

Lighting up the past

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For one hour this weekend, there will be a smattering of bright spots in the otherwise dark Adirondack night sky.

Fire towers across the state are slated to be illuminated between 8:30 and 9:30 p.m. on Saturday — the same time Sunday evening serving as a rain date if needed. Now in its 12th year, the annual lighting pays homage to the fire lookouts who staffed the towers from 1909 until 1990, as well as the preservation and restoration efforts that have subsequently taken place to maintain the historical structures through today.

The lighting, which is usually correlated with Labor Day weekend each year, is organized by the New York State Chapter of the Forest Fire Lookout Association. As of press time Tuesday, NYSFFLA is expecting 35 towers across the state to participate, with several local towers. These include:

- Adirondack History Museum (town of Elizabethtown)

- Mount Arab (town of Piercefield)

- Azure Mountain (town of Waverly)
- Buck Mountain (town of Long Lake)
- Hurricane Mountain (towns of Elizabethtown and Keene)
- Owl's Head Mountain (town of Long Lake)
- St. Regis Mountain (town of Santa Clara)

A complete list of participating towers can be found at nysffla.org/light.html. The webpage includes a map, as well as the surrounding locations around each tower where the illumination is expected to be visible.

Organizers emphasize that this is not a hiking event, and that viewers need not hike into the dark woods to catch a glimpse of the fire towers — and that hiking at night without proper preparation and equipment can be dangerous. Instead, there are ample spots “from civilization” to view the lights, and even enjoy planned festivities to celebrate the towers.

The Lake Clear Lodge and Resort — where St. Regis Mountain's tower lighting can be seen — is planning on hosting its eighth annual “Light Up Your Senses” event. That's slated from 5:30 to 9:30 p.m. on Saturday, rain or shine, with guests being invited back on Sunday if the rain date for the actual tower lighting is required.

The event — which also serves as a fundraiser for the Friends of St. Regis Mountain Fire Tower, the nonprofit organization that oversees its maintenance — includes an Oktoberfest dinner, a presentation on the tower's history, a presentation from the Adirondack Sky Center & Observatory on astronomical features in the Adirondack night sky and live music from Peggy Lynn.

Tickets start at \$39 and must be purchased in advance online at tinyurl.com/33msspwk or by calling the lodge at 518-891-1489, which people can do if they have any questions about the event. Co-owner Kathy Hohmeyer said the deadline to purchase is Saturday morning so that the lodge can determine how many people it will be cooking for.

In Elizabethtown, the Adirondack History Museum's tower — an amalgamation of components from towers that were removed from West Mountain near Raquette Lake and Kempshall Mountain near Long Lake — is right next to the museum, and people can walk right up to it. The light from Hurricane Mountain's firetower, located about 7 miles away, is also visible from the museum, according to Board President Peter Slocum, who will be participating in the lighting.

“It's a fun event,” he said. “It's a nice chance to look at the Adirondack scenery and recognize the fact that it's a beautiful environment for us in part thanks to the sacrifices that people made by going up there all those years and watching for fires.”

During the event, volunteers at each tower will read aloud the names of those who served there when they were active. Fire watchers were instituted by the state after particularly devastating fires that ripped through the Adirondacks in 1903 and 1908, burning hundreds of thousands of acres.

They were gradually phased out in New York in the 1970s as increasing commercial aviation activity rendered an effective means of spotting fires. This left the towers slated for deconstruction.

“They were kind of mothballed and then, eventually, the state decided they would dismantle the ones that were in wilderness areas as non-conforming uses in the wilderness,” Slocum said. “But then it turned out that a lot of local folks in different communities ... said ‘Hey, this is part of our historical heritage, we’d love to keep these.’”

Slocum said there were protracted legal battles and while some towers throughout the park were removed, advocates were successful in saving others, including those on Hurricane and St. Regis mountains, from demolition. This was accomplished when the Adirondack Park Agency reclassified small, 0.5-acre plots of land at the mountain summits from “wilderness” to “historic,” which allowed the structures to remain in place. An Enterprise report from 2019 detailing that history and process is available at tinyurl.com/mstsxtkv.

Preventing the fire towers from being torn down was only part of the battle. The other, Slocum said, was maintaining their aesthetic and structural integrity. This time-intensive process was largely made possible by volunteer efforts, he noted.

“Each firetower had a group of volunteers working on restoring the towers, with help from the state,” he said. “We were able to put in new flooring, stairways and safety fencing so that people could go enjoy them — and they’ve become extremely popular hiking destinations.”

In fact, there is now an entire hiking challenge dedicated to the fire tower peaks in the Adirondacks. More information can be found at tinyurl.com/zwbxcp3.

Slocum said one of this weekend’s goals is stoking interest in fire tower stewardship in the next generation, which he said is crucial to their ongoing viability.

“A lot of the volunteers who worked on the early stage of restoration are getting up there, so we’re working on finding younger people to do the climbing and that’s worked out pretty well,” he said.

The National Weather Service’s Burlington, Vermont office, which serves northeastern New York, is predicting partly cloudy skies Saturday evening throughout Essex and southern Franklin counties, with nighttime temperatures in the 40s.

