



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

Sadly, we begin our state news with discussion of the very serious drought that we are experiencing here in NYS. Locally in my area we are currently looking at the second driest year ever in the period from October 1<sup>st</sup> through today, with just over 1 inch of rain. The earth is parched and it takes very little to ignite the dry fuels on our forest floors. There have been numerous fires since this newsletter was written last month, brush fires that are started from motor vehicle accidents, structure fires, lightning strike, power lines, and from people burning or mulching leaves when the mower gets so warm that it ignites the leaves. And once these fires get underway, we have had significant winds to move them quickly through our forests and grasslands.

As I write this today, two very significant forest fires are ongoing. One is near Greenwood Lake / Sterling Forest State Park on the NY/NJ border. Nearly 6,000 acres have burned and sadly, there was a fatality of a Parks employee who was working the fire. Hundreds of fire fighters both volunteer and paid, the National Guard and our Forest Rangers have been battling this blaze in an area that is heavily forested, rocky and steep. Unfortunately, as winds have changed direction, this fire has gotten very close to homes. Thus far, they have saved those structures. I am not certain how close this is to the Sterling Forest Fire Tower and Observer's cabin, and do not know if it is still standing. I do know that the tower has been closed pending an engineering report for several years now, so I can't help but wonder if it was an active tower, would manpower have been sent sooner and would this fire be out now? Over the border in New Jersey, one of their active fire towers first spotted the fire and they are utilizing the towers as part of their fire fighting efforts.

In Ulster County, the Whitehouse Fire grew to 648 acres and has consumed a lot of resources. The fire was also in steep and rugged terrain, but did come very close to some houses and some short term evacuations were necessary. Damage to local roads also occurred. As of today, it is listed as 98% contained. Both fires did have one advantage and that was proximity to large bodies of water where they could use air support with bambi buckets to put water on the fire.

The statewide burn ban has been extended to November 30<sup>th</sup> and there is very little rain in the forecast for the next two weeks.



Photo from News 12 Hudson Valley



Leather Helmet Photography

Reading Lou Curth's book, *The Forest Rangers*, the chapter entitled "Tumultuous Times", he talks a lot about the changes that were made following significant fires in the very dry 1960's. Perhaps we will see changes going forward in the near future due to this drought and these significant fires. Sadly, those changes are too late for young 18 year old Dariel Vasquez. May he rest in peace. Our sincere sympathies to his family and those who worked the fire with him.

The winner of this month's Facebook photo contest is Brent Pierce with his photo of Lyon Mt. Fire Tower taken in November of 2023. That photo received the most likes and is our new cover photo for the FFLA New York State page. Congratulations Brent and many thanks to all who participated and voted.

## **AROUND THE STATE**

Our Ranger reports were filled with wildland fires this month, so I am only going to provide a brief synopsis here on those. However, I did want to note that once again we have had some rescues, and once again, one from Bald Mt Fire Tower.

From the 10-8 Ranger Report:

Town of Roseboom, Otsego Co, Wildland Fire. Town of Santa Clara, Franklin Co, Wildland Fire.

Bald Mountain Rescue - Town of Webb, Herkimer County

On October 11, at 12:46 PM, Forest Ranger McCartney responded to a call regarding a hiker with a lower leg injury near the Bald Mountain trailhead. The 68-year-old hiker from Fairport was located and had her leg splinted. With assistance from Ranger Hanno and the Old Forge Fire Department, the hiker was secured in a wheeled litter and transported to an awaiting Old Forge Ambulance by 1:16 PM.

Overlook: Town of Woodstock, Ulster County, Wilderness Rescue:

On Oct. 12 at 2:30 PM, Ulster County 911 requested Forest Ranger assistance for an injured hiker on Overlook Mountain in the area of Echo Lake. Rangers called the hiker's daughter and learned the 78-year-old from France was unable to walk or even sit up. Rangers Franceschina and Martin joined Woodstock Fire and a Woodstock Paramedic and found the subject at 4 p.m. The paramedic suspected the subject had a fractured pelvis. New York State Police Aviation Pilots Leeder and Celestine were called in to help perform a hoist rescue. Ranger Cowart lowered Ranger Rusher who helped package the subject. At 5:15 PM, Ranger Cowart successfully hoisted the hiker into the helicopter, and they flew to the hospital.

From the 10-22 Ranger Report:

Town of Arietta, Hamilton Co, Wildland Fire. Village of Greenwood Lake, Orange Co Wildland Fire: On Oct. 18 at 4:30 PM, New Jersey State Fire contacted DEC's Regional Office in New Paltz to report a fire crossed over state lines into Sterling Forest State Park. Forest Ranger Jahn responded with New York State Park Rangers. By 6:10 PM, responders contained the fire to 5.9 acres in New York and 0.7 acres in New Jersey.

Towns of Berkshire, Boonville, Caton, Dover, Howard, Kortright, Lawrence, Lysander, Monroe, Moriah, Plattekill, Potsdam, Ramapo, and Southport, Cities of Ithaca and Chemung, Delaware, Dutchess, Essex, Oneida, Onondaga, Orange, Rockland, St. Lawrence, Steuben, Tioga, Tompkins, and Ulster Counties Wildland Fires.

