

# Duncan Peak Lookout

Foresthill Ranger District

Tahoe National Forest



Duncan Peak Lookout is situated 28 miles east of Foresthill, atop Little Bald Mountain on the Tahoe National Forest, at an elevation of 7,182 ft. From its location you can see magnificent views, such as French Meadows, the Royal Gorge of the American River, and the Sierra crest.

There have been three different lookout structures called "Duncan Peak". The original facility was constructed between 1910 and 1915 on the current lookout's site. The Tower was rebuilt in 1917 on the actual Duncan Peak, just north of the current lookout site. The current structure was built in 1943. Several changes have been made since then, including realignment of the stairway, improvements to communications links, and other modernizations.

## Lookout History on the Tahoe National Forest

Due to catastrophic fire losses in the west in the early 1900's, fire planning was given great consideration on public lands. The Bureau of Forestry, precursor to the USDA Forest Service, together with private lumber companies, developed large scale fire plans. The plans called for firebreaks in logging slash, fire patrols, telephone communications, caches of fire tools, and prevention signs.

The Southern Pacific Railroad erected the very first lookout in 1876 on Red Mountain, north of Cisco Grove, on the Tahoe National Forest. Its main purpose was to protect the railroad's valuable snowsheds from fires ignited by sparks coming from engine smokestacks. The first two permanent Forest Service lookouts in California were built in 1908. During the summer of 1911, the Forest Service built its first tower in the region on top of Banner Mountain near Grass Valley. Duncan Peak lookout was constructed soon afterwards.

In the 1930's, Federal, state and local fire control agencies set out to create an integrated system of fire lookouts stretching from the Oregon border to the Mexican border. Lookout construction was a priority project for the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), a Federal work program during the Great Depression. The CCC built over 200 lookouts during the 1930's. Eventually, there were as many as 600 sites in California used as lookouts. By 1986, only 185 were still in use, and the number of lookouts continue to decline.

In the early part of the century, there were still vast unroaded areas on National Forest lands. After World War II, roads were constructed in many areas, providing greater opportunities for spotting fires and providing access for firefighters and equipment. Airplanes crisscrossing the state have become an increasingly valuable tool in fire detection. Even satellite imagery is used to trace lightning strikes, a leading cause of fires in the western U.S.

Many fires have been spotted from Duncan Peak, which safeguards vast amount of resources. Unfortunately, due to budget limitations, the number of staffed lookouts has decreased. But through the use of volunteers, as well as paid staff, Duncan Peak has remained in service.



*Duncan Peak Lookout, constructed 1917*

## Local Fire History

Fire Records from 1910 to the present show that the Foresthill Ranger District has had an active fire history. The most fire prone area lies along the north side of the Foresthill Divide Road from the Sugar Pine turnoff to China Wall OHV Staging Area. Much of this area far into Humbug Canyon has burned three to four times since 1910. Data prior to 1910 is more anecdotal but newspaper accounts like this one are not uncommon:

The recent forest fires in the mountains were the most severe in the history of the county, burning over an area of twenty miles long, embracing thousands of acres. The timber losses surpass any ever experienced here. The course of the fire is given as commencing at the river in Humbug Canyon, continuing beyond Bear Trap and Chris Elliot's ranch, on to the Giant Gap flume, back on the south side to Eureka and Sugar Pine Mills, and far up into the Forks House Country.

*Placer Co. Republican, Sept. 29, 1904*

A year after the above mentioned fire, another raged in Volcano Canyon, burning to the Michigan Bluff area.

If you had been at Duncan Peak lookout in the early afternoon of August 20, 1960, you would have been able to see and report the Volcano fire that eventually burned 44,386 acres near Michigan Bluff and Foresthill. It began deep in the canyon of the Middle Fork American River, ultimately destroying huge tracts of timber, watershed, and wildlife habitat. Firefighting forces were limited because, earlier the same day, the infamous Donner fire began near Truckee, and forces were being sent to that fire in huge numbers. Imagine the scene from Duncan Peak that day, as the Volcano, Donner, and numerous other fires visible from the lookout raged, filling the air with heavy smoke and firebrands.

**How to use the Firefinder:**

The Osborne firefinder is usually located in the center of the lookout. It is really an extension of using a compass or protractor on a map. The sights and wheel simply make it easier to plot locations on a map for fire reporting.

When a smoke is sighted, the lookout looks through the pinhole side through the hair sights on the other side. The slide gives an elevation angle that is used to calculate distance.



*A Firefinder in use*

On the wheel are the 360 degrees of the compass. A Vernier scale on the ring allows the lookout to calculate degrees and minutes for a more precise bearing. When this is determined, the lookout then calls the Command Center in Grass Valley ("Dispatch") with a bearing and elevation. If the smoke is sighted from another lookout, their bearing is also recorded, and a string or line is drawn on a map in the dispatch center to triangulate the precise location to guide the responding firefighters.

The firefinder map is a standard planimetric map with a 1/2 inch per mile scale. The brass tape across the wheel allows distance to be measured easily. A pin in the center of the map indicates the location of the lookout. All bearings are then relative to the lookout.

Lookouts are still in use as a cost effective, efficient, and valuable tool for detection. They are staffed through the summer months. Perhaps some day lookouts will no longer be used, but the lookout will live forever in the hearts of those who have been lucky enough to have enjoyed the view, and who have scanned the horizon.

**Lookout Sites on the Tahoe National Forest**

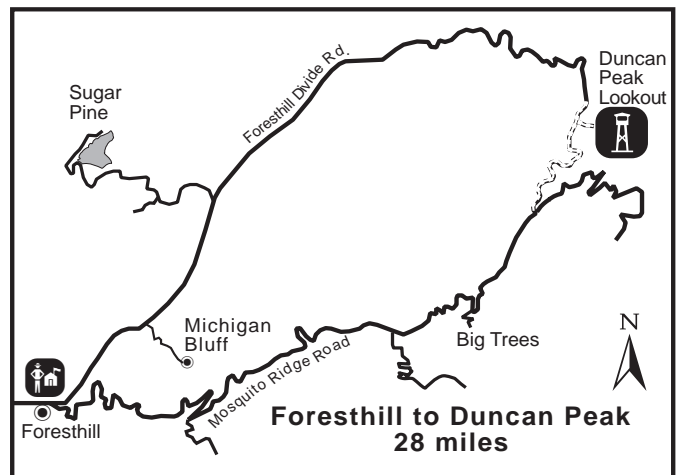
- |                  |                  |
|------------------|------------------|
| Babbit Peak*     | Calpine Mtn.*    |
| Duncan Peak*     | Grouse Ridge     |
| Helester Pt.     | Martis Peak      |
| Saddleback Mtn.* | Sardine Peak.    |
| Sierra Buttes*   | Verdi Peak*      |
| Mosquito Ridge*  | Big Valley Bluff |

(\*Indicates a lookout that exists today. Not all lookouts are staffed annually.)



*Duncan Peak Lookout, constructed 1943*

Foresthill Ranger District  
 22830 Foresthill Road  
 Foresthill CA 95631  
 voice (916) 367-2224 TDD (916) 367-2226



*The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service is a diverse organization committed to equal opportunity in employment and program delivery. USDA prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, religion, age, disability, political affiliation, and familial status. Persons believing that they have been discriminated against should contact the Secretary, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington DC 20250, or call 202-720-7327 (voice) or 202-720-1127 (TDD).*