



**Forest Fire Lookout Association
New York State Chapter
May 2020**

May 2020 – so much uncertainty, so much fear, so many conflicting opinions, so many unkind words being spoken. It is my sincere hope that we will all rise above this, learn from this, and stay well. In the meantime, I have tried to put together a newsletter for the State Chapter that has information and opinions as well some moments in history. I hope that it will inform you, give you food for thought, and hope.

Historically fire towers were part of a fire prevention system across not only New York State, but the nation as well. In addition to proper tools and communication, the towers allowed for a quick response to a fire. I was reminded of the need for them just yesterday. A funny, but true story. As we have been staying home while NYS is on “pause” and cleaning up the yard we have made great progress and we have made a huge brush/debris pile out back. I dumped a wheelbarrow load of yard waste and the day old ashes from the woodstove there yesterday. It was a bit breezy. I heard Tom yell fire! Thankfully we saw the smoke pouring out of the pile and were able to rake out the smolder before it became a flame and what a flame it would have been with all that debris! There must have been the tiniest hot coal in that ash bucket. Believe me if we had not been here, a fire tower would have seen that pile if it became fully involved. I could see the headlines now..... The NYS burn ban has officially ended, but one should always remain cautious.

We have anniversary coins! Two designs – the standard FFLA logo with an Osborne Firefinder on the reverse and the 30-Year Anniversary design with the NHLR logo on the reverse are now available. The cost is \$10 for the first coin, \$7.00 for each additional – of either design. To order, go to our national web page (while you are there please consider becoming a member or renewing your membership): <http://ffla.org/>



NYSDEC has closed all of their fire towers, the ADK has said they will not count any climbs toward their challenge, but it has not stopped miscreants from climbing fire towers, breaking rules, and vandalizing things. You can see the Ranger reports of the last month for more, but here is a sampling from May 5th.

Essex County Wilderness Rescue: On May 1 at 3:51 p.m., Essex County 911 transferred a call to DEC's Ray Brook Dispatch reporting an injured person on Poke-O-Moonshine Mountain. A few minutes later, 911 called Dispatch advising that a 19-year-old man from Plattsburgh had fallen on the trail and injured his left leg. The man, hiking alone, believed he had dislocated his knee after falling on his way to the climbing walls. Coordinates obtained by 911 put the man on the trail not far from the trailhead. Forest Ranger Jared Booth responded to the area first, followed by Forest Rangers Sarah Bode and Scott van Laer, the Keeseville Fire Department, and Champlain Valley Physicians Hospital EMS. The emergency team carried the injured man back to the trailhead and EMS transported him to a local hospital for further medical assistance.

Town of Santa Clara Franklin County Wilderness Rescue: On May 2 at 5:05 p.m., DEC's Ray Brook Dispatch received a call from two hikers on St. Regis Mountain concerned that they were lost. Dispatch instructed the two women from Hogansburg to call 911 to establish coordinates. The coordinates indicated the pair had been off the trail for more than a mile and while they were headed in the wrong direction, they were close to a secondary trail at St. Regis Lake. At 5:44 p.m., Forest Ranger Chris DiCintio arrived at the trailhead and started hiking to the hikers' last known location. At 6:41p.m., Ranger DiCintio located the hikers and started back out to the trailhead on Keese Mill Road. At 7:18 p.m., everyone was back to the trailhead and heading home.

Bald Mountain Graffiti on rocks: DEC Forest Rangers in Region 6 are investigating graffiti painted on rocks at the top of Bald Mountain. Hikers said the drawings were located off the main trail near the fire tower and included language making light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Forest Rangers, already aware of the graffiti, are encouraging anyone with information to call DEC's non-emergency dispatch at 518-897-1300. If caught, those responsible could face a \$1,000 fine and up to a year in jail.



In addition to the vandalism on Bald Mt, the parking lot was parked full and both sides of the road were lined with cars for quite a distance. While under the NYS “pause” order, persons are asked to hike locally, to avoid crowded trailheads, to practice social distancing, and to wear a mask or step at least 6 feet off the trail when you meet others. The amount of cars at this trailhead would certainly seem like it would be a place to avoid at this time. Have an alternative hike in mind when you plan a destination and remember, with all the fire towers closed, you may not have a view from the ground either.

