

Maureen and Mike

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**Interviewee: Mark Hufstetler**  
**Interviewers: Beth Hodder and Kjell Petersen**  
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**Project: Northwest Montana Lookout Association**

Kjell Petersen: Greetings, lookout friends. The Northwest Montana Lookout Association is back in service and 10-8 [in service subject to call]. I'm Kjell Petersen. I'm here with Beth Hodder. She's our program manager for the Oral History Program. And we're here to do a second interview with Mark Hufstetler. Mark, want to throw anything out before we launch?

Mark Hufstetler: Kjell, I'm just happy to be back talking with you guys again, it's always a pleasure talking about lookouts. And it's a special pleasure talking about lookouts with the two of you.

KP: Yeah, well, we kind of like it too.

Beth Hodder: So, Mark, I think maybe toward the end of the interview, we could have you talk about what to do when a person first visits a lookout; it may be the very first time they've ever come. Or it may just be to that particular lookout, but we need to let people know that this is not an office. It is somebody's home, and people should conduct themselves as if they are at someone's house. So maybe you can just talk about what you like to see when people come visit.

MH: That sounds great. I always love to have folks come visit me up there.

KP: Okay, well, if I don't have a complete meltdown, I'll bring that up again at the end. And we can talk about it. So, Mark, since our first session, which was more general in nature, and we talked about the philosophy and the good feelings and stuff, I'm hoping maybe the second interview, we can spend more time leading up to your lookout addiction, and wondering if you might focus more specifically on lookout duties. And if memory serves me correctly, you've staffed Porphyry Peak on the Lewis and Clark [National Forest], Cooney, Cyclone, and currently Baptiste on the Flathead [National Forest]. So how about you cover each of those with high points, low points, taxing moments, joyful times, specific fire, wildlife or weather highlights? And we'll see what we can draw out of your history. Are you up for that?

MH: Sounds good, Kjell, we'll give it a shot. That's a lot for an hour. But we'll get going here.

KP: Well saddle up and ride off into the sunset.

MH: I think I talked a little bit last time about how I got recruited into the lookout business. And that was to be a member of the volunteer lookout program that the Flathead National Forest has been operating since about 2012. And I'll talk about that a little bit at the beginning because it's a pretty unique program, and one that I think benefits the Forest pretty substantially and also offers some wonderful opportunities for members of the community.

I was introduced to that program by Leif Haugen, who has operated it since its inception. He's the staffer for Thoma Lookout up in the North Fork country close to the Canadian border. And he's an old friend of mine. I entered the program about three years after it got started. That was in 2015. The first three years, the program staffed Firefighter Lookout and Baptiste Lookout, and in 2015, they added Cooney Lookout down in the Swan country.

The program is a little different from many of the country's volunteer lookout programs. Those are typically located in areas that are less remote. Often the volunteers will go up for the day, put in their eight hours, and then head home at the end of the day. In our program on the Flathead, individuals sign up for what's essentially a full lookout hitch. They'll be up there for ten days to two weeks actually living in the lookout and performing exactly the same duties as the paid lookouts. That makes it a pretty unique experience for the individuals involved and it also makes it a pretty cool thing. A pretty cool thing for the Forest, because it gives them a fairly small number of folks who become pretty knowledgeable about the country and are able to perform the duties just about as well as the paid folks are.

When I started the program, I was offered a two-week hitch to staff Baptiste Lookout down in the South Fork country. And then as the season grew closer, I added a one-week hitch down at Cooney Lookout. This was all pretty new to me at that point. I had spent some overnights in three or four Forest Service rental lookouts, but had never worked for the Forest Service before or actually operated a lookout. And I was a little apprehensive about what I had gotten myself in for. But the Forest Service did a great job of introducing me to it.

We operate a training program that lasts for two full days for our new volunteers every June. So, I came up to Hungry Horse, spent a week doing various lookout things up there. Began with a day in the classroom, where we were introduced to how a lookout observes and interprets the weather. A gentleman from the National Weather Service in Missoula comes up and does that for us. We spent some time learning how to use the firefinder, which is a pretty simple tool, but a pretty arcane one as well. And it's something that takes folks a little while to fully understand. And then we learned how to use the radios. It was a lot of material. Some of the new volunteers get pretty overwhelmed by it all, because folks think that there's not really all that much to a lookout job—that you just go up on top of the mountain and sit there and stare out—and they don't realize all the pieces that go into it and all of

the skills that you need to have to do the job well. And skills that have often been lost in our twenty-first century world. So, it was a pretty full day of classroom instruction. Then the next day, all the new volunteers, along with all the paid lookouts, go up to Firefighter Lookout and spend a day actually doing field work that imitates how a lookout's work day progresses. And it was tremendous fun. I remember leaving it feeling just a little bit overwhelmed at knowing how much there is to do and how much there is to understand and that there's some responsibility involved with that at the same time.

