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Saving a Landmark

From 1942 to 1944, the Shuckstack Lookout in Swain County provided a spectacular view of the construction of Fontana Dam and the flooding of Fontana Lake, two and a half miles away.

Since then, the old fire tower has been a prominent landmark on the Appalachian Trail, giving hikers their first or last good view of Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

But today, people wanting to climb the Shuckstack Lookout have to contend with a missing railing on the bottom flight of stairs and several loose steps that make

the 60-foot climb a bit frightening. Those few brave enough to reach the top cab will find holes, broken windows, and a partially rotted floor.

"Fire lookouts in North Carolina are a dying breed," says Peter J. Barr, director of the state chapter of the Forest Fire Lookout Association, a group of enthusiasts who restore and protect lookout towers nationwide. "About a third of the lookouts that once stood in the state are gone.

Others are so badly deteriorated that they face removal. Most people assume that the towers on public lands are still maintained. Sadly, this is far from the case."

Barr is trying to do something about it. He is being encouraged by Great Smoky Mountains National Park to submit a detailed plan to rescue the Shuckstack Lookout. His hope is that the National Park Service will ultimately match the funds and man-hours of labor donated by private organizations and individuals.

And that isn't all Barr is doing. His book, *Hiking North Carolina's Lookout Towers*, promotes over two dozen towers as scenic landmarks accessible to almost anyone who enjoys a brisk walk in the outdoors. He outlines three different hikes to the Shuckstack Lookout, two of which are accessed across the top of Fontana Dam, which at 480 feet tall is the highest dam east of the Rocky Mountains.

Shuckstack isn't the only candidate for rehabilitation, says Barr. In Great Smoky Mountains National Park, he and others are looking into the possibility of raising money and volunteer labor for the Mount Sterling Lookout and for the cabin on High Rocks Mountain at the site of the former tower there.

Success stories aren't hard to find. At Mount Cammerer, the work of a judge, an architect, and an artist from Tennessee and donations from a Lowe's warehouse in North Carolina saved a landmark tower. At Little Snowball Mountain in Buncombe County, Lloyd Allen paid \$300 for a fire tower slated for destruction. Working only on Sundays, Allen and a friend, Bill Hensley, disassembled the tower. Then, after storing it for 25 years, they put it back together in a different place. Former U.S. Forest Service employee Ron Carnes was instrumental in saving the Yellow Mountain Lookout in Macon and Jackson counties. Carnes, now with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, hopes to do the same for the Mount Noble Lookout on the Cherokee Indian Reservation.

The need for lookout towers was brought to the forefront in the summer of 1910, when lightning strikes in Montana and Idaho started hundreds of fires, many of which went undetected for days. Twenty years later, fire lookouts dotted the North Carolina mountains. Some were stone structures built by the Civilian Conservation Corps. Many were steel towers adapted from a windmill design. Now, after decades of harsh exposure to the elements on high mountaintops, they risk being lost.

"In addition to conserving and protecting our wild lands, it is paramount to also do so for our cultural resources," says Barr. "These lookout towers not only offer great views, they are historic structures."

Hiking North Carolina's Lookout Towers

Peter J. Barr

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