

# FIRE AT ROOSA GAP

By DEC Forest Ranger Scott Sabo with Bernadette LaManna  
Photos by DEC unless otherwise noted

Every year as warmer temperatures herald the beginning of spring, thoughts turn to outdoor activities: picnics, barbecues, and...brushfires?

Spring cleaning often includes yardwork, tidying up what winter's receding snows have left behind: twigs, leaves and occasional branches. Somehow, leaves reappear even after last autumn's raking. You can compost them or bag them, but remember—burning brush or debris is prohibited from mid-March through mid-May, the high-risk fire season.

In NYS, open burning is the largest single cause of spring wildfires—uncontrolled fires that spread through vegetation. Because wildfires affect everyone, residential outdoor burning during the high-risk season has been prohibited since 2009. Consequently, the average number of spring fires per year

decreased by more than 40 percent. Even during that decline, however, a wildfire covering nearly 1,000 acres burned through Long Island's Central Pine Barrens, destroying several homes and a fire engine.

DEC's Division of Forest Protection (forest rangers) is New York's lead agency for wildfire mitigation, but the role that homeowners play in preventing fires is even greater. According to data from 1988 through 2012, humans caused 95% of wildfires in the state, and debris burning accounted for 35% of those fires.

Wildland fire management, including prevention and suppression, has been a traditional role of forest rangers, who were originally known as fire wardens. Rangers are educated and equipped for immediate response to wildfire outbreaks. The following is Forest Ranger Scott Sabo's personal account of a spring 2015 wildfire in Ulster County.



Rangers perform a back burn to halt the fire's spread.

**Fuel, weather and topography:** these three elements comprise the wildland fire “triangle” and dictate fire behavior. Early in my wildland firefighting career, I learned that when extremes of these elements meet, I’d have my hands full trying to control the resulting fire.

On Sunday, May 3, 2015 in DEC Region 3, the three elements for a wildfire aligned. Early that day, I heard a few rangers calling dispatch to let them know they were “on scene” of a wildfire near Roosa Gap State Forest in Sullivan County. Their tone and word choices told me serious work lay ahead. “Upslope running fire to the north” and “Get engines to Fire Tower Road for structure protection” particularly stood out. I also learned that a couple of other rangers located between me and the fire had already been dispatched to help.

Experienced and well-trained rangers were on the Roosa Gap fire, and dedicated fire departments with water tankers were in position to protect houses. Given the weather forecast, fuel, topography and size of the fire, it seemed the situation was well in hand.

As I headed home, I planned to pack a bag with everything I’d need for a night’s work on the fire line just in case. Pulling into the driveway, I received a call from my captain and learned I’d be packing even faster than I’d thought.

Things happen very quickly where fire’s concerned, and what had begun as nothing more than a stubborn leaf fire had suddenly become a raging inferno, with 15-foot-high flames. The fire had escalated soon after an unexpected but steady 8-10 mph wind began blowing from the west.

I drove to the fire outside my assigned patrol area; it was easy to locate because of the large column of smoke rising several thousand feet. I’ve seen some impressive smoke columns from fires I’ve worked in Montana, Wyoming, California and Wash-

ington. This column wasn’t quite as big as those, but it was the biggest I’d ever seen in New York!

When I arrived, firefighters were trying to keep flames from jumping a narrow road and patrolling for spot fires across the way. Water engines (trucks) were stationed in backyards and driveways to protect houses, and everyone was busy. There wasn’t much need for me there; my work was in the woods.

After reaching the command post, I was assigned to scout the fire’s north flank. The west wind had pushed the fire east, up slope and over the ridge, where it had jumped Fire Tower Road north of the last residence. Volunteer fire departments had done great work—no one had been injured, and no structures had been lost. A crew of firefighters from Wurtsboro was working uphill, trying to dig a line around the fire. It was burning slowly on the side of the hill instead of running up it.



Heavy equipment was brought in to construct a control line.



