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**SPORTS**  
**Ex-fire lookout is hot destination**



For the first half of this century, manned lookout buildings were the U.S. Forest Service's first line of defense against forest fires. Before being replaced by spotters in airplanes starting about 1950, there was a fire lookout on most high mountaintops across the national forests of the Northwest.

The lookouts came in a variety of shapes and sizes, but unfortunately only a few remain, the rest having been dismantled by the Forest Service. One of the most interesting of the fire lookouts still standing is the 80-foot metal and wood tower atop 4,969-foot Saddleblanket Mountain, a high ridge between the Fall Creek and Willamette River drainages in the Old Cascades west of Eugene.

Despite being just an easy 1.4-mile hike from the main trailhead at Lower Blanket Shelter, you'll have to do quite a bit of driving on logging roads to reach Saddleblanket Mountain. However, because there are two equally good routes available, the trip can easily be made into an enjoyable loop.

The approaches are about equal in length — just over 40 miles — but they differ substantially in scenery. The most interesting, and longest, route is via Jasper.

Drive east of Eugene on the McKenzie River Highway, No. 126, and turn left at the Jasper exit (it's actually 42nd Street). Take this road out of Springfield and follow the signs to Fall Creek. You'll pass the small town of Jasper, as well as numerous small farms. About



Photo by Jayson Jacoby  
**This 80-foot metal and wood tower atop 4,969-foot Saddleblanket Mountain is one of the last of its kind in the Northwest.**

12 miles from Springfield is the Unity covered bridge, which was built in 1936. Turn left immediately after the bridge to the Fall Creek road.

The other approach is more direct, but not quite as scenic. Drive on I-5 south of Eugene to Highway 58, leading to Oakridge. Fifteen miles from the freeway turn left at the sign pointing to Lowell. Cross Lookout Point Reservoir and drive through the small town of Lowell, staying on the Jasper-Lowell road. Three miles from Lowell is the Unity bridge junction, where the road from Springfield comes in.

Follow the Fall Creek road from the bridge, winding above Fall Creek Reservoir. Stay on this road another 12 miles, entering the Willamette National Forest and following beautiful Fall Creek.

About one-half mile from Big Pool campground turn left on Road 1821. Follow this good gravel road uphill three miles

to a four-way intersection. Keep straight ahead, now following road 196. Drive on 196 two miles to another junction, and take road 1824. Another mile on road 1824 leads to the junction with road 142, which is the left (uphill) fork.

Take road 142 for one mile before bearing right onto road 144, which leads another mile to the trailhead. There is a small parking area here, and a small spur trail leads to the Little Blanket Shelter, a primitive wooden structure with room for four or five sleeping bags. There is also a single outhouse adjacent to the parking area.

The trail winds through young Douglas Fir trees, climbing gradually but steadily. About halfway to the top the forest changes to mostly old-growth trees, and as the trail flattens out on top of a ridge wildflowers such as beargrass and rhododendron become more prevalent.

After climbing two switchbacks, views to the west and south open up just before the trail reaches the lookout tower. Although trees restrict much of the view from Saddleblanket Mountain, the tower, which was built in 1933 to replace the previous lookout which consisted of only a small platform connected to several trees, is a worthwhile enough goal. The tower, while appearing solid, is not safe and should not be climbed.

A loop hike can be made if you can arrange a car shuttle, as the trail continues south from the lookout tower another half-mile to road 143, which is a spur road off road 142.

Jayson Jacoby is a sports reporter for the Emerald.

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