

Golden view atop Gold Butte



In this photo taken Oct. 6, fall leaves color the surroundings of the Gold Butte Lookout in the Willamette National Forest north of Detroit. Built in 1934 and active during World War II as a station for spotting Japanese air attacks, Gold Butte was refurbished for public use in 2007 by the Sand Mountain Society. The lookout is so beloved that it's almost impossible to rent unless you start working at it six months in advance.

Zach Urness/Statesman-Journal via AP

Cozy inside a Cascade lookout, watching a storm come in

By **ZACH URNESS**
Statesman Journal

DETROIT — The arrival of a storm is a glorious sight from inside a mountaintop lookout.

Snug within glass windows, you watch dark clouds crawl up the mountains, seep into the valleys and knock on your door with a rattle of wind and rain.

There's a feeling close to guilt as you sit cozy and warm while the rain pours down, just imagining anyone outside trying to set up a tent or sprint back to their car.

Suckers.

The thrill of enjoying a storm — as opposed to trying to escape it — is among the many reasons Oregon's decommissioned fire lookouts are the state's best places to spend a night.

Over the past few years, I've been making an attempt to spend a night in all 20 of Oregon's lookouts. Last week, I finally got the chance to enjoy Gold Butte Lookout north of Detroit, the closest rentable lookout to Salem by far.

Built in 1934 and active during World War II as a station for spotting Japanese air attacks, Gold Butte was refurbished for public use in 2007 by the Sand Mountain Society. The lookout is so beloved that it's almost impossible to rent unless you start working at it six months in advance.

The views from Gold Butte are spectacular even by lookout standards. Every major Cascade peak from Mount Hood to the Three Sisters is visible, and nearby Mount Jefferson is the main attraction.

The cabin is an exact replica of what you'd have found in 1934 and quite spartan. There's a twin bed and cots to sleep up to four, a desk, cabinet, fire-finder and a wood stove. Nothing more.

There's no electricity, and you have to pack in your own water, stove, lantern and food, along with packing out your garbage.

"The main thing people need to remember to bring is extra water — there's none at the lookout, and it's a fairly steep hike," said Josh Weathers, developed sites recreation manager for Willamette National Forest.

The hike into Gold Butte is short but fairly steep, meaning you'll need a big backpack to haul in all your gear.

But once you get settled and take in the view — or, if you're lucky, watch a storm roll in across the mountains — any inconvenience becomes a distant memory.

THE TRIP

Even if Gold Butte is within striking distance of Salem, the journey is by no means simple.

The drive — about two hours from the Capitol City — requires navigating one of the roughest gravel roads in Willamette National Forest, Forest Service Road 4697.

"The last three miles is the worst road many people are ever going to drive," Weathers said. "We recommend a high-clearance vehicle with

something better than standard street tires.

"Also, make sure you have the ability to put on a spare tire."

Some people come just to hike to the lookout, without a reservation to stay overnight. If that's the case, the trek begins at the first green gate you encounter and follows the road and a trail 1.6 miles to the lookout (3.2 miles round-trip) with 800 feet of climb.

If you're staying overnight, you'll have a code to unlock the first green gate and drive to a second gate. From here, it's 0.75 miles to the lookout (1.5 round-trip) with around 400 feet of gain.

The hike follows the road before turning onto a proper trail, which switchbacks uphill to the lookout's perch — its own little island in the sky.

RESTORATION

Gold Butte Lookout looks so much like a classic fire lookout, it would be easy to imagine that it's been sitting atop this peak unchanged since the 1930s.

That's not quite true.

The lookout was staffed for fire watching until around 1972. That included a stint during World War II when people — often a married couple — watched for invading Japanese airplanes.

(The Japanese did make an offensive attempt against Oregon, dropping two incendiary bombs near Brookings on Sept. 9, 1942, with the goal of igniting a forest fire. This being Oregon, and the forest damp, the bombs did little but smolder before being doused. You can hike this spot today on the Japanese Bombing Site Trail No. 1118).

Anyway, while Gold Butte Lookout never saw assault from the Japanese, it was viciously attacked by an infestation of carpenter ants.

"They turned the framing in the west, south and east walls into Swiss cheese," said Don Allen, a former Forest Service employee. "In the late 1970s and early 1980s, there was talk of 'disposing of' Gold Butte Lookout."

Allen and a group of others opposed that plan. Eventually, they got a hold of the Sand Mountain Society, a group of volunteers who do their utmost to save any U.S. Forest Service fire lookout that's left, and began work restoring Gold Butte.

"It was taken apart, piece by piece, all the way to ground level," said Allen, now a volunteer with the Sand Mountain Society. "Each piece of interior siding was cataloged so it could go back in the same precise order."

Using as much of the original wood as was possible, "the lookout was painstakingly reconstructed using as much original fabric as possible," Allen said.

