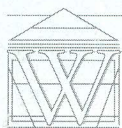


# THE ART OF MOUNTAIN WATCHING

—BY KEVIN GRANGE—

At North Cascades National Park, rangers posted in fire lookouts get a unique perspective on one of our nation's most fascinating ecosystems.



When you work as a fire lookout in Washington's North Cascades National Park, your day begins at 5:30 a.m., when the sun rises over miles of immense glaciated peaks, blasts through your window-walled cabin, and pin-balls off the propane stove, lightning stool, and Osborne Fire Finder, sending diamond light in all directions. There is no snooze button on this "alarm clock," and even if there were, North Cascades park rangers like Gerry Cook and Kelly Bush wouldn't push it. There is work to be done: snow must be boiled for drinking water, the cabin must be tidied should a park guest come to visit and, most important, a vast expanse of pristine wilderness needs to be looked after. It is July, fire season in the North Cascades, and despite the early hour, the day is hot, forest dry, and punctured purple clouds brood on the horizon.





itting quietly in the upper reaches of the Pacific Northwest, these 684,000 acres, which house two national recreation areas and half of the glaciers in the lower 48 states, could be the best kept secret of America's National Park System. Thanks to its Swiss-like snowy peaks and sub-alpine meadows teeming with wildflowers, the North Cascades has long been called the "American Alps." It is a good description—if you're talking about the park from the neck up—for below these jagged peaks and flowery meadows lies a wooded wonderland of ancient, moss-dripping trees, thundering rivers, and the cascading waterfalls for which the park was named. Rather than one defin-

in 2008—which means that instead of bumping into other hikers on the 400 miles of trails, you're far more likely to encounter the park's more permanent inhabitants, including deer, black bear, mountain goats, bald eagles, and, perhaps, the western tanager—a striking red, yellow, and black bird that migrates more than 3,000 miles to the North Cascades every year from Mexico.

Another migration occurs within the park each summer as park rangers trek into their mountaintop cabins and lift the storm shutters to stand as sentinels for the surrounding peaks. Ironically, the first fire lookout in the United States was "manned" by a woman (the term "fire lookout" is used for both the struc-

**FIRETOWERS LIKE DESOLATION LOOKOUT** were designed for staff to scan 22 miles in every direction and pinpoint a fire within a 160-acre section.



ing feature like its national park neighbors to the south, Mt. Rainier and Crater Lake, the North Cascades has a diversity of offerings—300 glaciers, 240 lakes, 75 species of mammals, 200 species of birds, and eight "life zones." Together, these distinct regions combine to give the North Cascades more plant species than any national park.

But perhaps the best statistic of all is the low number of tourists—fewer than 300,000

ture and the person on duty). A timber-camp cook named Mabel Grey was hired to watch over the North Fork of Clearwater River in Idaho in 1903. Years later, when a 1910 forest fire in Idaho killed 85 people and destroyed more than 3 million acres, a "housing boom" occurred on America's high peaks. At the request of Franklin D. Roosevelt and based on the doctrine of total fire suppression, the Forest Service's Civilian Conservation Corps



flocked to the mountains for the next 30 years, drilling eye bolts into rocks, setting wind cables, and assembling fire lookouts from prefabricated pieces. The lookouts were square 14 × 14-foot “glass cabins” with rope-webbed mattresses, kerosene lanterns, and a glass-shoed lightning stool on which to stand during electrical storms. When lookouts spotted smoke, they’d call the coordinates in on their radios after identifying the location with an Osborne Fire Finder—a circular, topographic map with two rotating sights that allowed lookouts to scan 22 miles in every direction and pinpoint a fire within a 160-acre quarter-section. By 1930 more than 9,000 fire lookout structures perched on high crags all

hard-luck stories of the fur traders and miners who followed the local indigenous people into the North Cascades, it’s no wonder lookout work was a hard sell in the upper Skagit Valley. But for a group of Zen-seeking writers in the 1950s, the life of a North Cascades fire lookout sounded perfect.

