



**Forest Fire Lookout Association  
New York State Chapter  
August 2024**

The Lighting Event 2024 has kept me rather busy this month. This is such a successful event, with numerous fire towers being lit by volunteer Illuminators throughout the state. We are so very appreciative of the people who have stepped forward to make this event happen. The event is the brain-child of Doug Hamilton, longtime Volunteer Coordinator at Red Hill fire tower and this is the 11<sup>th</sup> year. The tower light will come on at 9 PM on August 31<sup>st</sup> (rain date is Sept 1<sup>st</sup>) and remain lit until 9:30 PM. Several fire towers are participating. All are listed on the website and include information about where you can see the lights from. <http://nysffla.org/light.html>

The event is meant to be a reminder to communities around the state about the fire tower and the men and women working in those fire towers. They once looked over these communities, homes, businesses and forests, protecting them from devastating wildfires. We are reminded of this in the news when we see the massive fires in the western part of the United States and Canada, and when we step outside and find hazy views and poor air quality from these fires. I often do presentations about fire tower history and include information about fires that occurred in New York State in 1903 that caused smoke to drift as far south as Washington DC. That seemed like such an amazing fact to share. That is until the last few years when smoke has drifted into NYS from many miles away. <https://suncommunitynews.com/news/111867/fire-towers-light-up-across-the-adks-aug-31/>

On the 31<sup>st</sup>, find a spot to see your favorite tower and look up!

Our monthly photo contest was won by Steven Hereen with his photograph of Sugar Hill Fire Tower taken in August of 2023. Congratulations to Steve! It is featured here and it is our cover photo on the FFLA Facebook page. Thanks to everyone for your participation!



## AROUND THE STATE

**Berry Hill Fire Tower:** We did a presentation at nearby Bowman Lake State Park about fire tower history on August 3<sup>rd</sup>. We had a nice group and following the presentation 11 hiked from the Park to the Berry Hill Fire Tower to enjoy the views! Then on August 14<sup>th</sup>, we hosted the Chenango County Bird Club at Berry Hill. Again, we presented information on the fire towers of NYS and particularly our host tower. We had 14 members of the bird group and shared information on the avian friends we often see there. Thanks to the other two volunteers who helped out.

**Bramley:** The Friends of Bramley Mountain have been issued their building permit. Meetings with all parties are being planned and it is hoped that work on the footings can begin soon. Many thanks to the County and the Friends group for their perseverance and work on this project. <https://www.the-reporter.net/stories/bramley-mountain-fire-tower-project-builds-steam,154451?newsletter=154762>

**Tooley Pond/Cathedral Rock:** Author John Sasso brings us another informative paper on this tower. “Below is a link to my paper on the history tying together Cathedral Rock and Tooley Pond Mountain. For folks who may not know, the steel tower atop Cathedral Rock once stood upon the summit of Tooley Pond Mountain over fifty years ago. My paper delves extensively not only into the legacy of the tower, but also name origins, (including that of Wanakena), the legacy of logging at Tooley Pond and Wanakena, and the establishment of the State Ranger School. The [paper](#) is best viewed on a laptop or similar.

**Wanakena:** I was disappointed that the article does not mention the Fire Towers such as Cat Mt that was an integral part of the history of the area: <https://www.adirondackexplorer.org/stories/wandering-wanakena-a-town-known-for-its-iconic-footbridge>

## IN MEMORIAM

From the Adirondack Explorer - “*Charles 'Chuck' Vandrei, the state Department of Environmental Conservation's historic preservation officer, died on July 19. He worked at the DEC for four decades and most recently spearheaded the ongoing effort to [rebury 18th-century remains unearthed in Lake George at a construction site.](#)*”

*I had just spoken to Vandrei earlier this month for a follow-up story on unmarked burial protections recently adopted and interment plans for the 44 skeletons thought to be Revolutionary War soldiers. That story will be in our September/October issue of the magazine. I'm sorry it will be my last interview with Vandrei. He was a wealth of knowledge and enthusiastic about his work.*

*The DEC shared with me a statement from Interim DEC Commissioner Sean Mahar: 'From remote mountain camps to former industrial sites, Chuck's wide-ranging work with DEC and our many state, federal, Indigenous, and international partners fostered an extraordinary legacy of preservation, appreciation, and respect for the past. We will miss him greatly and my thoughts are with his family, friends, and many colleagues throughout DEC who had the pleasure of knowing Chuck and the history he helped shape.'*”

Though I never met Chuck in person, I did share numerous emails with him and had phone conversations over the years. He was very supportive of fire towers and the work of the FFLA. He will be missed.

## AROUND THE COUNTRY

How to combat crimes in the outdoors took a new turn recently. <https://wgme.com/news/local/acadia-park-rangers-seek-help-identifying-hikers-who-disturbed-protected-falcon-area-maine-precipice-trail-acadia-national-park-migratory-bird-treaty-act> Perhaps we should be doing this here in NY to discourage illegal behavior such as graffiti at our fire towers?

