



**Forest Fire Lookout Association
New York State Chapter
January 2022**

As we move forward in 2022, this seems like a good time to look back on the gifts of 2021. Yes, despite the pandemic there were many gifts in our fire tower world! January is always the month when each state chapter produces their annual report and we hold the Annual meeting of the FFLA Board of Directors. As I put together the facts and figures for 2021, I was truly amazed at all that we were able to accomplish. The full report can be seen on the web page: <http://ffla.org/chapter-reports.html> but I will highlight a few things here.

Our membership has continued to grow and for that I am very, very grateful! The first year I submitted a report was in 2015 and we had 42 members. This year we had 121 and we have had 6 more since the first of the year! Thank you all so much for your support! Our membership is our strength and each of you is making the Chapter stronger.

We continue to provide information and support to our membership and Friends groups throughout the state via our Facebook page and this newsletter. Those numbers have continued to grow as well.

As you continue to scroll through the report you will read about individual work projects that we did with your help through hands-on assistance or monetary support. We also saw 2 fire towers reopen to the public, Swede and Berry Hill! Looking ahead, we expect to see more fire towers open in 2022 and several work projects will be available to choose from. Our very successful Lighting of the Fire Tower Event was wonderful again this year and we hope to improve upon that in 2022 with more participants and community connections. The National FFLA may consider participating this year!

We always like to take the time to look at what we can improve upon as we go forward. During our annual meeting, it is very helpful to hear about the challenges that other state chapters face and to hear about their successes as well. Of course many chapters in the country discussed actual fire spotting activities and rental activities. We do not have either of those in our state. But many other chapters are experiencing the same type of increase in outdoor recreation that we have in New York. Other chapters reported on their work projects and unfortunately on some losses to wildfires. Take a few minutes to read their chapter reports on the web page. They are very informative.

One area of concern that has come up is that small group and individual Facebook pages are being created and they leave our national and state organizations out of the mix. I have seen this happening and do look at it as a challenge. One thing I can do better is simply connecting with these groups who obviously love fire towers. Maybe they don't know about our organization and its love of fire towers. If you know of one of these types of groups, please let me know. I would love to connect with them.

A major occurrence nationwide since our last newsletter was the devastating fire that occurred in Colorado. The ferocity and speed of this fire was remarkable. It also came at a time that is not often thought of as dangerous. There was loss of life and there was a tremendous loss of homes and businesses. Our thoughts and prayers go to all involved.

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/colorado-wildfire-caused-513-million-in-damage-officials-say>

As we wrap up the events of the past year, we do so with a fond farewell to our FFLA Chairman, Keith Argow. In 2016 our state chapter hosted the northeastern conference in Keene Valley. I was a real “newbie” just starting as the Director a few years before. One of the highlights of the conference for me was going to be the opportunity to meet many of our members and other State Directors and Administrators in person. While I had had many phone conversations with Keith, I had never met him. On one hand, I looked forward to meeting him, on the other I was quite intimidated to be meeting the National Chairman. Our initial meeting was actually quite a quiet affair. He flew into Albany and I was driving from the Hudson Valley, so we planned to meet at the Cornell Hill Fire Tower en route to Keene Valley.

As it turned out, I need not have been intimidated at all. This kind and gentle man was not the least bit intimidating. His love of fire towers was evident from the moment he saw the Cornell Hill Tower. His energy, his recommendations, his experience, and his genuine warmth led all of us through the entire conference weekend! He was as pleased to see old friends and make new friends as I was. Whether relaxing around the campfire or during conference presentations, Keith was a pleasant force of enthusiasm! He embraced both tradition and moving forward (at his suggestion, we added the pigeon release to our conference trip to Belfry, what a mix of old and new!).

Keith has been Chairman for the last 22 years and leaves us with some wonderful words in his last On the Lookout column in the Lookout Network “As for me, you can be sure I will continue to support FFLA any way I can, it's in my blood. At 85, my concentration is following my body out to pasture, but as long as Lou and I can maintain good health, I feel blessed. Right now, the opportunities for FFLA to grow and serve are better than any time I can remember. I look forward to seeing many of you when FFLA can again hold face to face to meetings. Until then, remember that God never takes away those days when we work on fire lookouts!”