WHEN POET GARY SNYDER applied for a lookout position in 1952, the North Cascades was still being managed by the Forest Service. Snyder had high hopes of reading the collected works of Geoffrey Chaucer and William Blake during his stint as a seasonal ranger, and when he asked for the “highest, most remote and most difficult-of-access lookout,” he was

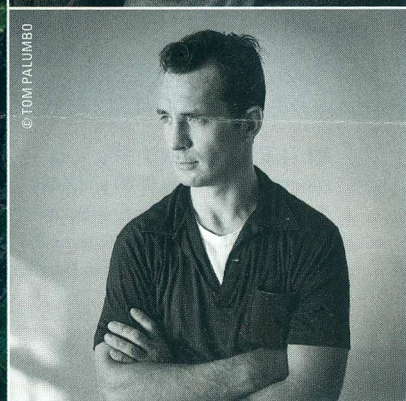
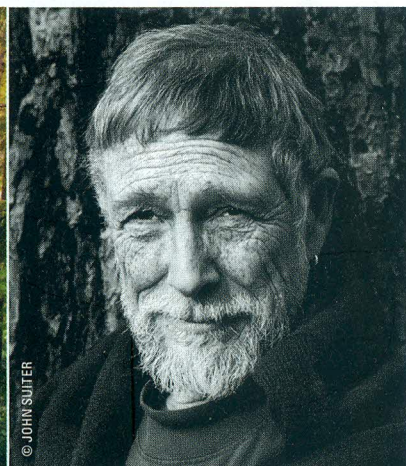
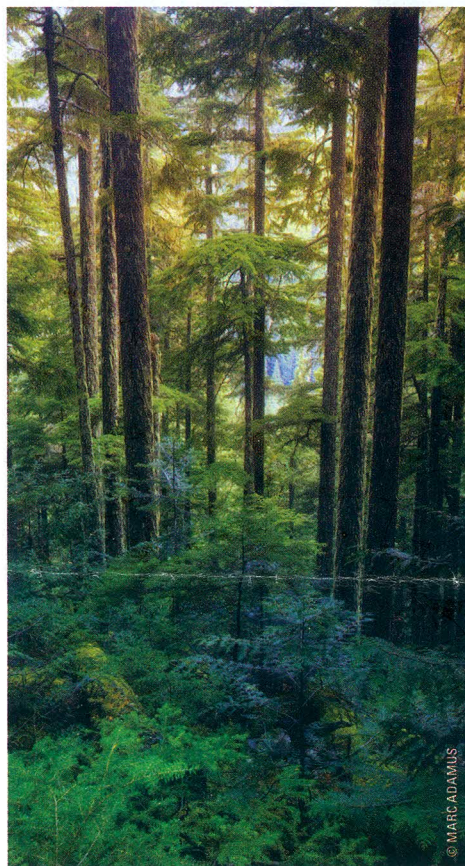
#### NORTH CASCADES DREW

famed poets and writers like Gary Snyder (top) and Jack Kerouac (bottom), whose immersion into mountain solitude allowed them to live like their Buddhist heroes.

The duties of a fire lookout were easy enough: to learn every peak, ridge, hill, road, trail, lake, creek, building and false smoke and spend at least twenty minutes every hour scanning the mountains for smoke.

across the United States, but there was just one problem—staffing them.

The duties of a fire lookout were easy enough: “to learn every peak, ridge, hill, road, trail, lake, creek, building and false smoke” and spend at least 20 minutes every hour scanning the mountains for smoke. The hard part, of course, was spending months in complete isolation. Back then, park rangers packed into their lookouts for the entire fire season and saw virtually no one. With mountains bearing such ominous names as Terror, Challenger, Fury, and Desolation and the



granted lookout duties atop 8,129-foot Crater Mountain. Snyder enjoyed the experience so much that he spent the following summer atop Sourdough Mountain and began telling his friends. Soon the North Cascade lookout logbooks were being signed by two other famed writers, Philip Whalen and Jack



Kerouac. As John Suiter suggests in his excellent book, *Poets on the Peaks*, Snyder and his pals also saw lookout life as a chance to imitate their Buddhist heroes, Hui-Neng and Han Shan, by retreating to a high mountain hermitage. In their lookout cabins, they envisioned a Japanese teahouse; the fog-shrouded

connections to the earth.” If Kerouac gave voice to the farmers, migrant workers, and minorities he met “on the road,” preaching their place in America, Snyder lent his poetic voice to everything that couldn’t speak—wind, water, trees, berries, and bears—and showed that, they too, are equally a part of our country and the people who call it home.



**IN THE 1970s AND '80s**, park rangers Gerry Cook (left) and Kelly Bush (right) worked as fire lookouts, strengthening their connections to places like High Meadows in North Cascades, shown here.

Northwest woods reminded them of Chinese silk paintings. By learning what Snyder called “the art of mountain watching,” they hoped to reach enlightenment... or at least get one step closer. The life of a fire lookout was the perfect chance to, as the Diamond Sutra instructed, “awaken the mind without fixing it anywhere.”

