

'LET THE FIRE FALL'

AN ENCOUNTER WITH THE EAGLE CREEK INFERNO

By **ROBERT MICHAEL PYLE**
FOR COAST WEEKEND

For almost a century, an event took place in Yosemite called the Firefall.

Every evening in summer, at precisely 9 p.m., one person down in the valley called out, "Let the fire fall!" as another person, way up on Glacier Point, tipped a cauldron of hot embers over the lip of the granite cliff.

The National Park Service ended the practice in 1968, arguing it was an unnatural imposition on the meadows and the walls. But the tourists loved how it resembled a fiery waterfall, and they missed it.

They should have been with me in the Columbia Gorge on Labor Day.

Leaving one evacuation zone to the north, in this parched summer of fire and flood, I drove unwittingly into an even starker inferno.

Teens tossing firecrackers over a basalt cliff near Eagle Creek on the Oregon side had sparked a blaze, of course. Now Interstate 84 was shut down, all its east- and westbound traffic

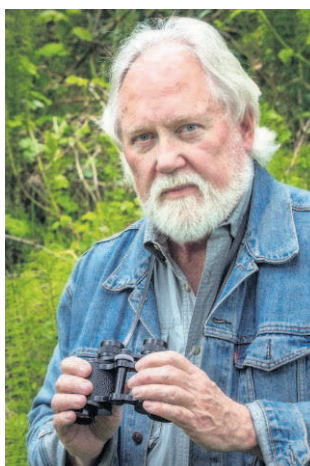


PHOTO BY DAVID LEE MYERS
Robert Michael Pyle

diverted onto little state Highway 14 in Washington for more than sixty miles. The Bridge of the Gods was closed, and both Cascade Locks and Multnomah Falls Lodge were in danger of incineration.

The drive itself was hell, all those trucks and bright lights, speeding and stalled for mile after mile. All that diesel exhaust and forest fire smoke. And who could help but rubberneck, as the opposite shore erupted in crimson tides of flame?

Finally getting off at North Bonneville to soothe



GENNA MARTIN/ASSOCIATED PRESS
A wildfire burns on the Oregon side of the Columbia River Gorge, near Cascade Locks and the Bridge of the Gods, in early September.

my nerves and gas up, I failed at both: The wall of fire just a mile away across the river, the hot wind of ash and cinders and smoke, and all the buzzed and frightened people did nothing to steel my nerves for the next bout of gridlock and race. And the gas pumps had been turned off because of burning brands flung over the

river by exploding trees.

Those exploding trees! I'd read about flare-ups and blow-ups, when violent convection turns trees to tinder and they ignite like giant matches, sending wild red flame high into the sky above ... but to see it, in tree after tree as whole stands were consumed! Or tall trunks would blaze like red-

hot rods, streaking the black slope with pillars of fire.

Standing there, eyes stinging, mouth forgetting to close ... that's when I saw the firefalls. Not one, but many, along the undulating face of the steep peaks across the river, like so many bright yellow ski jumps and orange waterslides, but nothing cool about them.

And here's another thing: When I glassed them, I saw the fire was falling *up* — rising against the mountain face instead of dropping, ignited by falling embers, then blown by hot winds to join the conflagration above. How one small patch of smolder, maybe an acre, grew, grew, then blew up to cover an entire mountainside in minutes! That gave me the hot chills.

Before I left North Bonneville to reenter the river of cars and trucks, a dazed-looking woman walked past, muttering. "I can't stop thinking about the animals," she said. "All those animals ..." And walked on, into the smoke.

Robert Michael Pyle is a writer, biologist and long-time resident of Gray's River. The most recent of his twenty books is "Through a Green Lens: Fifty Years of Writing for Nature." He will be reading from the new, updated edition of his classic "Where Bigfoot Walks: Crossing the Dark Divide" at KALA Gallery on Friday, Oct. 20, the 50th anniversary of the famous Patterson-Gimlin Bigfoot film.

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