The Western Conference of the FFLA is scheduled for Big Bear California September 27th through the 29<sup>th</sup>. Events will include guest speakers, fire tower visits, and a visit to the USFS Air Tanker base – all situated in the San Bernadino National Forest. Cost is just \$45. Have you registered yet? It will be a great opportunity to meet fire tower friends old and new!

Idaho: There are fire tower enthusiasts everywhere! They are hooked on finding the locations of old towers and cabins, following the clue that an occasional old phone insulator may provide, and finally finding the tower site! Read all about the enthusiasm of this couple: <https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2024/jul/05/top-of-the-world-idaho-fire-lookouts-project-trace/>

## STEWARDSHIP

Stewardship has become a major aspect of our work here in New York State. We are featuring some of the testimonials of our stewards here so that you can get an idea of what the stewards do each day.

Georg and Katy: “Down at the car now, despite the iffy weather, 25 people braved the hike to the Fire Tower. It was wet, drizzling and rainy all day. Opened the fire tower cab for a wonderful pillow case view. Nevertheless we had a good time and enjoyed interacting with all the visitors.”

Dan: “I saw about 75 people yesterday and had some really good conversations! The out of staters were from Connecticut, Arizona Wyoming, Colorado and a guy and daughter from Thailand but now living in the United States. No graffiti. Privy was good with toilet paper. Put new fresheners up and just use that little broom to clean up the inside cobwebs. Filled a whole garbage bag, full of trash from the parking lot, on the trail and up top. Handed out a decent amount of stickers frisbees and wristbands! I went down about 8 PM to return the packs then I hiked back up for a sunset which there was a couple and a guy up there, watching the sunset to which we had a good conversation. Just an amazing day. Thank you again for this opportunity!”

Rich: I had a free day yesterday and noted you had invited anyone to steward this past weekend, so I headed up to Berry Hill. I arrived early at around 9:30 so I could mow the lawn as well be the steward. The view was excellent and there was a nice cooling breeze that also kept the bugs away. I had 6 visitors, all enjoyed the tower and were happy to see the cabin and ask some questions. Interestingly, the Rochester dad had grown up in Chenango County and visited the tower periodically since the 1960s but had never seen the cabin.”

From Adam: “In my happy place. Happy Saturday everyone!”

All Trails: A review for our Stewards Pat and Debi stationed at Kane; “Great well marked trails and awesome views from the fire tower. The volunteer stewards at the top were kind and a great source of information.”

## HISTORY

As we continue our discussions about aircraft being added to the fire prevention/fire fighting force in New York State, we have been taking note of the changes in how the aircrafts were used.

Here is a current use, from retired Forest Ranger, Gary Lee, who uses one for loon surveying (please note Gary donated the flight for this purpose) From Gary: *“I flew with Tom Payne of Payne's Air Service to check lakes back in the Moose River Area. We saw a loon right on Seventh Lake as the plane warmed up. As we taxied before takeoff, Tom said there was a bald eagle flying right along off the left wing. Soon we were coming down on Little Indian Lake. Tom taxied to the boot of the lake and we saw a family of Canada geese with five little ones. Back toward the outlet we saw a family of common mergansers, but no loons. At the end of Muskrat Lake we saw three adult loons fishing together. And as we flew over the ridge to Beaver Lake I saw 2 adult loons and a chick. A single loon was spotted at Mitchell Ponds. Back at Seventh Lake, we said our goodbyes and there was a pair of adult loons fishing not far from the docks.”* Thanks for taking us on that ride Gary!

In Lou Curth's book, “The Forest Rangers: A History of the New York State Forest Ranger Force”, pages 4 and 5, there are a couple of great photographs and text about the transition to the Forest Rangers directing “Search and Rescue Operations in wild, remote and forested areas of the State. Of all the duties of Forest Rangers, search and rescue missions receive the highest priority. ... When a call for help is received, Rangers quickly form an ad hoc team of sufficient size to carry out the mission.”

As the responsibilities transitioned in the Department, training to complete the roles required new trainings. In Mr. Curth's book on page 81, he mentions the “Winter conferences for Rangers and Fire Tower Observers were being held in all the Forest Preserve districts. Instruction was given in all phases of the Rangers work. ... Critical to the success of these missions is the support of state and local organizations. NY State Police Aviation helicopters provide an aerial search platform, crew insertion and patient medivac. Local volunteer fire departments and search and rescue groups provide ground searching and logistical resources while the local sheriff's offices provide local government liaison. All of these resources working together are critical to the success of any mission.”

Today, training continues for all roles of a Forest Ranger's Work, Land Protection, SAR, and Wildland Firefighting. The DEC must now partner with the NYS Police who now own and pilot the aircraft being used.



Photo from the Podskoch collection – Grumman Goose

I am personally very grateful to the NYS Forest Ranger force who illustrated to me first hand how well they have been trained and how efficiently they can conduct a rescue in partnership with the NYS Police. In March of this year, I was out hiking on an icy mountain trail about 4.5 miles from any trailhead. I fell several feet and knew immediately that I had broken my ankle. We applied a splint and I attempted to get myself off the mountain, but it quickly became obvious I would not be able to do so. A phone call to the Forest Ranger's emergency number 833-NYS-RANGers put me through to a friendly dispatcher who then put Forest Ranger Martin on the line with me. His calm voice and clear explanations made me feel much better about my situation. He suggested an aviation rescue was what they would prefer, but they would also begin a ground carry out in case aviation was not able to help. Rangers Stratton and Horn came in the NYSP helicopter and I was hoisted off the mountaintop. I was very fortunate that there was cell phone reception where I was and I cannot emphasize enough that these Rangers were professional, calm, courteous and extremely skilled at what they did! I am very grateful to them, the pilot and the entire ground crew who gathered to assist me.

