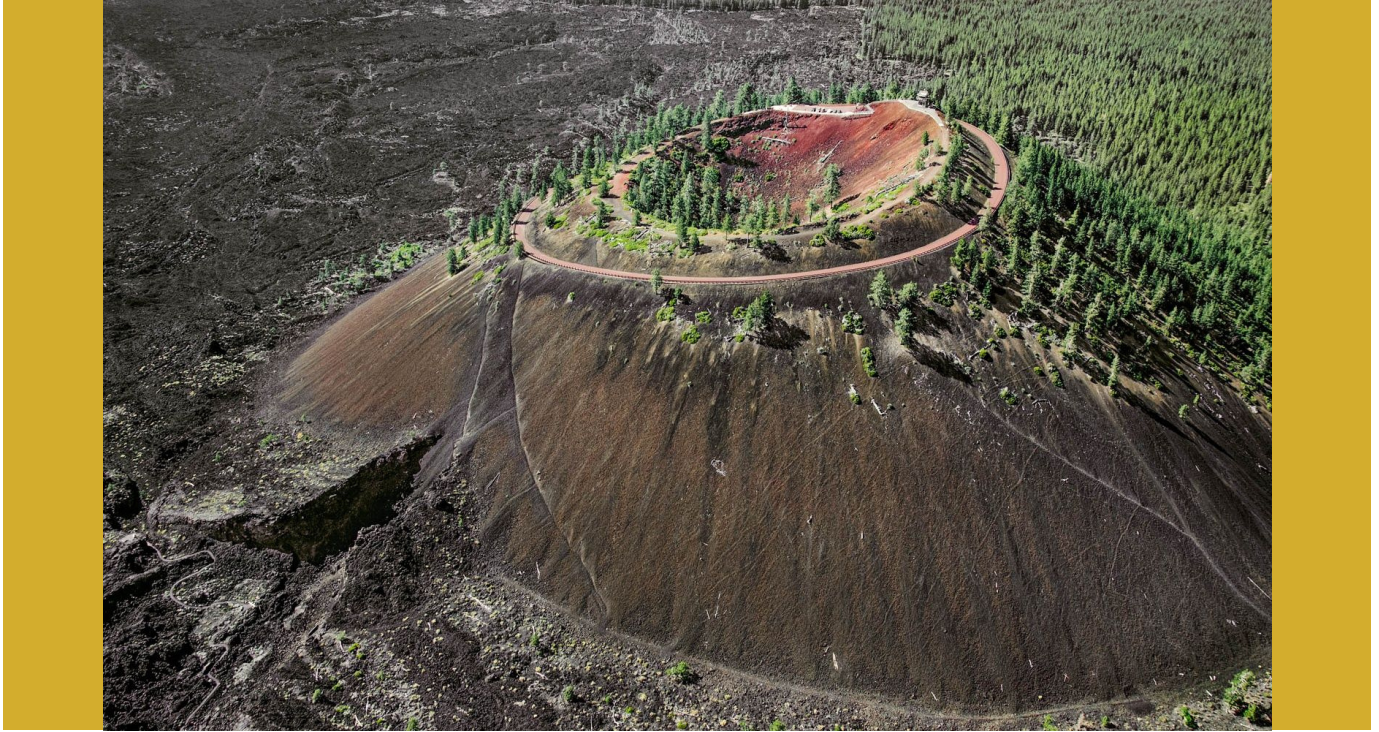


LAVA BUTTE LOOKOUT

In Celebration of Newberry National Volcanic Monument



An Ideal Location

Written by Amy Jensen with Historical Timeline Courtesy of Ron Kemnow

Lava Butte, the cinder cone at Lava Lands on the northwest flank of Newberry Volcano, has a fascinating history beyond just its geology. The butte became a fire lookout site all the way back in 1913, and is still staffed as a lookout today. It remains an important facet of wildland fire safety in Central Oregon. The Lookout (which is the name of both the building and the staff on site) sits more than 500 feet higher than the various peaks and valleys in the area, at an elevation of over 5,000 feet. From the vantage point on top of the butte, Lookouts are able to view an immense amount of land on a clear day. While many peaks are visible from this place, here are a few landmarks to help demonstrate the vast view: to the north, you can see Mt. Adams 155 miles away. Looking south, Mt. Scott is visible

approximately 77 miles away. The westward view is blocked by Mt. Bachelor, only 17 miles away, and viewers can look east to Pine Mountain, roughly 40 miles away.