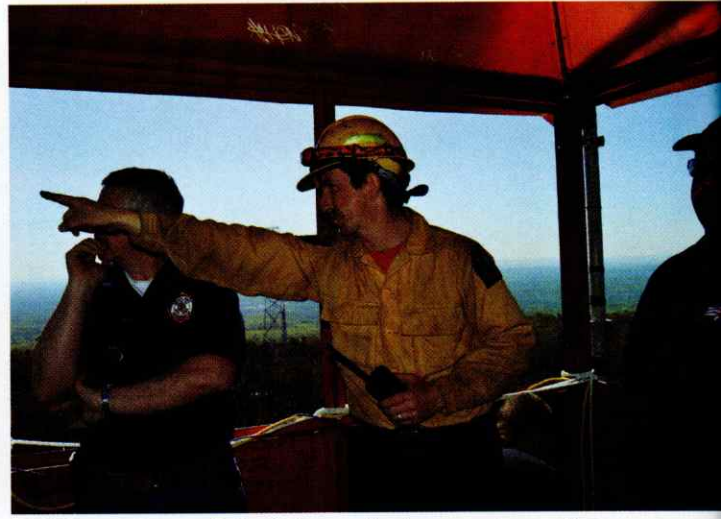
I requested another crew, and a ranger and firefighters from Port Jervis quickly assembled and followed me wherever I went, flagging areas with surveyor's tape. Everything was coming together, but as I neared the top of the ridge, I saw five-foot flames moving through scrub oaks. There was no way to stop the fire due to the intense heat, but, worse, I couldn't find a safe place for crews to get ahead of it. Consequently, crews, Utility Task Vehicles (UTVs) with water tanks, DEC fire wardens and I dug a line from the top of the ridge down, trying to prevent the fire from reaching more fuel. Occasionally the fire torched full-grown pitch pines, and flames shot 80 feet upward. We stationed a fire warden in the Roosa Gap fire tower as a lookout and to help direct our movements in relation to the fire. Even with the aid of water dropped from the NY State Police helicopter, we couldn't punch through the dense forest and get around the fire before nightfall.

Early the following morning, several of us kept an eye on the fire from the fire tower. Volunteer fire departments prepared their equipment for another run, and rangers began working on logistics for the day's activities.

Mike Wentland Photography



Although the fire threatened several residences, none were lost.



DEC Forest Ranger Robert Mecus directs ground operations from a fire tower in the 'Gunks.

On Monday, May 4, we faced another challenge: the fire had progressed north and moved a few hundred yards along the top of the ridge. Ranger-led crews were accessing the west flank, lower on the ridge off Route 209, while other rangers and crews were headed north, off Old Mountain Road. Bulldozers cut a wide line ahead of the flames—a task that would have been impossible to complete in time with hand crews. In the fire tower, I served as a lookout for crews in my area and provided weather readings every hour.

The wind was relentless, changing direction unexpectedly and increasing in speed as well. At sunrise, sustained winds of 16-18 mph had begun blowing from the north. At 11 AM, it suddenly veered and started coming from the west, pushing the fire to the very top of the ridge. Within 20 minutes, the wind began blowing from the north again, but it increased to 25-30 mph and remained at that velocity for the rest of the day.

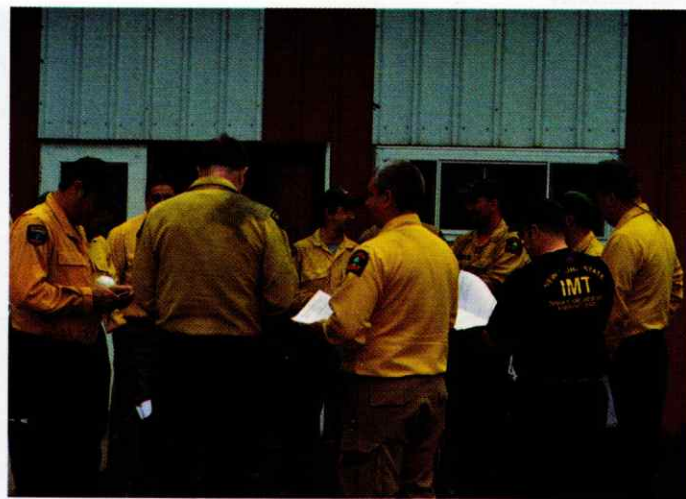
As a large black smoke column appeared and rose thousands of feet, it made me wonder whether I was really in New York. I watched in disbelief as the 130-foot wind-blown flames scorched entire stands of trees and began threatening my crew and equipment. I like to think that I calmly and professionally radioed to tell them to return to the safety zone created earlier by the 'dozer. But later they joked that I was yelling loud enough to be heard at Old Mountain Road, which was two miles away.