Although both Whalen and Kerouac wrote of their lookout experiences atop Sauk, Sourdough, and Desolation, Pulitzer prize-winning Snyder arguably had the biggest impact on America’s pristine natural places. For more than 50 years he has used his poetry to explore the nature of work and human affairs and encourage readers to find “deeper

ALTHOUGH NORTH CASCADES park rangers Kelly Bush and Gerry Cook didn’t have the Buddhist aspirations of Kerouac or Snyder, their lookout experiences left them equally enlightened. “Being on the lookout really solidified the idea that this is where I belong,” says Cook, who worked atop Desolation Peak

**Being on the lookout really solidified the idea that this is where I belong. I realized that my roots are the essence of mountains. It taught me to limit my expectations and live in the moment as well as one can.**

in 1970 and Sourdough in 1971. “I realized that my roots are the essence of mountains. It taught me to limit my expectations and live in the moment as well as one can.” Kelly Bush, a backcountry ranger who worked at Copper Ridge Lookout for three years in the late ’80s, agrees. “Back then, I didn’t measure happiness and success by how much money I made but, rather, how many days and nights I spent roaming the wilderness. This was the perfect opportunity.” To the courageous few who sought an intimate experience with nature, lookout life seemed to be the dream job. But there was one drawback—lightning.

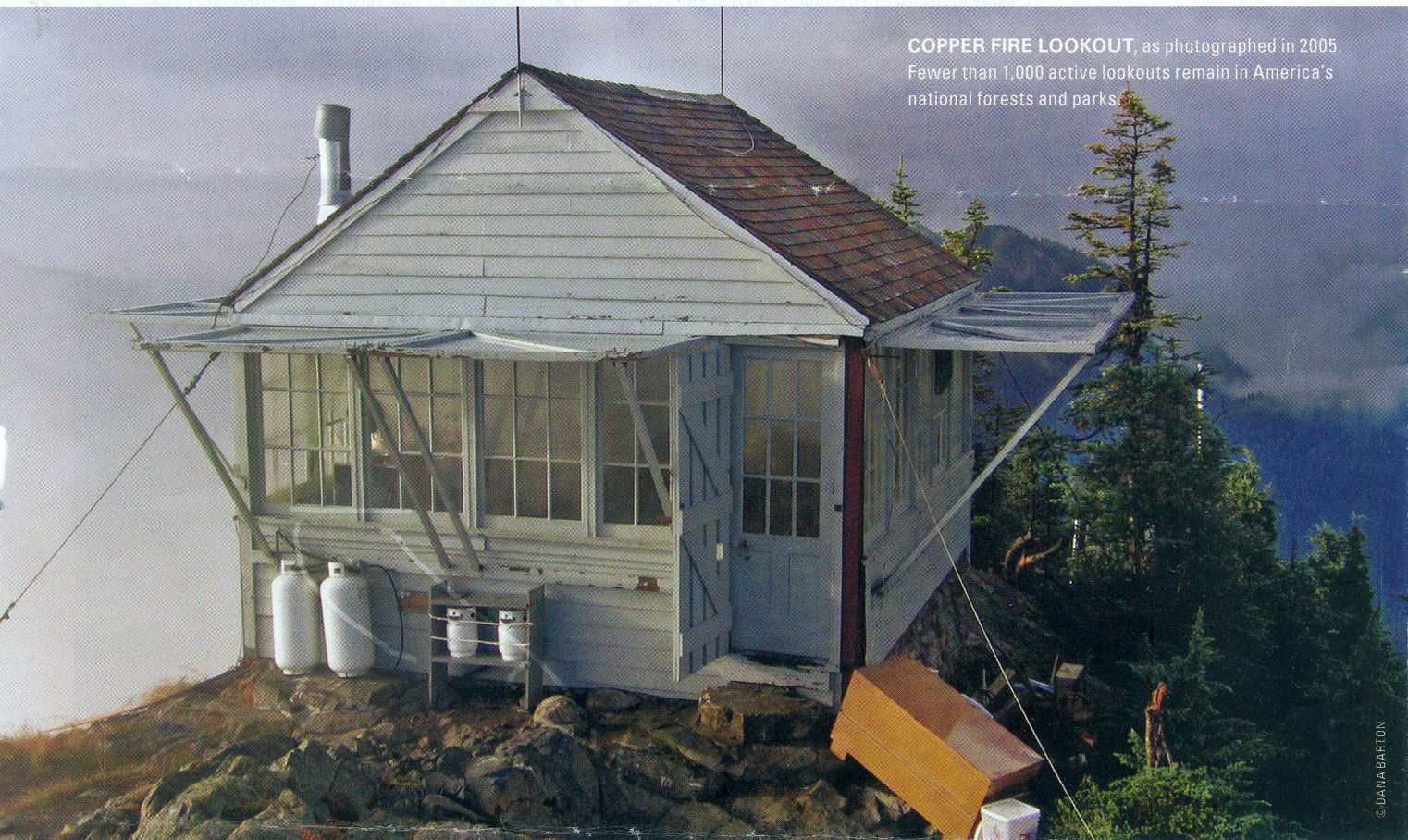
To experience a raging storm atop a fire lookout is to have a lightning-clenched fist