We will miss you Keith! We thank you for always being enthusiastic and supportive, for sharing your joy of fire tower lookouts and their unique histories, your expertise, support, and guidance as we move toward the future. We will miss you greatly! I share this favorite photo of Keith at Belfry from our 2016 conference.



At the National Conference a new Board Chairman was voted into office, Brad Eels. Brad had been our Archivist and Historian, and while resigning from that position, he agreed to step forward as Chairman. Brad had these words to say about Keith: “You have faithfully guided FFLA for so long and so well. I only hope that we can honor your commitment by moving FFLA forward and expanding its efforts. I believe our future is bright and filled with opportunity.” I look forward to working with Brad.

Check out the photo that won this month's Facebook contest. do not vote on these monthly contests as it is about what our members and followers like, not what I like. In the case of this month's winning photo, I simply fell in love and if I could have voted, I would have! I just love the aspect of the photo. Congratulations to Lori Ann who seemed to somehow capture the vastness of the view from a fire tower, the all encompassing opportunity that one has to observe and protect the community and forest all around them. Lori Ann took this photo from Overlook Mountain Fire Tower in January of 2021. Her photo is the cover photo for our Facebook page until February 10th. Thank you to all who continue to participate in this fun and positive monthly endeavor!



Around the State

Sterling Forest: Back in 2015 a work project was underway to do restoration at Sterling Forest Fire Tower. The goal was to open the fire tower to the public and having a steward presence for educational and historical interpretation. Susan Serico immediately took the helm of the steward project at Sterling Forest. She sent along numbers for this past year: The tower was open 35 days, where 16 volunteer stewards greeted over 800 visitors! What a way to save a tower, provide the historical information to the visiting public and to continue to educate the visiting public as Fire Tower Observer's once did! Thank you to Susan and all involved!

Poke O Moonshine: Poke O is continuing their winter series with opportunities to explore the area around the fire tower trails and see what animals visit there and to see future possibilities too! A great way to spend a winter day – see their web page for more info: <https://www.pokeomoonshine.org/>

Friends of Mt. Arab: It was with great pleasure that I opened the mail box and found the Friends of Mount Arab 2021 Newsletter. I knew it was coming, having already seen a photo on Facebook of the group sitting around the Board Chairman's home with masks on, folding and preparing the mailing. That is just one of the small things that volunteer groups do on a routine basis. Lots of news is contained in the newsletter about their stewards, accomplishments of volunteers, donors, and more. Thanks so much for all you do!

Stillwater: Stillwater Fire Tower reopened on December 21st for the season. We extend our thanks to retired Forest Ranger Gary Lee for getting out that day. In order to be sure the trail is clear for visitors on the reopening date and to make sure the fire tower fared well during the annual closure, Gary got there first thing and took care of the work. Thank you Gary! You can read about it here in his weekly column: <https://www.viewarts.org/news/new-blog-post-14/>

Calendar

Saturday, January 22: Snowshoe Mammal Tracking with naturalist/outdoor educator Elizabeth Lee. Meet at 9:30am at the Observers trailhead. Be ready for 2-3 hours in the cold, following and identifying mammal tracks in the snow. In cooperation with CATS: champlainareatrails.com. Sign-up required, minimum of 6 participants.

Saturday, January 29: Back Country Ski Exploration. Meet at the Observers trailhead at 9:30am to explore the trails on the west side of Poke-O. David Thomas-Train will lead this trip for skiers with at least intermediate skills, to manage some steep, narrow terrain. Arduous, 3-4 hours. In cooperation with CATS: champlainareatrails.com.

May 2022: Work on Blue Mountain

May 2022: Work on Buck Mountain****

Saturday, September 17: Sterling Forest Celebration

****An exciting project will be happening as soon as the weather allows in the spring. We will be working with a fire tower contractor and local municipalities to assist them in their plan to reopen the Buck Mt Fire Tower in the spring. If you can lend a hand it would be wonderful! Remember this area is private property and is not yet open! Please respect the private property and do not do anything to jeopardize the reopening plan.

