

CATSKILL LOOKOUTS

A Newsletter of the Catskill Fire Tower Restoration Project

NUMBER 1

SPRING/SUMMER 1997

Fire Tower Restoration Project Underway

The Catskill Fire Tower Restoration Project is underway, and receiving wide-spread public support throughout the region. The project, which was initiated by The Catskill Center for Conservation and Development (CCCD) and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC), is designed to stimulate local community involvement in the restoration of the five fire towers located within the Catskill Park. Presently all five towers -- Red Hill, Balsam Lake, Tremper, Overlook and Hunter -- are closed to the public and in need of repair.

The project began back in February with a meeting in Kingston to discuss the status of the fire towers and what could be done to restore them. Participants at this meeting ranged from small groups concerned for a tower in their neighborhood to regional organizations such as the Forest Fire Lookout Association, the National Historic Lookout Register, Northern Catskill Audubon, and the Catskill Forest Association, to name a few.

Discussion focused on the status of restoration efforts at each site, issues such as liability, costs, fund raising and roles for volunteers, and listings on historic registers. A slide presentation on similar successful projects elsewhere in the State was also given by representatives of the Adirondack Mountain Club.

It was decided at the meeting that the best course of action would be to stimulate interest in the restoration project at the local level. This was to be done by helping in the formation of community groups, made up of local residents and businesspeople, who would be willing to spearhead restoration efforts for a local tower in cooperation with the NYSDEC.

Since February, the NYSDEC has been actively meeting with existing citizen groups, chambers of commerce, business associations, and local government boards, to stimulate interest in the project, and identify key individuals that would be willing to organize restoration efforts in their community. The results of these meetings, including progress to date and the names of the contact people identified for each tower can be found inside this newsletter.

Since the towers are each in varying states of disrepair, once a core group of volunteers for each tower is formed, the next step in the process is to analyze the condition of each tower, determine what work needs to be performed, what materials are needed, and how much money needs to be raised. The NYSDEC, in cooperation with other organizations, has volunteered to help local groups in this exercise.

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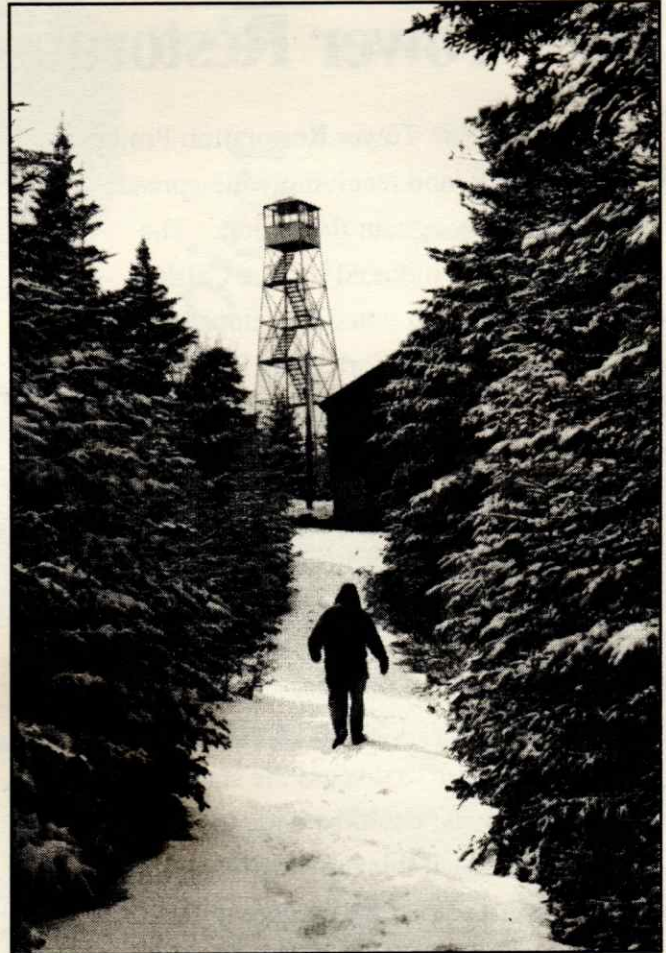


Balsam Lake

**Town of Hardenburgh
Ulster County
Elevation: 3,723 feet**

The first forest fire tower in New York State was erected on Balsam Lake Mountain in 1877. Built of wood by the Balsam Lake Club, it survived until 1901 when lightning struck and burned it. In 1905, it was replaced with another wooden tower. Telephone lines, a small observers cabin and a road to the summit were added in 1909. The first steel tower was erected in 1919, and the present steel tower was built in 1930. The fire tower recently received an engineering review for modifications which, when restored, will allow use by the public, providing unsurpassed views and interpretive information.