coming at you at eye level. "Just before lightning struck my lookout, there was this intense gathering of energy," recalls Bush. "Then suddenly it felt as if someone was moving a silk scarf across my face, and when I looked outside, I saw glowing balls of St. Elmo's fire rolling down the branches of trees next to

staffed their lookouts in the North Cascades. With airplanes, helicopters, and satellite pictures playing a greater role in spotting fires, fewer than 1,000 active lookouts remain in America's national forests and parks. Instead of packing up for the entire season, today's rangers generally have

**COPPER FIRE LOOKOUT**, as photographed in 2005. Fewer than 1,000 active lookouts remain in America's national forests and parks.



the lookout." Being at the highest point on the horizon, in a cabin full of metal appliances, one's natural impulse is to descend immediately, but it's during these terrifying, earth-shaking moments that a fire lookout is most needed. If a lightning strike starts a fire, a ranger needs to be there to call the blaze in. "During one storm, I saw three fires break out in the span of five minutes," recalls Cook. Thus during a storm, the lookout rangers must stand atop their glass-legged lightning stools, crouching, flinching, praying, and watching over the mountains, sacrificing their own fear in service of the forest.

A lot has changed in the years since Gary Snyder, Gerry Cook, and Kelly Bush

ten days on and four days off. In addition, fire lookouts today receive more visitors, many of whom, in the North Cascades, make pilgrimages to the sites that Snyder, Whalen, and Kerouac made famous. The policy of suppressing all forest fires has changed as well. "Fire is a natural part of the ecosystem," says Cook. "It helps seeds germinate, diversifies the forest canopy, and clears away underbrush that could act as 'kindling' for a bigger fire." Today, all fires started by a human hand are extinguished immediately, but fires that occur naturally are allowed to continue as closely monitored, controlled burns, unless they threaten people or property.



NORTH CASCADES National Park also has changed significantly in the last few decades: Global warming is lengthening the summers and melting glaciers; fifteen of the park's species are now on the endangered list; non-native plants threaten the natural ecosystem; and Homeland Security agents patrol the North Cascades border with British Columbia. But there have been many positive changes in the park as well: In 1976, the North Cascades Highway opened, allowing more people access to this pristine wilderness. Ten years later, the North Cascades Institute opened its doors with the goal of using science, art, literature, and hands-on experience to connect people

there in the future, gazing out on the surrounding peaks with unspeakable awe. Fire lookouts aren't merely prefabricated pieces of wood, glass, and wind cable; they are also testaments to the human spirit's capacity to seek something outside itself—and higher. And when you serve as a fire lookout in the North Cascades and the day ends, when the moon rises and the mountains have that timeless incandescent snow glow, you don't stay awake with worried questions like what to do with your life, because you're already doing it—you're living and loving. So you say goodnight to the surrounding peaks and fall fast asleep, because in less than seven hours, the sun will rise and signal the arrival of a new day. **NP**

**TIBETAN PRAYER FLAGS** hang from shutters at Desolation Lookout.

to this fragile ecosystem. And over the last five years, the park's hiking trails have been extended, and the interpretive programs have been improved and updated.

Many of the early fire lookout buildings in the North Cascades have long since disappeared, but Sourdough, Desolation, and Copper Ridge still stand. Like prayer flags on Himalayan mountain passes, they honor those who once stood there, those who are standing there now, and those who will stand

**Kevin Grange** is a freelance writer based in Park City, Utah, whose work has appeared in *The Orange County Register*, *Yoga Journal*, and *Seattle University Magazine*. He's currently working on a travel memoir about the "Snowman Trek" through the Himalayas of Bhutan.

To learn more about the history of writers in the fire lookouts of North Cascades, see John Suiter's book, *Poets on the Peaks*, at [www.poetsontheparks.com](http://www.poetsontheparks.com).



A 1972 PHOTOGRAPH shows Desolation Fire  
Lookout in North Cascades National Park.