So, I remember going to my first hitch at Cooney Lookout and being more than a little nervous about what I had gotten myself into. But it turned out to be great. Cooney is an easy lookout to reach and it's unique in that it's part of a community. The folks who live in Condon are well acquainted with the lookout and they come up to say hello and introduce you to the landscape around there. And it isn't long until you feel like you're a part of the place that the lookout serves. And that's one of the coolest things about being a lookout in general. And I remember that as being particularly strong there. For a number of years, Cooney was operated by the state, by Montana DNRC [Department of Natural Resources and Conservation]. And those folks turned it over to the Forest Service a few years earlier, and all the DNRC folks would come up to the lookout and help get me acquainted and introduce me to the valley.

It reinforced the notion that it wasn't just a few lookout geeks like us who love these places, but that people who live nearby really liked having the lookouts there too, and felt that it was something that helped hold the community together, in a way. And I thought that was pretty neat.

I never actually found a fire at Cooney. We call in a couple of fires there every summer. But my main memory of that place is of being part of a small Montana town in the middle of nowhere and observing how that valley evolved over the course of a season and then over the course of years.

We also use Cooney Lookout as a location for some of the annual lookout refresher trainings. Every summer the Flathead takes all the returning volunteer lookouts and gets them together for half a day or a day to go over the principles of being a lookout again, and Cooney is where we do that. And I always look forward to those trainings. Partly because it's good to get back into the habit of being at one of these places, but also because we have a pretty remarkable lookout community in the Flathead. We have a group of volunteers who are an amazing group of folks. People who have a strong affection for the job, and a strong affection for the location as well. And I've gotten to know a lot of them over the years, and I count many of them as being very good friends of mine. I think I mentioned in our last interview that I was a little apprehensive about introducing myself to the lookout community because I thought that fire lookouts were always going to be cranky old farts who didn't want to talk to anyone else, and were basically hiding from the world. And that was definitely not the case. Some of the best folks I've ever met have been part of the lookout communities in the Flathead and elsewhere.

MH:

Every June, we have a lookout potluck right before the beginning of season. And we have another one in September at the end. And I remember going to the first of those potlucks in 2015. It was hosted by Karin Connelly. And I was really worried about what I was getting into. I kind of thought I was going to be in a corner by myself with a whole bunch of other people who were in a corner by themselves. And nobody was going to have any fun. And it was exactly the opposite. I had a blast and everyone else was having a blast and talking lookouts and sharing stories and getting excited about the summer ahead. And it was a great thing.

MH:

Being at a place like Cooney you were able to drive to the lookout and you brought your own supplies in and basically had a town a few minutes away where you could get anything else that you needed or interact with people. And then you went to Baptiste, which is about six miles from the closest road. That trailhead is about an hour from the closest pavement. And it's a place that gets maybe two dozen visitors a summer if that. So, you're completely on your own there. And that was an interesting transition for me. You have to bring up everything that you need for your hitch. As a volunteer I wasn't sure what that would entail. And I spent hours planning menus and making lists. Then when I went up to the training, I was asked to bring a couple of boxes of my supplies, groceries, gear clothing that would be delivered to the Forest Service, and in turn, they would get it to the lookout in advance of my arrival. Typically, they do that using pack mules. And so, in late June, early July, the Forest Service took a pack string with my stuff up to the mountain. And I think I mentioned that the first year one of the mules broke away, and most of my stuff spent the night scattered across the forest floor on the Baptiste trail. And when I got up there, a lot of my dried food had been munched on a little bit. But that was part of the excitement for me. It turned out that I was able to plan reasonably well for most of that. I didn't run out of food; my dog didn't run out of food. And I had a pretty amazing time. That year there was a pretty massive fire in the Spotted Bear country. And it meant that Baptiste was pretty heavily impacted by wildfire smoke. And so, my visibility wasn't much. And I didn't have many visitors. The only folks who came up were a couple friends of mine who came to see the place. But I was able to see wildlife. And I was able to get comfortable with the job. And I was able to interact with the volunteers down at Firefighter Lookout. And they kind of helped me through that process too. And I'm pretty sure the two of you spent some time on the lookout circuit with me that first summer.