Our Fourth FFLA Affiliate is the Kent Conservation Foundation who restored the Nimham Fire tower in the Town of Kent. The Conservation Advisory Committee or CAC Chair, is Bill Volckmann. The structure on Nimham Mt. is an 82' 6" International Derrick tower Model 1937 with a 7' x 7' metal cab was erected by CCC Camp P-135, Peekskill in 1940. The tower was first staffed in 1941 reporting 73 fires and 266 visitors. Nimham Tower can be found about 3 miles northwest of Carmel in the Nimham Mt. State Forest. The tower ceased operation at the end of the 1988 season and was officially closed in early 1989 when the Department of Environmental Conservation determined that fire towers were no longer effective and decided to phase them out of service. In 1994, the Observer's cabin was burned. The Nimham fire tower is on the NHLR, US #314 and NY # 21. The summit area has been used as a radio repeater site for several years.

There has been some controversy over the name of this tower and site, once named Ninham. It is believed it was named after Chief Daniel Nimham of the Wappingers tribe and that correction has now been made. The fire tower is one of the few that bears the manufactureres tag for the International Derrick Company.

Local volunteers were organized by the Town of Kent in the mid 1990's. Restoration began and was completed in 2005 sans a fire tower roof. The official dedication and reopening occurred on July 24, 2005.

****photo

Catskill Fire Tower Project: The release of the Catskill Advisory Group (CAG) report comes on the heels of the newly announced Catskill Fire Tower Challenge and involves numerous contradictions. Details on the NYSDEC Challenge can be found here: <https://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/76620.html>

The first three paragraphs of the report note the increase in users and the impact it has had: *The Catskill Strategic Planning Advisory Group (CAG) appreciates the opportunity to provide this interim report on balancing the increasing recreational use of the Catskill Park with the protection of our natural resources.....Visitor use in the Catskill Park, as measured by trail register data, increased at a steady 9 percent over the last decade and spiked during the Covid pandemic in 2020. The spike during Covid exacerbated an already existing capacity issue for the Park and community infrastructure and facilities.....but inevitably put pressure on many parts of the cherished natural resources in the*



Park, including, but not limited to, trailheads and trails, lakes and streams, and other recreational facilities.....Public use continues to increase in the Park, in all four seasons and every day of the week, not just on weekends and holidays. This higher and growing volume of use, similar to trends nationwide, should be anticipated to continue for years to comewhile ensuring the experience of using the Park is welcoming, accessible, and inclusive. This interim report captures components

of a larger, long-term strategic framework forthcoming next year. Access to public recreation, including trails, campgrounds, parking, water resources, and associated recreation facilities, is vital to the State's recovery during and after the pandemic, and should receive increased financial investment. The CAG maintains that protecting the natural resources and the wild forest character of the Catskills region is essential to the economic well-being of the region's communities, and of the entire State.

One of the recommendations of the CAG is to *Educate all users of the Catskill Park....Promote fire towers as alternative destinations that provide recreational and educational opportunities. The trails leading to the fire towers are often old roads that are already hardened, so impacts to surrounding natural resource are limited, there are staff and/or volunteers to greet the public at fire towers, and the structures are already on the mountain tops. The trails leading to fire towers are not necessarily "old roads that are already hardened so impacts to surrounding natural resources are limited". Rather many are actual foot trails and many of the old roads haven't seen maintenance since the 1970's when fire towers were decommissioned. Many of the foot trails have not had a maintainer in many years and erosion of the trails is deep and significant. The new red spur trail to Overlook consistently has water running down it, across it, and standing in it. The Becker Hollow trail to Hunter is deeply eroded and very steep. Balsam Lake Fire Tower trail that follows the old Observer's road is seeing significant impact from poor drainage and NYSDEC ATV use.*



The fire towers are not new destinations and have seen dramatic increases in usage like the rest of the park. The increase in use that already exists has caused natural resource deterioration (see photos above) and continues to cause impact on the recreational facilities themselves. Many of the fire towers have not had any upgrades since the inception of the Catskill Fire Tower Project in the 1990's. That is more than 20 plus years of exposure to the elements and visitor impacts. Several structures are not in a good state of repair.

One of the top 5 goals established by the CAG is in regards to parking management. The existing fire tower parking areas already overflow onto road sides creating safety hazards for our neighbors as emergency vehicles cannot pass through secondary roadways due to overflow parking. Several of the parking areas on seasonal limited use roads are not plowed in the winter, creating an even greater need for parking spots on already overburdened parking areas. No new parking strategies were put in place prior to the announcement of the Catskill Fire Tower challenge. Yet parking is addressed in the CAG report as a need to - *“Use tools to encourage use of a broader diversity of trails, reducing pressure on these hotspots.”* Again, the Catskill Fire Tower challenge is encouraging more people to go to already identified hot spots (fire towers) with no management plans or investment for the parking areas. It **will not reduce** the pressure on these already overflowing parking areas.