On Oct. 25 at 1 AM, Forest Rangers responded to a call for a fire on Hemlock Ridge Multiple Use Area in Plattekill. The steep terrain and rocky slope impeded a full containment line around the 46-acre fire. Eight Rangers, four DEC volunteers, 75 fire department members, and New York State Police Aviation helped get the fire under control.

On Oct. 27, Forest Rangers responded to a 13.5-acre fire in Ramapo, Rockland County, and an 18.5-acre fire in Dover, Dutchess County.

**Wilderness Access:** Why do we care? <https://www.adirondackexplorer.org/stories/debate-over-wilderness-and-access?>

For those who may not be aware the use of motorized vehicles in the forest preserve for such things as administrative access for necessary repairs and even what tools we can use to make repairs involves “motorized” use. Think about how we need to provide new landing or step boards in the wilderness. If possible, could we use a minimally maintained road via an ATV to get those boards there and could we use battery powered saws and drills to cut the boards to fit, drill holes in those boards and maybe a battery powered driver to tighten the nuts and bolts. Or do we hand carry those boards, hand saw them to fit, hand drill the holes, and tighten by hand. Both options get the job done. But which would be easier for volunteers or staff? What is the impact to the “wilderness” if we choose one option over another?

What about the person with disabilities that would like to visit a fire tower? What accommodations should be made for them? Berry Hill, Leonard Hill, and Cornell Hill all come to mind.

If you have comments on this matter, please make them by the deadline of December 2<sup>nd</sup>.

**OT for Forest Rangers:** How is it assigned? <https://www.adirondackexplorer.org/stories/forest-rangers-grievance?>

**Big Tupper sold:** <https://www.adirondackexplorer.org/stories/dormant-adirondack-ski-center-sold-at-auction?> What could this mean for access to the Mt. Morris fire tower and for preservation of the Observer's cabin that is on the property?

**Holiday Shopping Time:** Support your favorite local fire tower group or our NYS Chapter by purchasing that special holiday gift for a fire tower friend or be sure to put it on your wish list for the holiday! Please check to see if your funds will really go directly to a group or organization that provides work at a fire tower. An example, the book, Finding the Blaze, is perfect for children and is one that I utilize in our outreach programs to schools. Many other books can be found on our website: <https://nysffla.org/books.html>

**Bramley:** On October 17<sup>th</sup>, for the first time since 1975, the Bramley Mt. Fire Tower could once again be seen above the trees! The work has continued since then and only the final minor details need to be completed. Local inspections will need to be completed following that and hopefully before long, the public can once again climb this tower!

**Berry Hill:** <https://www.evesun.com/news/stories/2024-10-14/41305/Community+Spotlight:+Berry+Hill+Fire+Tower?>

## HISTORY

Rensselaer County once had two towers, Dickinson Hill and Number Seven Hill to watch over the county and make quick stops on any fires. The City of Troy provided \$1,000 to build the tower in 1924. It was a standard Aeromotor LS40 model.

Much has been written about Dickinson Hill Observer Helen Ellett. You can read about her career in the book entitled "I Remember When: The Untold Story of Helen Ellett", written by Randy Kneer. But there were in fact 10 Observers who served at the tower, 6 of whom were women. Mrs. Elsie Simmons served from Sept 11<sup>th</sup> to Oct 31<sup>st</sup> of 1942, Helen from 1943 to 1952 and again from 1959 to 1965, Geraldine Lewis served in April and May of 1955, Mrs. Thyra O'Brien from June of 1955 to November of 1956, and Irma Maxon from June of 1965 to November of 1972. As you can see some of these women had a very short tenure and others were there for many years.

The Observer's cabin had a unique stone chimney, the remnants of which can still be seen along the trail in the last 100 yards to the tower.

The tower sits on land owned by the New York State Police who maintain a communications tower adjacent to the fire tower. The Friends of Grafton Lakes State Park restored the tower in 2011. In 2017 the Park built a new fire tower at their Nature Center in the children's playground. There were some adjustments made for young climbers of the tower and it is a great introduction and starting point for families to then go visit Dickinson Hill. The Park and the Friends partnered to make signage all along the trail in 2017. See our October 17th newsletter for more information on this. The Grafton Lakes State Park maintains and cares for the fire tower with assistance from our NYS FFLA Chapter. In addition to maintenance, the FFLA works with the Park to provide a Steward Program (see our first day hike).

It is suggested that the Beebe Hill fire tower was placed where it was in nearby Columbia County to replace the fire spotting duties of Dickinson Hill, but Beebe Hill was placed at its current location in 1964, and was active through 1988. Dickinson Hill remained active through the 1973 season, so I am a bit skeptical of this information. Dickinson Hill and other towers near the Massachusetts border seemed to have been moved around a bit. Was it due to state lines or was it due to excessive fires? I do not know. Photos from the FFLA Paul Hartmann collection.