Here is a feel good related fire tower story: The NYS Forest Ranger school at Wanakena had to make a decision when the corona virus struck. Read all about their success here. Congratulations to all of the graduates and to the professors who made it happen!

<https://www.syracuse.com/coronavirus/2020/04/they-stayed-and-graduated-together-meet-the-suny-esf-students-who-accomplished-a-unique-goal-in-2020.html>

A new phrase – virus snitching – indeed virus snitching is alive and well in the fire tower world! I do get people reaching out to me each and every weekend and most Mondays about persons who were posting on social media that they were on a closed fire tower. I do appreciate people letting me know about these instances and I have followed up with the NYSDEC about these situations. The DEC really does not have the manpower and resources to police and enforce the closures. They have tried to make certain that fire tower closure signage is in place at least at the trail head kiosks and replace them as needed. But it is not realistic for a Forest Ranger to hike to each fire tower each day and replace signage on the fire towers themselves. Leaving those signs in place is an individual hiker's responsibility. So is respecting the message on those signs, the fire tower is closed! Keep the notes coming. Maybe we will see a ticket issued to set an example and make hikers respect the closure.

Were it not for a certain virus, this is the time of year I would be out poking around old fire tower sites - if they were on public land of course. Usually by late April the snow has melted and leaves are well matted down and it is easier to see "old things." Currently we must stay close to home so my activities have been curtailed. But Bramley Mt is within 10 miles of my home, has 2 great trails to the summit, old fire tower footings, a nice view and a group who is working to return the fire tower to the summit! On a walk up there last week, we did make a discovery. We have been looking for the remains of the Observer's cabin, and thus far had come up empty handed, but here was this strange square shaped rock with another square shape on top. We compared it with photos on our new web page and think we found it!



the remains of the Observer's cabin, and thus far had come up empty handed, but here was this strange square shaped rock with another square shape on top. We compared it with photos on our new web page and think we found it! <https://catskillmountainclub.org/events/friends-of-bramley-mountain-fire-tower/>.

We are lucky thus far in NYS regarding spring wild fires. In the state of Florida on top of all of the Covid-19 issues, they are now dealing with many fires: <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/14/us/florida-wildfires-evacuations/index.html>

Cancellations due to closures

As of May 13th, the Forest Preserve Fire Tower Stewardship Program will be on hold until spending decisions have been made. That means that those towers where you would have seen a paid steward in the past will not be funded at this time.

Fire Towers that already have an established volunteer steward program are also canceled at this time as the fire towers are closed.

The FFLA work projects that were planned for 2020 are all on hold at this time. I am currently checking to see if we can do trail maintenance under certain guidelines and if we will be able to work on Pillsbury later in the summer as all materials are on sight for that project. We must take into consideration both social distancing guidelines being lifted and the budget as we move forward.

Trivia: This month I have more of a guess than a trivia question for you. I had the pleasure of hearing from Mr. Richard Horn. He gave us a Prospect Mountain fire tower photo and some memories: “Lake George Village was my home for the first 27 years of my life. In the 1940's and 1950's Frank Wheeler was the Conservation Department fire warden and drove a red pickup truck with a red light and siren on the hood and it had a gasoline water pump and "Indian Tanks" in the back. He responded to all the forest fires in our area and coordinated the fire fighting effort. Volunteer fire departments and local citizens would leave their jobs to fight the fires. High school boys would also help. On a few occasions we high school boys would sleep overnight at the fire scene with Indian Pumps to extinguish any flare-ups. I believe Harold Norton was the man stationed at Prospect Mountain fire tower. I did photography in high school and as summer employment when I was in college.” Our trivia question is How much was Richard paid for his work in putting out fires? An anniversary sticker to the closest guess! For more on Richard's memories and others, don't forget to visit our new state chapter webpage: <http://nysffla.org/>

Last month's winners: We had a trivia question last month regarding an aerial photograph and you had to identify the fire tower. For reference you all received a clue when I said the photo came from Former Kane Mt. Fire Tower Observer Rick Miller. Yes it is a photo of Kane! Winners of an anniversary sticker were Jack K., Lori Ann, and Randy K. Thanks for playing along.