The lookout was finished and opened to the public in 2007.

AT THE LOOKOUT

It's the simple, everyday chores that I love most at a mountaintop lookout.

Cooking dinner and washing dishes, when you're peering out glass windows at the Cascade Crest, becomes a thrill. So does just reading a



Zach Urness/Statesman-Journal via AP

A hiker from Eugene looks out toward Mount Jefferson from the deck of Gold Butte Lookout in the Willamette National Forest north of Detroit.

Gold Butte Lookout

Gold Butte Lookout
What: A rentable mountaintop lookout tower that sleeps north of Detroit in Willamette National Forest
How to do it: Visit Reservations.Gov
What to bring: Water, stove, lantern and food
Hike in (without reservations to stay the night): 3.2 miles round-trip, with 800 feet of climb
Hike in (with reservations to stay the night): 1.5 miles round-trip, with about 400 feet of climb

book.

The hike to this mountaintop Marriott does take some time, however.

After the bumpy ride up Forest Service Road 4697, I parked at the green gate trailhead and, carrying a pack overloaded with items like a lantern and extra water, headed to the lookout.

I was joined by my dog Mater — dogs are allowed at the lookout — and we trekked up the road for half a mile to where a trail shoots into the forest. The trail climbs a final 0.25 miles to the lookout, showcasing increasingly beautiful views until the lookout appears on a crest overhead.

As I entered my abode for the night and got supplies organized, two different groups of hikers showed up to

check out the view. Everyone was friendly, though somewhat envious, that I was staying the night.

The only problem with staying at a fire lookout is that once you set up and explore the area, there isn't much to do.

While Mater attempted to smell every smell, and pee on every tree, I placed a chair on the lookout desk and dug into a book, looking out at the view every few moments.

The sky moved from bluebird to cloudy to threatening as afternoon became evening. I made a small fire in the wood stove, filling the cabin with a toasty heat, and made dinner as the storm clouds wrapped themselves around the surrounding mountains and began blowing across Gold Butte.

BRIEFLY

Wolves kill calf in Wallowa County

ENTERPRISE — The Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife has confirmed wolves from the Imnaha pack killed a calf sometime during the night Oct. 24-25 on private land in Wallowa County.

A rancher reported the dead calf in a grassland area around Needham Butte. ODFW investigated the same day, and found wolf tracks and bite marks consistent with a wolf.

A GPS-collared wolf from the Imnaha pack was found to be in the area, at one point just 20 feet away from the carcass. Another wolf was also located nearby with conventional radio telemetry.

It is the eighth confirmed wolf depredation of livestock in 2015, and first by the Imnaha pack. Wolves remain listed as endangered species by the state of Oregon east of highways 395, 78 and 95, though the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission could vote to delist wolves as early as next month.

There are at least 81 known wolves in Oregon that survived through 2014, according to ODFW. However, the Sled Springs pair were recently found dead under mysterious circumstances in September.

Umatilla NF to hold forest meeting in Elgin

ELGIN — A public meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, Nov. 3 at the Elgin Community Center to discuss current and future work on the Walla Walla Ranger District of the Umatilla National Forest.

The meeting comes on the heels of a busy wildfire season in the district, including the Phillips Creek Fire that charred 2,600 acres northwest of Elgin, and the Grizzly Bear Complex, which has scorched more than 80,000 acres in the Wenaha-Tucannon Wilderness.

"We want to outline our current and future program of work, address issues of concern and answer any questions the public might have," said District Ranger Mike Rassbach. "Fire will surely be a topic of discussion; however, I encourage the public to attend and engage in discussion around an array of forest topics."

Several resource specialists from the district will be on hand to answer specific questions. For more information, contact Joani Bosworth at 541-278-3722.

Ontario park almost complete

With a new boat ramp, picnic benches and an air pump machine for river rafters, Rudy Park is about 90 percent complete.

Paving the parking lot is all that remains of the project's to-do list, though that will not be an easy feat. Road and Bridge Director Alan Scharbrough said the project will cost about \$60,000. The county Road and Bridge Department is applying for the Idaho Waterways Improvement Fund grant to cover the cost.

Staff will need to apply for the funds by January. If the county gets the grant, then the parking lot should be paved and ready to use by next summer, Scharbrough said.

The park was first opened on Dec. 15 last year. Since then, Payette County officials have banded together to make the park the go-to place for river floating, fishing and family picnics.

Spearheading those efforts is Rudy Endrikat, former county commissioner, after whom the park is named. He said he has been pushing the idea for the last 18 years.

In honor of Endrikat's ambition, county commissioners chose to name the park after him.

The park is located on the east side of the U.S. 95 bridge crossing over the Payette River heading into Fruitland from Payette. It has been a popular spot.

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