

Friends of the Forest Work in Fire Towers by Susan Vitek

Visualize yourself sitting stiffly in a 7' x 7' fire lookout tower balanced on a tall chair, touching nothing—as yet another wild electrical storm sears lightening flashes into your brain. Smoke from fires has obscured your views part of the day.

But you watch. You wait. You listen. You look for that next piercing slash of white lightening to start yet another fire. You pray that it won't happen, but you fear the worst.

What could make it scarier? Picture that same fire tower **unmanned** in one of the worst fire seasons in thirty years. Unmanned! Why? Because the paid employee works only six days during this dangerous time. So volunteers with **Friends of the Forest** (FOF) volunteer at least a ten hour shift to help keep our community safe. If it's time to leave and lightening is near, they can't descend because the steps are attached to metal.

“One day a storm circled the tower, then went right over me,” said FOF member Rick Zabor. The wind went from zero to thirty in seconds, followed by rain, thunder and lightning. The lightning started a fire, so I called it in to the dispatcher who, in turn, alerted the ground crew to make the trek into a difficult area.”

“The radio is on scan as well as my eyes. I listen and watch for any fire developments. I recognize how tiring it is to maintain a high state of alert, especially for ten and a half hours. I appreciate the paid employees who do this every day,” Zabor added.

Sure, ten hours can be boring. But the job has rewards—including closeness to nature that is soul-soothing. “I was treated to an ‘out-of-wilderness’ experience,” Zabor continued. “Turkey vultures floated, Redtail Hawks dove, and violet-green Swallows turned on their afterburners as they flew at what appeared to be a ‘breaking the sound barrier speed. Eight pronghorns were grazing and drinking from a water tank all afternoon. Later ten elk strolled right into the tank—chest high—and also grazed with their pronghorn friends. Three more elk greeted me on the road home, but they didn't appear to be from Detroit, since they ran away from my General Motors pickup!”

“We are the first line of defense to get the fire crews to the right place,” said FOF volunteer Frank Wirkus. “Just because you see smoke in a particular area doesn't always indicate where the fire is located. Accuracy in reporting map coordinates is critical.” FOF volunteer Al Cornell emphasizes that “this is one of the most valuable committees of Friends of the Forest.”

The fire tower on Mingus Mountain overlooks parts of both the Coconino and Prescott National Forests. It's small and has one amenity—a chair that is grounded so you don't get electrocuted. Volunteer Al Gilson said that last year, from April 5 to July 7, there was 2.31 inches of rain on Mingus Mountain. But this year from April 29 to July 5, the rain level is a mere .41 inches. Vigilance is more important than ever under such conditions.

The Apache Maid tower is larger and more comfortable, and it also overlooks primarily the Coconino and some of the Prescott National Forest. With a small refrigerator, stove, two beds, a balcony and a much nicer chair that reclines at a height that still allows fires to be seen and monitored, one can get a free “mini-vacation.”

However, sleeping in a fire tower can be challenging, depending on conditions. Recently, the employee needed two weeks off for a family emergency. So FOF volunteer Mike Vitek selected a Thursday and Friday for two successive weeks. Since the drive is long and bumpy, Vitek decided to spend the night.

“I forgot how bright a full moon would be up there above the tree line. I should have taken a sleep mask. Plus the winds gusted up to fifty miles per hour. The Apache Maid tower is very stable, but the winds made it noisier than on a calm night,” he said. For gourmet dining, he took pop-open cans of soup, fruit, and Oreo cookies with peanut butter frosting. (His wife always finishes those he brings home.)

Many members of **Friends of the Forest** get the chance to do things they never even considered before moving here. Experiences like working in a fire tower adds new interesting chapters to this time in your life. Contributing to the safety of your community is its own special reward. If you want to make a difference, please see our website at friendsoftheforestsedona.org.