BH: Yep.

KP: Yep.

MH: And I basically repeated that process for the next couple years, each year spending a little more time at the volunteer lookouts. In the year 2017, they added Cyclone Lookout to the volunteer list. And

so that year, I spent about ten days at Cooney, another ten days at Cyclone and then twenty-four days at Baptiste in one long hitch. And so certainly I knew I was hooked at that point.

The thing I love most about being at Baptiste in particular, is that the weather up there is incredible. You have a view of the valley that is in line with the clouds, not below it, sometimes above the clouds. And you can watch the interplay between the sun and the clouds and the water of Hungry Horse Reservoir. And there's a light there that is just the most remarkable thing. And what makes it even more remarkable is that you're the only one who's able to see it from that perspective, and it makes you really feel like you're the luckiest person that there is.

MH: You see wildlife too, and the area on the Baptiste trail has a lot of huckleberries in late summer. And so, every August and September you see evidence that you're sharing the mountaintop with grizzly bears. I remember one day, I think it was 2016 or 2017, that I started hiking down from Baptiste to get water, and the dog I had at the time was a very savvy outdoor dog. And he was always excited about the trip down to the creek. And we got about a half mile down the trail and the dog stopped and just gave me this look. I'd never seen that look on his face before, and he didn't really feel like going any farther. And so, I looked down at him and said it's your choice, we can go get water or we can go back up the mountain and he turned around and ran up the mountain. The next morning, I heard a noise in the avalanche chute very close to where the water source is. And I got my field glasses out, and I saw a mother bear and three cubs, eating huckleberries right there. I took a picture of it with my camera and I sent it to Kjell right away, and I got an email right back from him. And it said, "Dude, you've got grizzlies." And it was super exciting. I spent the next couple of days watching those bears in the avalanche chute, just below me about a quarter mile as the crow flies, happily eating away at the berries. And again, I was the only person who had that experience. It was wonderful.

KP: The dog probably saved your life.

MH: I'm not sure if the dog was more interested in saving his life or mine. It worked out well either way. But those were some of a couple of my favorite moments at Baptiste. I enjoyed Cyclone too mostly because it has a spectacular view of Glacier National Park. It's a view that equals or exceeds any view that a tourist is going to get by being in the park itself. And when you get up early in the morning, and you watch the sun come up over the Livingston Range and down into Bowman Lake, it is truly a magical thing.

You're a little bit a part of that community as well, when you're up there. You know, the little town of Polebridge is in view right below you and the folks down there come up to the lookout fairly often. It's the only place they can get cell reception in the valley. They come up at night to watch the stars and they come up in the morning to watch the sunrise. You feel like it's your outpost, but it's an outpost

that you're sharing with a handful of other people who understand it and appreciate it. And that's also pretty cool.

A lot of the memories I have of these places are ones that are hard to describe in words. I remember a night at Cyclone where we had a completely full moon and just about the whole sky was covered with clouds except for an opening where the moon was and the moon was shining right down onto Cyclone Lake. And you could look out the windows of the lookout and look down from the catwalk and everything was pitch black except for a perfect reflection in that lake, and it was glowing in the night. It was just an incredible thing to see. Moments like that really give you a special connection with the place where you are. You get an intimacy with a particular spot on earth that nobody else is really able to do in quite the same way. And I think that's one of the best things about being a lookout.

MH: After my volunteer years were done, I accepted a lookout job with the Lewis and Clark National Forest out of the White Sulphur Springs Ranger District. This was my first paid lookout position. I staffed Porphyry Peak Lookout which is up in the Kings Hill area. It was a very different experience for me. I was the only operating lookout for about a hundred miles any direction. So, I was completely on my own. I was at the end of a road that people could use and there was a picnic area right there and a ski hill right below me. So, I had a good string of visitors almost every day. Lots of folks with ATVs and mountain bikes and jeeps. It didn't have the solitude that I really grew to love, at Baptiste in particular. It was a wonderful crew working at the office--some of the best folks I've ever met --and they were super supportive of the lookout, but I really missed the isolation; I missed the sense of having a mountain that was just mine, almost. And at the same time, I also missed the lookout community of the Flathead. So, I was very happy to get back up to the Flathead the following year, when I was able to accept a paid position back at Baptiste again. And I've been there coming up on my fifth year doing that as a paid employee. So, a lot of lookouts will spend one or two years in a place, go on to another, spend one or two years there, go on again, and so forth. Others of us will find a place that becomes ours, that becomes home. Baptiste is definitely home for me.