Others have found themselves in need of rescue of late too. All involve fire tower or former fire tower mountains. From Ranger reports of July 23rd and 31<sup>st</sup>.

**Town of Webb, Herkimer County, Wilderness Rescue:** On July 15, at 11:17 a.m., Herkimer County requested Forest Ranger assistance for a hiker with an unstable ankle injury on Rondaxe Mountain. Seven Forest Rangers and an Assistant Forest Ranger responded with the Eagle Bay, Old Forge, and Webb Fire Departments. Rescue crews reached the 53-year-old from Pennsylvania and secured her in a wheeled litter. Rangers used rope techniques to lower the subject through several steep sections along the trail. At 12:37 p.m., the rescue team reached a waiting ambulance in the parking area. Resources were clear at 1:30 p.m.

**Town of Webb, Herkimer County, Wilderness Rescue:** On July 16, at 12:50 p.m., five Forest Rangers responded to a call for a hiker with a lower leg injury on Rondaxe Mountain. Old Forge Fire and EMS splinted the subject's fractured heel. Rangers used rope techniques to lower the 51-year-old from Avon through several steep sections along the trail. At 2:18 p.m., crews reached a waiting Old Forge ambulance. Inlet and Eagle Bay Fire Departments assisted with the rescue.

**Town of Waverly, Franklin County, Wilderness Rescue:** On July 22 at 5:20 p.m., Ray Brook Dispatch received a report about an older hiker with a heart condition who could not continue hiking Azure Mountain. At 5:45 p.m., Forest Ranger Bowler reached a 76-year-old from Colorado and helped him down to the trailhead where he was met by a St. Regis Falls ambulance. Resources were clear at 7.

**Town of Webb, Herkimer County, Wilderness Rescue:** On July 26 at 12:11 p.m., five Forest Rangers, the Old Forge Fire Department, and Webb Police responded to a call for a hiker with an unstable ankle injury. Rangers reached the 50-year-old from Massachusetts, splinted her ankle, and used a rope system to lower her approximately 1.4 miles down the trail. At 2:52 p.m., they reached the trailhead where an Old Forge Ambulance transported the subject to the hospital.

**Town of Harrietstown, Essex County, Wilderness Rescue:** On July 26 at 2 p.m., Ray Brook Dispatch received a call from a subject with an ankle injury on Ampersand Mountain. At 3:15 p.m., Forest Rangers Corey, Curcio, and Evans reached the subject from Maryland and assisted her approximately two miles down to the trailhead. Resources were clear at 5:08 p.m.

These rescues illustrate the need for an investment in our trails and in education to help prevent these occurrences. It also illustrates the need to support our Rangers and make it safer for them.

In the Adirondacks area, a long time pilot has just retired. We extend our thanks and our best wishes to Scott as he retires: <https://www.adirondackdailyenterprise.com/news/local-news/2024/07/adirondack-helicopter-pilot-retires-after-30-years-of-saving-lives/>

If you do not already own Lou Curth's book, you can find a bit of his history at this link: <https://muse.union.edu/adirondack/2019/05/13/defending-a-changing-landscape-a-history-of-forest-rangers-in-new-york-state/>

Sometimes the National Guard flies: <https://www.nationalguard.mil/News/State-Partnership-Program/Article/588485/new-york-helicopters-fly-adirondack-mission/>

While some of the items in this newsletter seem far removed from fire towers, I believe they illustrate our history as well as our future. Observers provided public relations when they were on duty as well as fire spotting. Today, we call that stewarding. Observers also participated in search and rescue operations. We must be able to adapt and change and yet as we remember our history, we may find that we repeat it too. Preservation of our fire towers and our forests does not necessarily mean an end to something, but rather it means adjustments may be made. Photos from NYSDEC and my husband.



## CALENDAR/ANNOUNCEMENTS

Tower Closed: Beebe Hill, Goodnow, Jackie Jones, and Spruce.

Stillwater: Annual Hunting Season closure begins the 2<sup>nd</sup> Tuesday in October – October 8<sup>th</sup>! Note, the tower will be closed prior to Columbus Day Weekend! Tower and trail will reopen December 21<sup>st</sup>.

Swede: tower and trail closes September 10<sup>th</sup> and will reopen December 16<sup>th</sup>.

**September 21 or 22:** Lyon Mt. Knowing that snow comes early to this spectacular mountain, we will try to get our fall trail work done before its arrival. We will choose the best weather day with the best views from these two days.

Laurie PS - I have not found a date when the last aircraft the Conservation Department/DEC used was taken out of service. If anyone can point me to that date, I would be very grateful.