The summit of Balsam Lake Mountain is covered in balsam firs -- the fragrant evergreens found on many of the highest mountains in the Catskills. The tower found at the summit is a valuable resource, as it is listed on the National Historic Lookout Register, and has also been nominated for the National Register of Historic Places.



Although the tower is closed to the public, you can hike to the summit of Balsam Lake Mountain by taking the Dry Brook Ridge Trail from the DEC parking lot at the end of Beaver Kill Road to its intersection with the Balsam Lake Mountain trail. You can contact the NYSDEC for trail information at 914-256-3082 or 3083.

Fire Tower Patches Now Available

To raise money to first stabilize and then restore the fire towers of the Catskills, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation and The Catskill Center for Conservation and Development, with the help of citizen groups, private industry and individuals, will be selling patches and T-shirts.

The patches, designed and produced by Stucki Embroidery Works, Inc. of Boiceville, are now available for purchase through the NYSDEC or The Catskill Center for a donation of only \$5.00 each. They are also available at selected local retail and specialty stores throughout the region in those areas where the towers are located (i.e. Hunter/Tannersville, Phoenicia, Woodstock and Margaretville).



The custom-made patches, measuring four inches in diameter, are decorated with a red border, yellow lettering, and proudly display the names of the five towers in red. A limited supply of patches with a dark brown border and lettering are also available.

With a silhouette of the Catskill Mountains in the background, and a silver fire tower in the foreground, the patch is attractively designed.

All of the proceeds from the sale of these patches will be used to help local groups stabilize and restore the fire towers. To order a patch, make a copy of the order form below and mail it with a check made payable to "The Catskill Center" at the address listed below, or call George Profous at the NYSDEC at (914) 256-3082.

Yes! I would like to order a "Catskill Fire Tower Project" patch. Enclosed is my check in the amount of \$ _____ for _____ patches (\$5.00 per patch). I would also like to donate an additional \$ _____ to further restoration efforts. Color Choice: _____ Red _____ Brown _____ No preference

Name: _____
 Organization: _____
 Street Address: _____
 Town/City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____
 Phone: () _____ Fax: () _____ E-mail: _____

Please make checks payable to "The Catskill Center" and mail with this form to:
The Catskill Center for Conservation and Development
 Route 28, Arkville, NY 12406



Hunter Mountain

There has been considerable activity surrounding restoration of the fire tower on Hunter Mountain since the informational meeting in February. On March 13, representatives from NYSDEC met with the Hunter Civic Association, and on April 9, a meeting was held with the Hunter Promotion Association. Both meetings were well attended, and widespread support for the project was received from area businesses, including the Hunter Mountain Ski Bowl. In addition, NYSDEC representatives also attended a meeting of the Greene County Promotion Department and Greene County Tourism Association regarding the fire tower restoration project, and both organizations showed enthusiastic support.

An engineering report on the tower was ordered, and was originally promised to be completed by April 28, but is still pending from the State. However, we are proud to announce that the Hunter Mountain Fire Tower has recently been named to the National Register of Historic Places, and is on the National Historic Lookout Register.

Perhaps the most encouraging development is a two-day meeting that is scheduled for the weekend of June 7th at the Sunshine Valley House in Westkill, NY to discuss the tower. The meeting is being organized by the Forest Fire Lookout Association. If you are interested in receiving a copy of the minutes from this meeting, you can call the NYSDEC. The purpose of the meeting is to discuss the parameters of the restoration work that needs to be done, identify existing conditions and funding possibilities, and to formulate a schedule for commencing restoration work on the tower.

The meeting itself will commence at 10 a.m. on Saturday, June 7th, and will conclude with a hike to the summit on Sunday morning to inspect the site and help make decisions on work efforts.