Lookouts scan this huge swath of land for columns of smoke. The early detection that is provided by having someone staff this site, is vital for fire personnel to have as much time as possible to prevent a small fire from expanding into a massive forest fire. The Lookout on the top of Lava Butte is able to see the City of Bend and surrounding properties as well and can alert authorities to help with residential structure fires in addition to wildland fires.

When wildfires do occur in the area, the Lookout plays a key role in maintaining the safety of firefighters in the ground. Due to smoke, steep terrain, and dense forests, it can be extremely difficult for firefighters to see their surroundings from the ground. By radio, sitting atop the butte, the Lookout can communicate with the fire crew



Recent Photo of Lava Butte Lookout

to warn them about changing variables in the fire behavior, wind and other weather conditions that affect their work.

A gentleman by the name of Ron Kemnow works to compile local histories of lookouts throughout Oregon. He has assembled some interesting additions into a timeline about the happenings at Lava Butte over the last 107 years for history buffs who might be interested. We have included several interesting photos of the Lookout through the last century for your enjoyment. To see the original timeline and attributions, click the link [HERE](#).

A Historical Timeline of the Lava Butte Lookout

- **July 9, 1913:** "M.L. Merritt and Clyde McKay were up at Lava Butte Saturday. The timber interests are planning to run a telephone line to the summit and keep a fire lookout there during the summer." (The Bend Bulletin)
- **July 16, 1913:** "The first action taken by the Deschutes Valley Fire Patrol Association will be the placing of a fire lookout at the top of Lava Butte. E. T. Gerrish has been employed and probably tomorrow will go to the butte. He will camp near the base on the river and have a horse to ride to the summit daily. A phone line will be installed next week." (The Bend Bulletin)



A group climbing the butte in 1910, prior to the development of a road - Photo Courtesy of USFS

- **1924:** Lava Butte was first used as a lookout point by the Forest Service.
- **February 11, 1928:** "Plans for establishment of a lookout station on the peak of the old volcano were made known here when Deschutes national forest allotment estimates were compiled for approval by the Portland district office. If the request for a station on Lava butte is sanctioned by district officials, a lookout will be on duty in the coming summer on the peak of the old volcano. A temporary shelter will be used to house this lookout for the first year. In connection with plans for

establishment of a lookout post on Lava Butte, it has been made known that a good trail will probably be built to the top of the cone. This trail will not only prove useful in taking supplies to the station, but it will enable tourists and others traveling the Dalles-California highway to climb the cone without any great difficulty, it is explained. Local forest service officials believe a lookout on Lava butte will prove of value in fire protective work. This station will overlook the new land exchange areas. Also, the lookout on Lava butte will have a sweeping view of the western slopes of the Three Sisters foothills and north and west sides of the Paulinas." (The Bend Bulletin)

- **February 13, 1928:** "Lava butte, prominent peak of the central Oregon plateau, is to play a new role in the 'fire business' of the Bend country. A forest service lookout station, to be used in locating timber fires, is to be established on the summit of the volcanic cone. Plans outlined by officials of the Deschutes national forest not only call for the establishment of a station on the top of Lava butte, but, if the district office gives its approval, a trail will be built up the rough slopes of the cone. This trail will enable tourists using The Dalles-California highway to climb to the summit of the butte. An unusually fine view of the upper Deschutes country, with the Three Sisters and attendant peaks to the west, can be secured from the top of the cone. Although its lava already is crumbling, Lava butte, 10 miles south of Bend, is declared by geologists to be one of the most recent cones in the northwest. Despite its youth, Lava butte has provided soil for a generation of pine trees now dead. A deep crater is on top of the butte. The lookout station will be built on the edge of this crater." (Morning Oregonian)
- **July 3, 1929:** "Edward Stadter, Bend, takes up his duties as lookout on Lava Butte today. This is the first time the forest service has had a lookout on Lava Butte which is near the cut over land recently exchanged by Brooks-Scanlon Lumber Company for stumpage in the national forest. Stadter will have the dual position of lookout and fireman and will be equipped to go out to locate fires which he has observed through his post." (The Bend Bulletin)
- **July 10, 1929:** "Inclusion of Bend in the vast acreage guarded by Deschutes national forest lookouts was suggested here today following the receipt of

information that lookouts are providing triangulation readings on fires in this city. Sunday evening when a grass and brush fire burned just to the north of Bend, moving toward the city in front of a stiff northwest wind, Ernest Putnam, Pine Mountain lookout, and Ed Stadter, lookout stationed on Lava Butte, telephoned triangulation readings to the forest service central platting office here and Leslie Colvill, central dispatcher, mapped the fire. In making the run to the blaze, the local fire department answered a still alarm and it was believed for a time in the local forest office that the lookouts had spotted a Bend fire that had not been reported to the fire department." (The Bend Bulletin)