This type of fire behavior is called a "blow up," and everyone who worked on that fire or who lives in the area would tell you that's exactly what the fire did—blow up. Within 30 minutes, it had pushed north nearly a mile and a half, all the way to Ulster County Route 52!

The following days became a blur of early mornings and late nights. They included air tankers dropping 800 gallons of water to slow the fire and Black Hawk helicopters with collapsible buckets knocking flames down in areas difficult to reach by those on the ground. Firefighters used small controlled burns or



Extending thousands of feet into the air, the smoke plume was visible for miles.



Rangers, including Praczkajlo, DiCintio, Mecus, Carpenter, Slade, Jackson, and Meade, provide the morning operational briefing at the Incident Command Post.

“back burns” near homes to prevent uncontrolled wildfire from getting too near each residence.

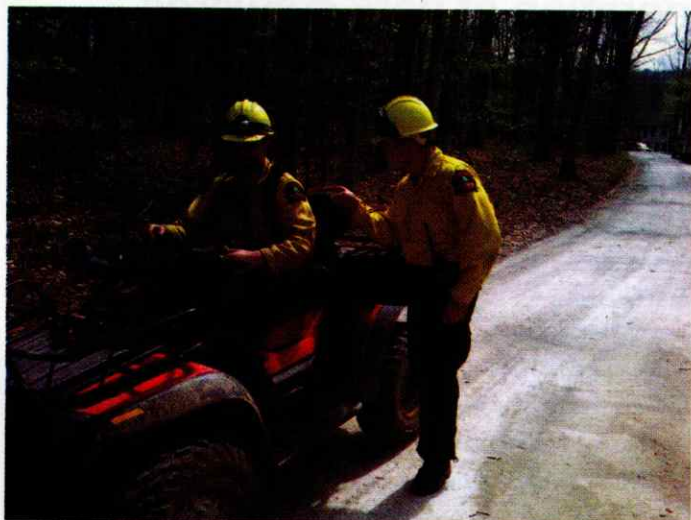
For many of us, this was among the biggest and most complex fires we’d seen in New York. At times, nearly every ranger from Region 3 was working the fire, as were rangers from five of DEC’s eight other regions. The State Incident Management Team, NYS Police Aviation, NYSDOT, Albany Pine Bush crews, Mohonk Preserve staff and air tankers from New Brunswick, Canada, all pitched in. Countless volunteer firefighters and companies from

many counties responded without hesitation to a situation completely outside their normal experience. After nearly a week, and at great expense of time and resources, we finally contained the fire. Not a single residence was burned, and no one was killed. A few injuries occurred on the fire line, but everyone survived.

Although we averted tragedy, one careless and illegal act—a backyard open burn—had jeopardized the safety of citizens, emergency responders and nearly 100 homes for almost a week. Many responders like me are consoled by memories of the fellowship and support received at the time. But the fact remains that everyone affected also will remember this potentially deadly incident was completely avoidable. All it would have taken was some thought and restraint.

Epilogue: By mid-May 2015, 110 fires had burned roughly 3,600 acres in Sullivan and Ulster counties. Because dry conditions persisted, DEC extended the outdoor burn ban beyond the usual May 14<sup>th</sup> cutoff date.

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Forest Rangers Slade and Krefl