KP: You have a brand-new bathroom at Baptiste.

MH: What's that Kjell?

KP: You have a brand-new outhouse at Baptiste--incredible view if you leave the door open.

MH: That was an outhouse that Leif built in, I think 2012, and it is a great outhouse. But I've had a couple of conversations with folks who can't understand how I could live someplace without indoor plumbing. I show them the view from my outhouse door, and then they almost immediately understand. That's one thing about a lookout outhouse. It's always got an amazing view.

MH: It was interesting, coming back to the Flathead, but instead of being one of the volunteers, being one of the employees. Our district has two paid lookout employees, myself, and Leif Haugen, and we each have our own lookouts. And then we are also responsible for the upkeep of the three volunteer lookouts on the Forest, as well as interacting with the lookout volunteers. So, there's a little diversity to the job.

I typically start at the Flathead towards the end of May, which is at least a month before our actual lookout season starts. So, we have a few weeks to get everything ready. It's important to visit all the lookouts the first couple of weeks that we're there to see how they handled the winter. Sometimes there will be maintenance needs that showed up over the winter. Things that need to be repaired before the lookouts go back in service. In a couple of cases, we've gotten to lookouts and found that they'd been broken into, for example. Then we have a week when we do refresher training for ourselves and for the lookout volunteers, annual Forest Service training, things like first aid and how to respond to fire activities and that sort of stuff. Quite a few lookouts have red cards, which are the credentials that allow them to actually assist with firefighting. And so those of us who have red cards have to do refresher training every year for that. We update instructional manuals for our volunteers. It's a fairly busy and diverse time. But we spend most of that time getting anxious for the days when we're able to actually move into our towers again.

MH: Generally, that happens for me about the end of June. It's dependent on the weather more than anything else. The hike up to Baptiste is one that includes a lot of snow until at least mid-June most years, sometimes later than that. And generally, my first hike up to Baptiste in the spring involves a mile or two of hiking over, you know, six or seven feet of snow sometimes and then climbing up the last set of trail switchbacks. They're completely obscured by steep snowfall. That also means that we can't get the lookout open until enough of the snow has melted for the pack mules to come up. I do a process a little bit similar to what the volunteers do with my food. I prepare a giant shopping list every May and buy several hundred dollars' worth of groceries, pack them into a dozen or so good-sized cardboard boxes, basically apple size boxes. And those get delivered to the ranger district in late June. And our district packer will bring them up in early July. She'll also bring up enough propane to last me for the summer, bring up any repair supplies that were identified during our early visits to the lookout, paint, stuff like that. And generally, they try to get there about the same time that Baptiste goes into service. It's the only lookout in our district that is still regularly serviced by pack animals. And I would guess one of just a couple dozen in the country that still operate that way. And seeing the pack mules come up the trail is just the coolest thing, because it's going to be like Christmas when you start opening all those boxes up. And at the same time, you know that the other 300 million people in America are getting their groceries through a UPS truck or Amazon Prime or their own cars, and you're experiencing something that the rest of the world has moved on from a couple generations ago.



Other supplies I will bring up to the lookout on my own. If I want to have perishables, I need to bring them up myself every time I go down for days off. And so, I have a pack every two weeks loaded with things like eggs and milk and cheese and a few fresh vegetables and that sort of stuff. But I eat pretty well up there.

BH: Mark, do you get resupplied at all by the packer?

MH: It's varied a little bit depending on the year. We always try to get one good sized pack trip at the beginning of the year, and hopefully a second pack string during mid-season. So typically, I would get two pack trips a year. It depends on the availability of animals and personnel to take care of that. There was one year that we handled the resupply by helicopter because the animals weren't available. A lot of other lookouts, especially the ones in Idaho, Arizona, and New Mexico end up using helicopters fairly consistently for their supply deliveries. Here in Montana, it's just about always pack animals. Other districts receive pack trips quite a bit more often than I do. For example, the Glacier National Park lookouts receive a pack string every two weeks. And the lookouts down in the Bob Marshall will generally get a pack string every three weeks or so.