- **August 12, 1930:** "Construction of five lookout houses, two guard cabins and several telephone lines is planned by the Deschutes national forest for the coming

fall, winter and spring, Carl B. Neal, supervisor, announced today. A telephone line from west of the Deschutes to Lava Butte will be built and a new line to the Shevlin-Hixon logging camp will be constructed." A standard lookout house is to be erected on Lava butte. (Morning Oregonian)

- **1930:** In August plans were revealed that a lookout house for the lookout-fireman is to be built. Also a new telephone line will be constructed making communications by telephone on the forest service lines. The present telephone connection is from a private line.



Photo Courtesy of USFS

- **1932:** A 14x14 L-4 hip-roof lookout house was constructed at a cost of \$617.93.
- **August 19, 1932:** "Construction of a road to the summit of Lava Butte will be started by the Forest Service this fall, under the unemployment relief program, and, according to present plans, the top of the extinct volcano will be accessible to motorists early in 1933..."

...At present, the top of Lava Butte is reached over a trail which zig-zags up the east side of the cone. It is probable that the road will swing around the northern base of the butte, then will cut back along the eastern slope, gaining elevation. A sort of loop is tentatively planned for the top, but because of the sharp edges of the crater, it may be necessary to do some leveling for a grade." (The Bend Bulletin)

- **August 25, 1933:** "So far as tourists and motorists are concerned, Lava Butte is the most popular lookout point in the Deschutes National Forest. Approximately 600 persons have visited the butte this season, making the ascent by car over the new road, reports Tom Brown, lookout. The first question the majority of the visitors ask Brown is: "How old is this lava?" (The Bend Bulletin)
- **June 11, 1936:** "Projected against the snow-capped Cascade skyline and the Three Sisters group immediately to the west, activities of a forest service lookout on duty in the Deschutes woods were pictured today for the Paramount News, with cameraman DeGroat in charge. Harold Heiser, Lava Butte lookout, formed the immediate "foreground" for the picture. He was filmed in the act of charting a fire, which happened to be imaginary. Telephoto lens of the cameraman's equipment brought the Cascades into the picture, against a cloud background. The scenic films will be released under captions bearing the familiar phrase, "Near Bend." DeGroat has been spending several days at the G. T. McFadden summer home on the Metolius River. The cameraman specializes in making films of scenic places, for national release." (The Bend Bulletin)

