

Lake Mountain

By Carol Godwin, Cycle Mania

1910. The morning had dawned cool and bright but was already showing signs of the July mugginess that was coming. There was a hint of smoke in the air and last night's storm had brought with it an incredible lightning show and rolling thunder, but little rain. The fireguard stationed at the newly constructed Los Burros Ranger Station knew that the fire danger was high, threatening the burgeoning timber industry in the surrounding Lakeside Forest district. He finished his coffee, poured a little grain for his mule, and began to prepare for the day he would spend at the nearby Lake Mountain Lookout. The mule was eager to begin the ride, he had done this particular climb before and was strong and capable, ready to ascend the track leading up to the lookout station. After arriving, the fireguard hobbled the mule to graze in the nearby meadow atop the mountain and scaled the tallest pine, using spikes hammered into the trunk of the tree. He scanned the area, being able to see any signs of smoke in any direction, and, on clear days, being able to see all the way to the San Francisco peaks near Flagstaff. His incredible view encompassed the largest contiguous stand of Ponderosa Pine in the world, a valuable asset, drawing new pioneers looking for opportunities in logging, sheepherding, and ranching. Fireguards were able to call in fire reports using a telephone line strung from tree to tree connecting to the main Ranger District office near ShowLow. In 1926, a 49' lookout tower was built and the use of the tall pine was discontinued, but the base of it still stands today, a charred remnant of an interesting past (the original tree was struck by lightning and burned nearly to the ground several years ago).

Los Burros Ranger station remained in use as housing for the fireguards and as a timber office until the early 1950s and is now a historic landmark visited by campers staying at the Los Burros campground. The Lake Mountain fire tower remains in use today and is staffed each summer by dedicated Fire Lookouts* who are happy to have visitors.

There are two main pathways to climb Lake Mountain, one being the two-track access road beginning from Forest Road 269 and the other being the Lake

Mountain Fire Tower spur connecting from the Four Springs Trail, both of which are accessible from the Los Burros trail. The Lake Mountain Loop Trail circumnavigates the mouth of the ancient cinder cone volcano which built Lake Mountain and gave Lake Mountain its name, although the “lake” part of the name is more of a marshy area much of the time rather than an actual lake.

Lake Mountain is worth the climb and is frequently visited by vehicles, mountain bikers and gravel cyclists, hikers, and equestrians. (Stravaholics take note: the climb segments are challenges to be proud of and are certainly doable. Just keep peddling!) The base of the mountain is vegetated by thick young oak trees which put on a spectacular fall foliage color show each season, with some of the largest leaves I have ever seen on an oak. As you climb in elevation, oaks give way to mixed Juniper and pine. These old-growth junipers began their lives well before settlers came and were there as indigenous peoples passed through and/or settled the area. Enjoy the adventure and wander off the road/trail a bit to appreciate the beauty of these ancient giants. Still climbing, you will move into tall pines and aspens, which, if you look around you and look up, you will see that many of them bear the scars of lightning strikes, alerting you to the real danger you could be in if you are on the mountain during the lightning season. When you reach the top of the mountain, take the short Lake Mountain loop trail around the lake/meadow and notice the distinct differences in vegetation and wildlife between the North and South facing slopes of Lake Mountain. It’s a great eye-opening ecological lesson demonstrating contrasting ecosystems, closely linked by distance but vastly different in sunlight and temperature.

Stargazers will love the dark skies and spectacular astrophotography opportunities from the meadow/lake top of the mountain and it’s an unforgettable experience to pack a camp in and spend the night watching crepuscular wildlife coming into the meadow and listening to nighttime elk bugles floating up from the surrounding forest.

One of my favorite fire lookouts, Allen, has manned the tower for decades and has detailed maps showing storm directions, lightning strikes, winds, insects, and just about any other natural phenomenon he has observed during his tenure as a lookout. It is well worth climbing the tower to talk to him and see his

incredible lightning photos (yes, he has stayed up in the tower during storms, perched on an insulated stool!). When you reach the tower, if it is manned, the lookout will usually wave from the window and invite you up to get a truly spectacular view of the amazing forest we call home.

Lake Mountain lookout tower complex and Los Burros are both listed in the National Register of Historic Places and every White Mountain resident and visitor should see and take the time to appreciate the history they represent.

Appreciating our past helps us form our future, for in the future, what we have done will be considered the past. Let us be sure to leave a legacy of care for our forest that will be admired and appreciated by those who will come after us.

*See Guardians of the Forest, June 2022, issue