For those folks the pack strings include not only their groceries, but also all the drinking water that they need. I get to haul the water up myself. And a few lookouts, Leif's lookout at Thoma--he has to carry in a good chunk of his own supplies. We don't send pack animals up there. Sometimes if there's a special need one of the fire crews will help us out and do what's called a "sherpa trip" where they will pack up supplies for us. We use the sherpas to pack supplies up to the Cyclone Lookout volunteers as well. The Cyclone Lookout folks still operate in the same way that the Baptiste volunteers did when that was a volunteer lookout. Every volunteer lookout is asked to bring a box or two of supplies and groceries to the training session. And then our district will get them up there prior to their hitch beginning.

MH: I think the self-reliance of it is something that I was the most concerned about before starting there, because we live in a world where that kind of self-reliance just doesn't exist anymore. And maybe it's one of the most gratifying parts of that experience. The understanding that we're still able to take care of ourselves to a certain degree without all the amenities that a society in the twenty-first century has for us. When you take that and you combine it with the solitude and with the opportunity to become incredibly well acquainted with a little spot of the forest, it's almost your own.

Those three things put together are what made the experience for me. I think a lot of people who talk about lookout life who haven't done it, don't necessarily see all of that. You know, they might have seen a lookout in a movie or a TV show or played a lookout video game, which was quite the rage a few years ago. And sometimes those experiences tend to emphasize the notion that fire lookouts are

hiding from civilization when in reality, it's just the opposite. We're getting to know ourselves and our planet and another group of like-minded people, I think, even better than anyone could anywhere else. Hopefully that made some sense.

KP: So, Mark, a question. You've talked about all the warm snuggly-huggy things about lookout life, which are all true. Can you share some less than warm snuggly-huggy things like maybe when you were in the middle of a lightning storm and the pucker factor was really high.

MH: (Chuckling) You know, people who haven't spent time at a lookout always ask me that question. They wonder if I see ghosts up there? Or if I've been afraid for my life up there? And you know, the answer is really, no. When you get a lightning storm the last thing I think about is the possibility that the tower might get hit by lightning. Because that's the moment of the lookout experience when everything you've learned about your countryside and about the job, those things come into play immediately. When I get a lightning storm, I am on high alert. I'm running out to the catwalk. I am scanning every single lightning strike I can. I'm trying to map the locations of them. My adrenaline is going and I'm just in awe of the experience of watching that because you're at an elevation that other people aren't, and you're in the lightning sometimes, you're not below it. And the sensation of it all is incredibly powerful. I don't have time to be worried about it. I'm just too excited about experiencing it. And then also looking for a downstrike that might turn it into a wildfire. And that's happened pretty much every summer. I remember, Kjell, maybe in 2016 or so you saw one of those downstrikes on Pioneer Ridge at about two in the morning. And you called me up from Firefighter and we spent the next hour or so out on the catwalk in the middle of the night, hoping that bit of orange would resurface again. And it was just a ton of fun. We didn't see it until the next morning, but it was there. And you called it in and they sent a helicopter out there. And they had it out by the by the end of the next day, and we had done our job. And that's what a storm like this is all about for me.

KP: Thanks for that little shine on.

MH: Yeah, there have been a couple of storms at Baptiste, though, that were honestly a little scary. In 2020, I think it was, we had a blizzard come in, over the Labor Day weekend. And everything got shut down. I woke up in the morning and there was a wind that was pretty literally about seventy miles an hour outside and the snow was coming down like crazy. And the wind just kept going and I couldn't go out on the catwalk safely. So, I curled up in my bed under a quilt with the dogs, and we all three of us huddled under that thing for hours. And I started hearing things on the lookout breaking. The flagpole snapped in two and the top half of it blew off into the forest. And the screen door was torn off the hinges and part of the doorframe went with it. And one of the windows blew out. And pretty soon that corner of the lookout was starting to fill with snow. I didn't feel like I was in danger, but I was realizing how much we are at the mercy of nature when we're in places like that. And I think that's also one of

the cool things in so many different ways. You know, when you're out in the forest, on your own, like that. They're just lots of reminders that you're not at the top of nature's food chain, and that's kind of cool.

