed the Northwest Montana Forest Fire Lookout Association.

During March, Cabinet Mountain Brewing in Libby will help the organization by holding a Brews for Benefits event each Thursday from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. The brewery will donate to the nonprofit a portion of each beer sold on those nights.

“Big kudos go out to the brewery,” said Chuck Manning, chairman of the Northwest Montana Forest Fire Lookout Association.

The chapter also is selling raffle tickets that could yield a .22 rifle or a one-night stay at Werner Peak Lookout in the Whitefish Range.

The Kalispell-based nonprofit describes itself as an organization “dedicated to supporting federal and state agencies in the restoration and maintenance of fire lookouts and other historic structures on public lands.” It is affiliated with the national Forest Fire Lookout Association, founded in 1990.

Volunteers working alongside a roofing company from Kalispell installed a new roof this fall on the Swede Mountain lookout tower, sited a few miles east of Libby in the Kootenai National Forest and still staffed during fire season.

Manning said the U.S. Forest Service covered the cost of the roof repairs and a group of the association’s volunteers helped with the work, completed in early October.

He said the next step, once the snow retreats, is to do a full assessment of what else the Swede Mountain lookout needs. One task before summer will be reinstalling lightning protection, he said.

Swede Mountain lookout, a 52-foot, treated-timber tower, is accessible seasonally by vehicle. Visitors gain views of the Libby Valley, the Kootenai River Valley and the eastern front of the Cabinet Mountains Wilderness.

According to the Forest Fire Lookout Association, Montana once boasted 639 fire lookout structures. It now has 130. Forty are staffed during fire season.

Among the remaining lookouts on the Kootenai National Forest that are still staffed are Swede Mountain, Marston and Black Butte.

In northwest Montana, lookout structures sited on federal public lands can be found in Glacier National Park and in Flathead and Kootenai national forests. State forests that feature lookouts include Stillwater and Swan.

Some who contemplate service in a lookout tower imagine using the time alone to write or read or both.

Glacier National Park’s lookout alumni include the late writer Edward Abbey, who staffed a structure on Numa Ridge, and his friend and fellow writer, Doug Peacock, who was stationed at Huckleberry Lookout.

People who served as lookouts in the North Cascades during the 1950s included writer Jack Kerouac, at Desolation Peak, and poet Gary Snyder, at Sourdough Mountain.

An edition of The Western News in 1949 introduced readers to people assigned to staff 16 different lookouts. Their ranks included college students, teachers, forest service wannabes and longtime lookout employees, including Caspar Thoe and Lloyd "Buck" Kidder, both of Troy.

The newspaper reported then that Mr. and Mrs. Robert Baugh of Tempe, Ariz., "have been stationed on Swede Mountain."

Today, several lookouts in northwest Montana are available as cabin rentals. Go to recreation.gov for more information.

Manning and his wife have spent time as lookouts. The appeal includes what Manning described as "a crow's nest" view of spectacular country and close encounters with thunderstorms.

For more information about the Northwest Montana Forest Fire Lookout Association go to www.nwmt-ffla.org.