

Wolf Mountain Lookout Tower

The first fire detection structure on Wolf Ridge was a tree lookout built on the south side of Forest Road 5840. The construction date of this tree lookout is unknown, but it was manned as early as 1921 and photographed in 1923. Remnants of this tree lookout can still be seen today. In 1921, directions in the Ochoco National Forest Fire Plan to the fire guard manning this tree lookout were:

“Occupy platform tree from 9:00 AM until 6:00 PM, except for noon hour 1:00 PM to 2:00 PM. Camp on extreme top of mountain. On the job all day and every day, Sundays and holidays included. Report all fires at once to the forest officer in whose district the fire is located, then as soon as possible to the forest supervisor. Keep a record of every fire on form D-6 lookout report.”

In July and August of 1926, a 50' lookout tower was completed on Wolf Ridge. It was built by Charles Congleton, first District Ranger for Paulina, and George Roba and Bert Tolladay, Forest Service summer employees. The cage on top of the tower was completely glassed in. That same year, a 16' by 18' cabin was built inside the base of the tower. This cabin had a living room, kitchen, pantry, and a small storeroom. Water had to be hauled to the tower and cabin, but each structure was furnished with an Osborne fire-finder (and a telephone after 1927). During the summer of 1927, a lightning cage was constructed on the tower. In 1934, a 14' x 16' garage was constructed on site near the cabin and tower.

In June of 1927, a new #9 D-6 standard grounded telephone line was put in between the new lookout tower and the Rager Ranger Station, a distance of 13.5 miles. This was the last link between Prineville and the Snow Mountain area (the town of Paulina did not get telephone service until October of 1929). This phone line is still used and maintained today between the tower and the Rager R.S. office.

This tower and the Derr Guard Station, the Spanish Peak lookout tower, and a field phone at Lloyd Springs were all connected on the same telephone line. There was a main switchboard at the Cold Springs Guard Station, and all lines came into that switchboard. If you were at Rager and wanted to call Prineville, you would call Cold Springs, they would connect you to the Ochoco Ranger Station, and they would connect you to Prineville. There was another main line that went straight through from Prineville to Snow Mountain (Allison Guard Station). Sometimes this line got weak and the ranger at Rager would have to repeat messages for Snow Mountain and Prineville.

In October of 1928, a road was completed to the tower from the Mud Springs Guard Station (location of the present Mud Springs Campground). Rangers were beginning to buy vehicles, and roads were replacing trails across the Forest. Before this, the tree lookout and first tower were accessed from the Summit Trail, built in 1908.

During the summer of 1931, a second lookout tree was constructed east of the 1926 tower and north of Forest Road 5840 on the edge of the Black Canyon. This tree tower, known as the East Wolf Mountain Lookout Tree, was built by Russell Chipman, Paulina Ranger District summer employee. He was stationed at this tree tower all summer, and single handedly constructed a crow's nest and ladder in an 80 foot Douglas-fir tree. This tree leans a little and the ladder was constructed so that you are climbing up the side of the tree leaning towards the ground. A stand was constructed in the middle of the open-air crow's nest for the Osborne fire finder. Three guy wires were later added (date unknown) to stabilize the tree lookout. Ten feet from the ground

was a landing constructed against the side of the tree; a ladder was used to reach the landing from the ground. Above the landing, wooden steps ascended another 70' to the crow's nest. A large stone fireplace measuring seven feet wide and five feet high was constructed a short distance from the base of the tree lookout. Approximately twelve feet to the southeast of the fireplace is a rock cairn to mark the junction of three trails to the fireplace, tree tower, and east to a ground level fire detection point. The privy was constructed approximately sixty feet southeast (downhill and downwind) of the cairn. Remnants of this tree lookout still stand east of present-day Forest road 5840-127. This tree tower is now seventy-four years old and withstood the Columbus Day Storm.

In 1939, a Project Work Budget sheet noted that the Paulina Ranger District wanted to build a new lookout tower to replace the 1926 tower, stating:

“Replacement is necessary but can wait pending further information on the ground. Desirable to build tower of sufficient height to get protection coverage for Black Canyon and other blind spots on the South Fork of the John Day.”

Building materials for the present tower (planned above in 1939) were purchased in 1942. Because of World War II and the shortage of personnel in the Forest Service, construction of the new tower had to be delayed. The pre-cut building materials were stored at the Derr Guard Station at Derr Meadows until 1947. This tower still stands north of Forest Road 5840 near the breaks of the Black Canyon. There is a commanding view of the Black Canyon Wilderness Area immediately to the north and east of this tower.

The floor of the present tower is 108 from the ground and supports a 12' by 12' cab. The support beams are creosote-treated sawn timber instead of the steel supports you see on newer Forest Service towers. There were eight towers with sawn timber support beams constructed on the Ochoco National Forest; today only Wolf Mountain and Pisgah still remain. Currently, this tower is manned by a summer employee from June through the first half of October. Information for fires that they spot is sent by radio to the Central Oregon Interagency Dispatch Center in Prineville. Suppression crews and equipment are dispatched to the fire from this main fire information center.