MH: I know a few lookouts have had unfortunate experiences with other humans, too. But that's never really happened to me. It takes a fair amount of effort to get up to Baptiste, and the folks who've come up there have uniformly been super excited to see it, excited to get inside a lookout and experience what that is like. They appreciate what you're doing up there, and that makes me appreciate having them there. At Cyclone I've had folks come up in the middle of the night to look at the stars; and I heard people on the lookout steps at two in the morning; and I had somebody else show up at the crack of dawn while I was still in bed, and that sort of thing. But they're always happy to be there. And it's a reinforcement to you that you're doing something that's pretty special and that people appreciate.

MH: I just I can't come up with anything that's got that much of a pucker factor though, Kjell.

KP: That's okay. Anything else you want to throw at us?

MH: A couple of things, I guess. You know, we've talked a little bit about what the typical day is like. And I don't remember if I talked about the seasons last time or not, but the early season, you go up to a place like that, on top of a mountain, in northern Montana, at the end of June, and the days are almost endless. It stays light until 10:30 or so at night, and then the sun's coming through the windows before five the next morning, and everything is green, and the world is new. Then in September, you know, the days are hours shorter, and the air is cold, and you feel like you're someplace where you're not going to be welcome in a few more weeks. And it's interesting watching that progression over time.

It also changes how you look for fire, too. The beginning of the summer, there's not a tremendous amount of fire danger in a lot of these places, unless you have a lightning storm. But at the end of the summer, the odds of discovering a fire in a place like Baptiste start to go up pretty substantially. Most of the fires we see there are in late August and early September. So, the experience of being up there over the course the summer varies a lot. When you do see a fire, your whole focus is just to that fire. I called in one last August that the Forest decided to let burn. And so, I spent a month watching it, you know, every day getting up at dawn, observing the fire, watching the fire over the course of the day, and then into the night, and understanding how the life of a fire goes. It was an interesting experience in that you begin to see fire as being a part of the landscape and a part of the part of the world that you're experiencing, and maybe not necessarily seeing it as the enemy, which I think is the traditional way that people look at wildfires.

KP: Anything else Kjell? What else?

KP: Well, it's up to you. If you've run out of steam, I'll turn it over to Beth to follow up with her question that we opened with.

BH: Yeah, so, Mark, what would you like to see when people come to visit you, knowing that this is your place of work, but it's also where you live--and that you are in charge of the place.

MH: You would probably get different answers to this from a few different lookouts. Some lookouts are pretty gregarious and love to have folks come up, and I've known a few over the years who are less like that. But I think by and large most of us really enjoy having visitors to talk to at least in measured doses.

BH: Some people worry about people coming up with firearms or bringing their dogs, thinking that they might get up and might not want to come back down again--those types of experiences--and then also maybe just wanting to walk in on you--just open the door and walk in. Is that acceptable, I guess?

MH: I think the best way to look at coming to a fire lookout is to look at it not as being a tourist attraction or a hike destination but as a visit to a person's home. If you're coming to a lookout, especially when it's in the backcountry, I always recommend that folks, as soon as they get in sight of the lookout that they call out and say hello. That gives us a chance to understand that somebody's out there, and come out to the catwalk and return the greeting. The last thing that any of us wants is to have somebody show up in your living room when you're still in bed, or in the middle of taking a shower on the catwalk or something like that. So as soon as you get there, let us know.

One other thing to remember is that, if you haven't been to a lookout, it's a very confined space, the stairs are very steep. So, keep an eye on your children and on your dogs. Don't bring either of them up to the lookout without getting permission from the person who's there. Sometimes dogs do great coming up and down the lookout stairs and other people's dogs are absolutely terrified. I've seen people try to carry eighty-pound black labs down the lookout stairs because the dogs aren't brave enough to do it themselves. And so, as you get to the lookout, follow whatever instructions the lookout has to offer. Generally, it's a good idea to keep your weapons outside the lookout tower, especially bear spray, because you don't want to have bear spray going off inside the lookout cab.

Be excited about being there, because generally we're excited about it, too. Ask your questions, and we'll love to answer them. If you know you're coming up to the lookout, it also doesn't hurt to throw in a few snacks on the way, keeping in mind that fire lookouts don't have a lot of fresh food over the

course of the summer. Throw in a bag of Flathead cherries or a few apples or oranges or some trail mix or anything you want. And bring me cookies. I had one friend pack me up ice cream one summer, and that was the most amazing of treats ever.