*If you would like more information on efforts underway to restore the Hunter Mountain Fire Tower, you may contact **Paul Trotta** of the NYSDEC at (607) 652-7365 or write to him c/o the NYSDEC, Jefferson Road, Stamford, NY 12167.*



Red Hill

Following the informational meeting in February, representatives of the NYSDEC met with the Town Board and representatives of the Planning Board in the Town of Denning to answer questions about the Red Hill tower and proposed restoration efforts. At this meeting, concerns were raised about issues such as parking, bus use and responsibility for road maintenance. It appears that all of these concerns can be addressed as details of the restoration efforts are worked out.

In addition, it was suggested that a public meeting be held on the matter at some point in the near future to allow widespread input on the restoration project by local residents. The date and place of such a meeting will be determined by the volunteer group spearheading local restoration efforts.

A group of local volunteers interested in restoring the Red Hill Fire Tower has been in existence for over a year under the direction of George & Helen Elias of Claryville, NY.

A meeting has been scheduled for noon on June 11th at the Grahamsville Library to discuss specific issues, identify problem areas, and set a timetable for future activities, including the scheduling of a public hearing on the matter. Last year, a trail was "roughed in" up to the tower, with the cooperation of the NY-NJ Trail Conference.

*If you would like more information on restoration efforts surrounding the Red Hill Fire Tower, you may contact **George and Helen Elias** at (914) 985-7274.*



Mount Tremper

Since February, organizers have been working to assemble a core group of volunteers in the Phoenicia area to spearhead restoration efforts of the tower on Tremper Mountain. To this end, a meeting was arranged on March 17th with the Phoenicia Business Association to discuss tower restoration and linkages to the downtown business area. There was a great deal of interest expressed at this meeting, and a steering committee has been formed under the direction of Dana Dorrity, a local businesswoman and owner of the Phlebus Book Shop in Phoenicia. Currently, efforts are underway by this committee to connect the hamlet of Phoenicia with the fire tower via the development of a hiking trail with the assistance of the NYSDEC. The tower has also recently been nominated to the National Historic Lookout Register.

*For more information about the Mount Tremper tower, or future meeting dates, please contact **Dana Dorrity** at 914-688-2744, or write to her at PO Box 495, Phoenicia, NY 12464.*



Overlook Mountain

The fire tower at the summit of Overlook Mountain is part of the *Overlook Wild Forest Unit Management Plan* currently being prepared by the NYSDEC. This plan will be completed by the end of the year, and has been the subject of public meetings within the past few months. Positive support for restoration efforts was expressed at the public scoping sessions held earlier this year. In addition, letters have been sent to the local Chambers of Commerce in the area, but we are still trying to identify a core group of interested individuals willing to organize local restoration efforts. An engineering study was requested on the tower in March, and that report is still pending. The tower was also recently nominated to the National Historic Lookout Register.

*If you would like more information on the Overlook Mountain Fire Tower, or would like to help organize local restoration efforts, you may contact **George Profous** of the NYSDEC at (914) 256-3082 or write to him c/o the NYSDEC, 21 South Putt Corners Road, New Paltz, NY 12561.*



Balsam Lake

A local group of volunteers has expressed interest in undertaking restoration efforts, under the leadership of Karen Harris, a local resident and businesswoman. An initial meeting to discuss the restoration project will be scheduled in the near future. In the meantime, a letter was received from a local landowner expressing concerns and ideas regarding the tower and its possible restoration, for which a reply was promptly returned.

On a related note, an informational kiosk will be installed in the Village of Margaretville within the next month by the NYSDEC. The kiosk will contain information on the Margaretville area, and will include information on the Dry Brook Ridge Trail that goes up to the fire tower. In addition, the NYSDEC will also be installing signage off of Route 28 indicating the location of the trail head. We are hopeful that this will mark the beginning of a process where downtowns throughout the Catskills will be linked to neighboring fire towers.

*If you would like more information on restoration efforts surrounding the Balsam Lake Fire Tower, you may contact **Karen Harris** at (914) 586-1994 by leaving a message on her voice mail.*

On behalf of those of us involved in organizing The Catskill Fire Tower Restoration Project, I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who called in to show their support by placing their name on our mailing list. We received dozens of calls from people who heard about this project through the local press, and we now have a mailing list of over 100 interested individuals throughout the region.