In lieu of a guest columnist this month, we have an opinion piece from Former NYS FFLA Director, Fred Knauf:

As we progress into the summer months, when people both flock to the mountain trails to hike the old fire towers, and special people group together to repair, replace and paint the towers for their preservation and safety, it is time to consider future action. The Covid-19 changes which we have all seen have brought this to the fore-front, but hiking technology, and in particular, winter hiking technology, has brought me here to discuss this topic among the NYS Chapter of the FFLA. Frankly, I believe it should be pushed to the national level for the same reasons.

What am I talking about? We've seen the closure of the fire towers for access from COVID-19, and today I am recommending that a proposal be made with the Department of Environmental Conservation to close the fire towers down from November 1st through March 31st – all of the winter months, as a start for the next winter. Why, you might be asking?

Here is where the technology part comes in. When the towers were erected and when they were actually open through the 1990 season, winter hiking was not a “norm”, and the primary means of traversing snowy trails was the use of bear-paw style snowshoes. Even crampons with their long knife-like teeth were not common. I do believe the towers were closed each winter when they were used, but back then, violators did not have the means to innocently damage the tower like today.

Today, the equipment is vastly changed. Nearly everyone out there in the winter has micro-spikes or other “mini-crampon” like foot gripping. Sadly, however, a large majority of the winter hikers to the fire towers wearing those spikes do not remove them at the base of the tower. Those spikes put gouges into the wood, which like a crack in a road that holds water, then freezes and leads to a pothole. The water freezing inside the gouge will weaken and eventually break off pieces of the wood. Just the gouge alone leads to the wood's strength being reduced.

2020's project season for tower work has already seen deferments and the outlook for further work weekends is nebulous with the recent State 7-point mandate plans to re-open. Thus, work weekends for

the entire year could be reduced or eliminated. The wonderful work on towers the past few years where stair treads and landings have been replaced are already seeing spike damage. I noticed damage on every tower I've climbed over the past handful of years, and all it would take is one of those steps or landings to suddenly give way and a hiker to fall and require serious DEC assistance for the DEC to once again raise liability issues, especially with the present lawsuit-happy society, and then the towers could come down.

We all know that there are many winter hiking challenges with patches, and nearly all include at least one fire tower, which increases the number of climbers & ultimately the amount of damage. Many state that you do not have to actually climb the tower to attain the credit and therefore closing the towers for the winter by placing multiple chains across the initial two stair treads will effectively stop those who try and get-by to scale the tower. One might try to scale the tower's frame, but that would be impossible with micro-spikes, so even if someone tried that after removing their spikes, the damage to the tower would not be possible.

The time is now to plan for winter 2020-2021 where a second outbreak of COVID-19 could hit, our DEC Ranger force and the NYS budget are being pushed or will be pushed to extremes, and repair projects might be canceled for the year. Will helicopter use be allowed for example? Once the State does re-open, the push to get back out on the towers into the winter may be even more massive than what has been seen in the past five years, and how much longer will the stairs atop the State's towers take the abuse? It is time for some serious considerations to protect the DEC Rangers, their budgets, the work of those dedicated volunteers and the towers and close them this coming winter. If you love the towers and care for their long-term survival, this might be a good time to write the DEC Commissioner and the Governor with their thoughts on the matter, and of course, keep our State Director in the loop, too.

Thank you for your thoughts Fred. This has been an area of concern of mine – note the attached photo that illustrates damage from microspikes that was taken in 2016. I have reported these problems to the NYSDEC and am certain that other groups have as well. No amount of maintenance and paint helps with all those holes!



If you have something you would like to discuss in upcoming newsletters, please let me know. If appropriate and time and space allow, we will try to fit it in.

Stewardship Appreciation Awards: The deadline has been extended to May 30th due to the Covid-19 situation. In addition, some people have had some difficulties with the form. If you need a new one reach out to adventureny@dec.ny.gov

A bit of follow up from last month: I ended the April newsletter with a few sentences about the beauty and perseverance of daffodils. Those daffodils have been snowed on many times since then and have found some really cold air pressing in around them. Some have done well and some got a bit sad, but we currently have several still blossoming in the gardens! Persevere! Be calm, be kind, be well!

Laurie Rankin, Director
New York State Chapter
Forest Fire Lookout Association
<http://nysffla.org/>