

The Cougar Pass Fire Lookout in 1984 -- just a year before it stopped being an active lookout tower.

Elliott Forest Lookouts

One of nature's many secrets -- and one we will never find out -- is what the Elliott forest would look like if its system of fire lookouts hadn't kept such good watch over the forest. We know the forest was periodically swept by catastrophic fires (see the [Fire page](#) in [www.ElliottSecrecy.Net](#) for more details) prior to 1914 when the fire lookout system was established, so it's a good guess the forest would look quite different today.

The Department of State Lands has quietly allowed the Elliott forest lookouts to rot and be vandalized, declared dangerous and removed or set on fire, an ironic fate for a fire lookout.

This pattern of neglect isn't unusual: Oregon once had over 800 active fire lookout towers, but today only a handful are still being staffed. Most of Oregon's fire lookout towers have decayed so badly that they've been deliberately destroyed: only about 200 are left standing, and most of those are in poor condition. This part of Oregon's heritage is rapidly being lost.

The same pattern holds true for the Elliott State Forest. It used to have four active lookouts, and now only the dilapidated shell of the Cougar Pass lookout remains. Only a handful of historical photos and written descriptions remain of the other lookouts.

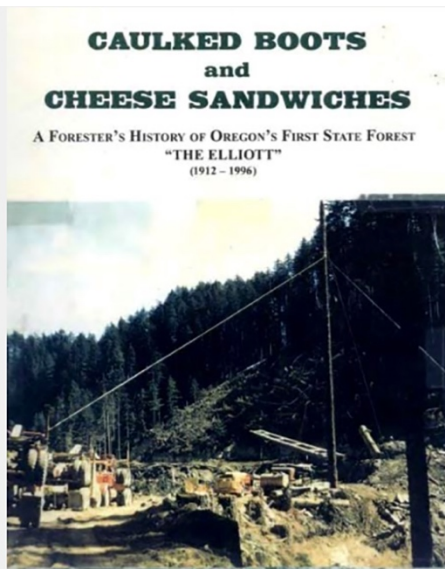
General Forest Fire Lookout History

The inspiration for the Cougar Pass Lookout Educational Center comes from the classic U.S. Forest Service Lookout Towers built on hilltops across the United States. The lookout tower building boom reached its climax in the 1930s and continued through the 1950s. By 1953, a survey showed over 5,000 lookout towers across the country. Each tower would house a solitary firewatcher who kept watch for distant smoke plumes. This system effectively caught fires when they were still small and easily extinguished.

After other methods of observing fires became available, most lookouts were neglected and eventually disappeared through rot, vandalism or deliberate governmental removal. But the Pacific Northwest still has over 400 lookout towers, and a few of these have paid firewatchers each summer. The remaining towers have become popular tourist destinations and some are rented to folks who want a rustic getaway. For more general information about lookout towers, we recommend the [Forest Fire Lookout Association](#) website.

Lookout towers have a magical charm that comes from their simple, functional design: they use wood trusses to put a cabin high enough to get awesome views. Their iconic design is unlike any other building, and they are just plain awesome.

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[Caulked Boots and Cheese Sandwiches](#) is BY FAR the best historical reference on the Elliott State Forest, and the entire book is available for free on-line. Just click the image above and begin reading.

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Jerry Phillips memories

Here's what Jerry Phillips has to say about the Elliott systems of lookouts (taken from [Caulked Boots and Cheese Sandwiches](#), excerpts from pages 82-96):

Dean's Mountain Lookout

The Dean's Mountain Lookout was one of the oldest, longest-occupied, and best-known lookouts in all Oregon. To many people, it was the only landmark in the Elliott State Forest they knew. Because of its fame and very long history, including its involvement with the CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] program, I want to provide an in-depth review of its lively past.

After the Siuslaw National Forest was created, back in 1908, one of its first actions on the ground was to build a small number of lookouts to overlook the historically fire-ravaged coast range land it was mandated to protect. The earliest were built between 1910 and 1914, and one of those was on Dean's Mountain -- only 1,818 feet in elevation, but with a good 360-degree view, especially with nearly all the timber in the area having been killed in the 1868 Coos Bay Fire. A simple old-fashioned "ground house" sufficed nicely for the first 25 years.



Phone lines serving the Elliott State Forest, 1930-1950. The last active line was between Dean's Mountain Lookout and Cougar Pass around 1960. (From Page 93.)



① Roy Peairs, forester, and Elroy Carlisle, laborer, in 1956 at the old Trail Butte Lookout ground house. Photo by Jerry Phillips

Elk Peak

This, along with Dean's Mountain, were the two established and used by the U.S.F.S. between about 1915 and 1929, when CFPA [Coos Forest Protective Association] took over the fire protection. Elk's Peak Lookout was, in the 1920s, a short pole tower and a tent on the ground.

Cougar Pass

This was a 60-foot tower with a cabin on top, built by the CCCs in 1935, when their road construction reached and passed that point. It was a very important lookout, because it looked over a lot of high fire risk country. Northeast and southeast from there lay tens of thousands of acres of steep country, covered with old-growth fir timber and slash – all east of the fog belt, and much with poor ground access. Also, Cougar Pass could "cross" its azimuth shots of smokes with Scare Ridge in Western Lane and with Old Blue and Landers in the Douglas Forest Protective Ass'n District, and also with Dean's Mountain (and later with Trail Butte and McKeever Butte in CFPA's District).