- Helen Budrock, CCCD
- George Profous, NYSDEC

Project Underway... (cont. from page 1)

Once a fundraising goal is set based on the materials needed, it is up to each community group to raise funds and/or solicit donated materials for the actual restoration work (with help from the NYSDEC and/or CCCD if needed). This could be done through a variety of fundraising activities, including individual donations, special events, raffles, etc.

To supplement local fundraising efforts, the project organizers will also be selling patches and T-shirts. Fire tower patches are now available for purchase through the NYSDEC and The Catskill Center, and are available in selected stores. It is anticipated that T-shirts will be available for purchase by the end of the summer as well. All of the proceeds from the sale of patches and T-shirts will be used for tower stabilization and maintenance.

Once fundraising goals are met, and there is solid local support, a work permit is issued by the NYSDEC, materials can be purchased, and volunteer labor mobilized to begin the actual restoration work. The Forest Fire Lookout Association has also expressed interest in working with local groups and the NYSDEC during the restoration phase, as they have considerable expertise in this arena, and an existing network of volunteers.

Should you have any questions or would like more information on The Catskill Fire Tower Restoration Project, contact Helen Budrock at The Catskill Center (914-586-2611) or George Profous at the NYSDEC (914-256-3082).

Fire Tower Lecture Series Announced

A four-part lecture series on the fire towers in the Catskills will be held this summer at the Belleayre Mountain Ski Center in Highmount. The second annual series, which is free and open to the public, is co-sponsored by Purple Mountain Press, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation and The Catskill Center. Each lecture will be held in the Discovery (Lower) Lodge at Belleayre beginning at 2:00 p.m. on the following days:

SUNDAY, JUNE 8

■ FOREST FIRES AND THE CATSKILLS

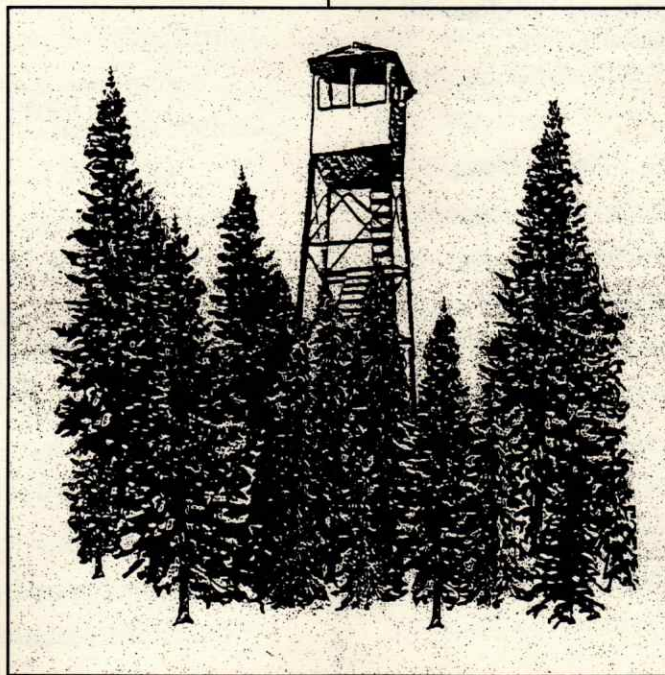
Slide lecture by Dr. Michael Kudish

Dr. Kudish is the foremost authority on the Catskill forest and the author of a forthcoming book on the subject.

SUNDAY, JULY 13

■ MIKE TODD DAY

A chance to trade stories about the Catskills' most famous fire observer and folk character; coincides with the new printing of *A Catskill Woodsman: Mike Todd's Story* by Norman Studer.



SUNDAY, JULY 27

■ FIRE TOWERS PAST AND PRESENT

Slide lecture by Marty Podskotch

Mr. Podskotch, a teacher at the Delaware Academy, has spent years studying and photographing fire towers. He is also the author of a forthcoming monograph on the subject.

SUNDAY, AUGUST 24

■ A FUTURE FOR FIRE TOWERS

Slide lecture by Jack Freeman and Jim Briggs

This slide lecture by Jack Freeman of the Adirondack Mountain Club and Jim Briggs of Cornell Cooperative Extension will profile successful restoration efforts for

several fire towers in the Adirondacks.

Representatives of the NYSDEC and The Catskill Center will also be on hand to talk about the future of the fire towers in the Catskills, and the status of ongoing restoration efforts.

For more information on this lecture series, call the NYSDEC at (914) 254-5600.