In a recent Adirondack Almanac article, authored by Melissa Hart, Retired Forest Ranger Lou Curth shared some wonderful insights:

“Keep enjoying those family outings Melissa. The memories will be precious, and you’ll get to keep on enjoying them over and over. Back when the fire towers were our eyes and ears, rangers made multiple trips up the same old mountains – usually carrying a pack basket full of dry cell batteries or tools. It was the rangers ritual of fire season. We opened the towers every spring and closed them again every the fall, with many other trips in-between. In retrospect, I guess these trips up picturesque mountains in the company of some very memorable fire tower observers and other rangers, were, indeed, more of a “busman’s holiday” rather than a work detail.

Like you Melissa, the late Barbara McMartin was always asking people about their favorite places for her guide book series. When she asked me, I probably told her, reluctantly, that mine was Crane Mountain, knowing that her efforts would bring even more visitor pressure to the mountain. That is still our dilemma; How can we share these wonderful places for ever more visitors to enjoy, who will, in turn, help preserve them for future generations, without loving them to destruction?”

JB made several comments - *“Wise man, Mr. Curth! How can we share these places and also preserve them? That is the hardest question of all to answer. Perhaps there is no conventional answer.”* JB made a comment that I wholly agree with *“Hiking challenges are a symptom of the disease of modern hiking in general—an expeditious passing through that engenders competitiveness, encourages overuse and prevents us from building the lasting connections that Americans will need to restore the fundamental land ethic.”*

My thoughts are that New York State should NOT be providing this new hiking challenge which will only cause continued overuse of our fire towers and the natural resources they once protected. What do you think? I would love to hear from you and will publish answers in next months newsletter.

To read the entire CAG report visit:

https://www.dec.ny.gov/docs/lands_forests_pdf/caginterimreport.pdf

Plans for 2022

I would really like to have some volunteers who are willing to not only assist with a work project, but also volunteers who might be able to help with planning behind the scenes, keeping up with our Facebook page and web page. Every little bit helps out there.

*** We are still hoping to get something done with the Vandewhacker Observer's cabin. We have a VSA application pending with the NYSDEC and support from them and the local Historical Society. We would love to see this project move forward in 2022 and could use **YOU** and your expertise.

***Ongoing work at Blue Mt will include a few days set aside for volunteers to finish up any ongoing projects and maintain all of the good work that has been done to date. If time allows, we will also do some trail work. **YOU** will love the opportunity to work on this project!

***Kane Mt Fire Tower is a location we have spent a lot of time at in the last few years, keeping the graffiti at bay and the work on the Observer's cabin have been great accomplishments. In 2022 we would like to continue this work and begin having a steward presence there too! We will need people like **YOU** who care to step up become a steward.

***Buck Mt Fire Tower – see the calendar for more on this project. We would like to have volunteers who will help us with both trail work and tower restoration work so that this historical tower can be reopened to the visiting public! I am guessing **YOU** would love to be part of this opportunity!

***Jackie Jones Fire Tower – long time followers may remember that the state chapter did a multi weekend restoration project here in 2018 in partnership with the Park and with Team Rubicon. Since then, vandals have wreaked havoc on the fire tower work and it is now off limits to the visiting public. We are in discussions with the Park about this and would like to begin a robust Steward program there, allowing the fire tower to be open when the stewards are present. We need **YOU** to make this happen.

***In 2022, we sincerely hope the Village of Speculator will be the new home of the historical Makomis Fire Tower. This will be an excellent opportunity for volunteers to lend a hand at a front country site during the restoration process. We need **YOU** to help out.

***Bramley and Rock Rift in the Catskills are making progress toward their goals of getting towers back up and restored on those mountains. If it all comes together in 2022, don't **YOU** want to be part of making that happen?

*** ongoing trailwork at Lyon Mt

***ongoing trailwork at Swede

***Pillsbury – if the radio equipment gets moved, we will be needing to complete work in the fire tower cab and then it can be reopened to the public!

If **YOU** could lend a hand on just one project – look what we could accomplish in just 2022 alone!

Thank you for considering!

Laurie Rankin, Director NYS Chapter FFLA www.nysffla.org