Cougar Pass Lookout was manned annually through 1985, so had fifty years of usage, depending upon whether it was finished in time for actual use during the 1935 fire season.

The spring where the lookout got drinking water was to the northeast, about 200 feet below the CCC road, at the head of Cold Creek. This was the last active lookout on the Elliott State Forest. As I finished writing this book, in 1996, it was still standing, although it had not been used since about 1985, I understand. It was still serving as a radio repeater point, however, and could still see future lookout usage during critical times if some of the fast-growing Elliott Forest trees nearby were cut (again).

Cougar Pass was named by an Ash Valley big game hunter, who reportedly killed a number of cougars in this vicinity. As late as 1952, a bounty of some \$60 each was being paid on cougars in Coos County. The CCC crew from Camp Walker built this tower when their road construction from their camp on Scholfield Creek reached this point. Their spur road to the tower hasn't changed much in the intervening 60 years.

The Cougar Pass lookout saw and helped communicate on at least three **huge** fires during its existence – all north of the Umpqua: the Smith River Fire in 1938, Weatherly Creek in 1951, and the Oxbow in 1966.

Another interesting feature of Cougar Pass is its usage as a radio relay site. During its later years of service, around the late 1970s, I think, a gas-powered generator was installed, along with the radio repeater equipment, in a secure structure at the foot of the tower. This repeater served the Umpqua River canyon and the rough country within the Elliott Forest for all mobile radio traffic.

Trail Butte

This lookout point, known in early days as Flags Peak (for the wild iris growing on its south slopes), had a lookout house built on it by the Coos Forest Protective Assoc. in 1942. This happened, curiously enough, due to a demand by the Federal Government that it be done. When World War II began in December of 1941, the Government created a plan to detect any Japanese aircraft (called the AWS -- the Aircraft Warning Service). A government official looked at an old map and saw that Trail Butte was marked as having a lookout on it already (incorrectly). So that site became incorporated into the AWS plan -- even though it did not exist ...

But it was a good place for a lookout in those days. Incendiary fires were still common in that area of the 70-acre area known as Burnt Ridge, lying just west of Trail Butte.



Howard Verschoor sent me this picture of the Deans mountain fire lookout in the Elliott State Forest. This ground-based 16' x 16' cabin with a cupola was built on Deans Mountain in 1920 as a replacement for the original "crude shake cabin." The shake cabin was built around 1914.

Howard Verschoor's memories

Howard Verschoor is the director of the [Oregon Chapter of the Forest Fire Lookout Association](#). He remembers making a significant effort to restore the Cougar Pass lookout starting in 1999 and continuing through 2003 as follows:

We went down to Cougar Pass in 1999, and it was in bad shape and had been vandalized. At that time the lookout still had windows, furnishings, a bed and stove, but no Osborne range finder (though the base was still there). Trees had grown up around the tower so it was difficult to see out. We wanted to restore and staff it with volunteers. So I contacted ODF (the Oregon Department of Forestry which managed the Elliott State Forest at the time). ODF said, "We don't know who owns it," so they didn't want to do anything.

Next, we went down again to repair the vandalism: patch up the broken windows and repair the roof. After we did that, we contacted ODF again, and this time they said the tower belonged to the [Coos Fire Protective Association](#), but Coos said, "We don't own it."

Next, ODF gave us the run-around again and suggested they might still want to staff it. They conducted a timber sale in the area, and that made it possible to see out again.

We didn't want to lose the Cougar Pass lookout to the same fate as the [Roman Nose lookout](#) that was demolished. But we kept getting put off and put off by ODF, so eventually we gave up.



This is a standard plaque for sites listed on the National Historic Lookout Register. If you click on the image above, you will be taken to the Cougar Pass Lookout's page within the National Historic Register's website.



National Lookout Historic Register

The Cougar Pass Lookout is listed in the National Lookout Historic Register. It's description in that register is:

The first structure on this site was a 30' L-4 wooden tower built in 1936. That was replaced with the present 50' treated timber tower with live-in Amort cab, which is presently occupied by packrats only.





Ron Kemnow has done a remarkable job of collecting information about Forest Fire Lookouts in North America. If you click on the logo above, you will be redirected to the Cougar Pass Lookout page within that register.

Ron Kemnow's Fire Lookout Site

As a sample to wet your appetite, here is one of many entries about the [Cougar Pass Lookout](#) with Ron's website:

December 12, 1935: "The activities of the Coos Fire Patrol do not cease even during the rainy season. A new standard 40-foot lookout tower has been completed at Cougar Pass, which will command the district of Loon Lake and Camp Creek, District Warden Keith Young has announced. This district has heretofore been blind to Dean Mountain lookout, the nearest station, because of a high mountain ridge.

The fire patrol is also planning another lookout tower for Flag Peak, southwest of Dean Mountain, and it is hoped to have it ready for the next fire season, Warden Young said." (The Coos Bay Times)