I'd encourage folks to come visit, because you'll learn a lot about a part of American life that is rapidly disappearing, but that has played a really integral part in how we care for the forests over the last hundred and twenty years or so. I guess that's what I have to say about that.

KP: I might throw in a comment. If you as Joe public know that you're going up to visit a particular lookout and it's staffed, call the lookout or call the ranger station or the park office and see if they'll check with the person up there. There might be something that they're in desperate need of, or something they have at the ranger station that needs to go up and you can provide a way to help take that up. It's always a very kind thing to let the lookout know that you're coming, and see if there's something specific you can bring.

MH: And I really do encourage people to come visit these places. You know, they may or may not be around forever. Certainly, there are fewer operating lookouts now than there were even twenty years ago. And it's a part of our legacy. But it's also a way to understand a part of nature and a part of our world that you're not going to be able to see anywhere else.

You know--if you've been to the Flathead National Forest--right before World War Two there were close to a hundred and fifty lookout sites extant on the Forest. And by a decade or so later, by the early '50s or so, they were still staffing three or four dozen of them. But then by the '70s, that number had dropped to a quarter of that. And then by the '90s, there were only two staffed in the Flathead National Forest. We're up to seven staffed lookouts now, thanks in part to the volunteer program. It's still an experience that is rare. And even more rare in a lot of other places. Many national forests don't have staffed lookouts at all anymore. So come on up to the Flathead and hike up to Baptiste if you like and say hello to me, and I'd love it.

KP: Hey, Mark, I appreciate you spending the time with us today to give us a little better understanding of your addiction, and why you are not interested in controlling it in any way, shape, or form. I might just mention that I think Beth and I both appreciated a little break from reality. Of course, Beth's in Arizona right now so she's warm and snuggly. When I got up this morning, it was four degrees. I saw a message on Facebook from Samsarah, in West Yellowstone on her way to work this morning, it was minus 44. So just in our minds, visiting summer in the lookout world kind of takes us away from reality.

BH: Come join me and get your early season fix.

MH: That's the truth, you two. And that's true in a broader sense when you look at the news every morning, and most of the news is horrible. And you sometimes worry about the future of humanity, even. There's something about being able to disconnect from that and reconnect with our natural world in one of these places that seems all the more important.

BH: Well, if I could just kind of add to what you said earlier about how interesting it is that you're the only person there to experience many of the things you talked about, you know, the lighting, and mother bears with cubs, and that sort of thing. When I was at Cyclone, a friend came up and she brought her dog and her tent and she camped and then we watched the solar eclipse the next morning as it came by. And that is something you're not going to see very often just you know, by yourself. There was one guy who came up, this was at Cyclone Lookout, and he walked up but that was it. So, it was pretty special.

MH: Yeah, there are these moments that are somehow incredibly meaningful and somehow also often hard to convey--make the whole thing unique. I remember hearing from Kjell one day when he was at Firefighter and he had heard wolves howling just outside the lookout, and what a cool thing that was.

KP: Yeah, that moment's etched on my soul forever.

MH: So much cooler than you can ever describe.

KP: Well, awesome, guys. Mark, thanks for sharing part of your history with us, gives us a better idea of our own addiction. And what a rare and privileged summertime adventure it is to spend in outer space on top of a mountain.

I opened the session by saying that the Northwest Montana Lookout Association was ten-eight and in service. Just a little bit of history from a geezer standpoint--when I first started staffing lookouts fifty plus years ago, the federal agencies were kind of in transition going from ground line phones, to radios. Those early radios were big and bulky and they didn't carry very effectively--words. So, agencies used ten and four codes to talk to each other. And one of the things I remember is every radio had a little sticker of the ten code and the four code. And so, Mark, Beth, either one of you have anything you want to throw in before I put us out of service.

BH: Just many thanks, Mark. This is great again. So good to see you.

MH: Always good to see both of you guys and great to talk lookouts with a couple of old friends who share my passion. And I'll look forward to seeing both of you in three or four months when we start up another summer.

KP: Hey, thanks, guys. And this is the Northwest Montana chapter of the Lookout Association going ten-seven out of service.