## AROUND THE COUNTRY

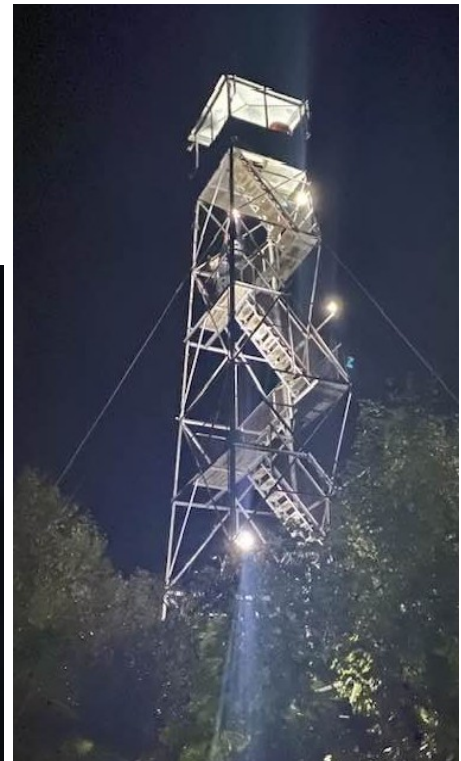
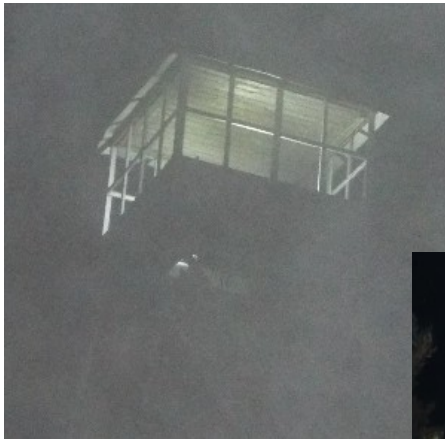
A shout out to our neighbors in New Jersey who have also been dealing with extremely dry conditions and numerous wildfires. May they all stay safe! With an active fire tower system in the state, New Jersey has done a great job of getting out the fires quickly. The Jennings fire understands no borders and has been burning in both states. We wonder if Sterling Forest Fire Tower was in service if this fire would have been spotted a bit sooner, though we greatly appreciate that our neighbors in a NJ tower spotted it when they did! An interesting perspective on the fire: <https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/2024/11/14/jennings-creek-wildfire-nj-how-firefighters-battling-blaze/76230360007>

## STEWARDSHIP

Steward follow up with donation: We greatly appreciate the feedback that our Stewards receive – this came along with a nice donation – “We very much enjoyed our hike to the Kane Mountain Fire Tower. We met volunteers who were so friendly and informative. The gentleman let me snap a picture of his shirt, helping me get this donation to you. Keep up the awesome work! It is so appreciated.”

## LIGHTING 2024 CONTINUED

Azure by T. Ortmeyer, Bald by Adk Aerial & Ground Imagery, Belfry by Brian Collupy



## LIGHTING 2024 CONTINUED

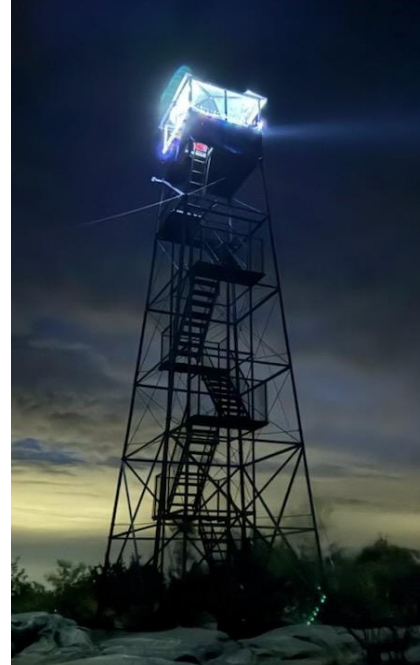
**Balsam Lake by Tom Rankin,**



**Ferncliff by Knick B.,**



**Hadley by Doug Fidler**



## CALENDAR

**December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2024:** Swede Mt Fire Tower and Trail reopens.

**December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2024:** Stillwater Fire Tower and Trail reopen.

**January 1st, 2025:** First Day Hike to Dickinson Hill Fire Tower at Grafton Lakes State Park

**January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2025:** Poke O Moonshine Mammal Tracking with Elizabeth Lee. Join master naturalist Elizabeth, for the highlight hike of the winter! Meet at the Observers Trail (lower) parking at area at 9:30am. Bring questions, and ample food and clothing for 2-4 hours out in the snow. Limit of 10 participants; to sign up, text David Thomas-Train at 802-989-6134.

**August 14<sup>th</sup> through 17<sup>th</sup>, 2025:** Kane Centennial Celebration

Closing up shop for the season was often bitter sweet for the Observer at a fire tower. If the fall was dry, there was always a chance that you would be asked to remain on duty beyond November 1<sup>st</sup>. In a dry year like this year, they would still be there keeping vigil.

Laurie