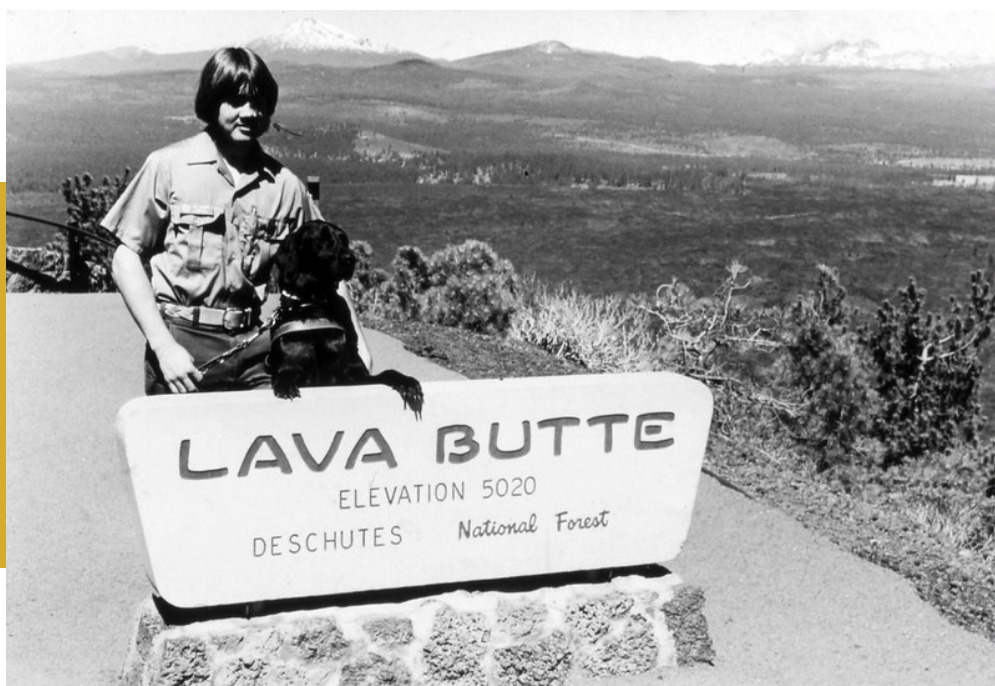


Photo Courtesy of USFS

- **August 21, 1936:** "The weather instruments of the forest service, until yesterday located on the roof of the post office building, have been moved to Lava Butte, 10 miles south of Bend to give better indication of weather conditions in the Deschutes forest, officials of the local office said today. Instruments taken to the new site were the hydrothermograph, psychrometer, and rain gauge." (The Bend Bulletin)
- **March 26, 1939:** "A Deschutes forest lookout scanned central Oregon from his Lava Butte post tonight, watching for wisps of smoke earlier in the season than at any time in the history of the forest. Two fires this week blackened 20 acres of cutover land and blazed close to a sawmill, causing officials to send the lookout up the mountain in a hurry. Low humidity and high temperatures, with no rain, created unusually hazardous fire conditions for this time of year." (Montana Standard)
- **May 20, 1939:** "The depth of the snow on Lava Butte reached six inches early yesterday, Jack Arney, lookout, reported after excavating a runway through drifts that practically covered the garage. Arney managed to get his car out of the garage and down the hill with considerable difficulty. Ranger Joe Lammi of the Bend district attempted to drive to the relief of the temporarily stranded lookout, but encountered such deep snow on the north side of the Butte that he was forced to give up the trip and back his car down the steep grade." (The Bend Bulletin)
- **August 9, 1940:** "Cecil Reid, lookout, saw a puff of white smoke rise above The Dalles-California highway opposite the old Vandever ranch this afternoon at about 2:15 o'clock, and notified headquarters that a fire had been spotted. Then the smoke suddenly disappeared. Reid continued to watch and saw passing cars stop on the highway. He surmised that an accident had occurred. State officers were notified from the local police station and a patrolman was dispatched south, to investigate." (The Bend Bulletin)
- **July 31, 1941:** "A 67-mile-an-hour wind, highest, so far as known, ever officially recorded in the Deschutes country, whipped across the exposed summit of Lava butte yesterday evening as a torrential rain fell in the upper Deschutes basin. So fierce was the wind, Willard Nelson, lookout, reported that it drove rain into the lookout house, through tiny cracks. The Lava butte lookout house is anchored to the rim of the old volcano. Otherwise, foresters point out, it would have been blown over the steep slope." (The Bend Bulletin)

- **August 5, 1941:** "Willard Nelson, forest service lookout on the lofty volcanic rim of Lava butte, didn't locate any fires yesterday afternoon, but he did spot an accident and played the role of good Samaritan in giving first aid. The forest lookout, in his glass house on the 500-foot high butte, heard a crash, looked down on The Dalles-California highway, which skirts the cone, and saw a car in the "ditch." He notified the central platting office in Bend and was advised to investigate. Nelson hurriedly drove to the highway and found in the car Mrs. Lundy, who gave her address as Lapine. She was bleeding badly from several cuts. Nelson rendered first aid, then brought her to town." (The Bend Bulletin)
- **June 17, 1946:** "A new two-way road to the top of Lava Butte was completed and opened to traffic today. (June 17th) Included in the road development was the construction of two parking areas on the rim of the crater which provide space for 30 cars. The new road has a ten percent grade as its maximum, compared with the 19 percent on the old one-way road which served the lookout station and as many as 5,000 registered visitors in pre-war years. To accomplish the new grade it was necessary to add another half circle in the spiral around the cone. Lynn McCall was foreman of the crew which started work on the road in February and the job was completed with William Ogletree in charge." (The Bend Bulletin)
- **July 28, 1947:** "Through the generosity of a former navy man, Cecil McLeod, Bend, the rugged beauty of the eastern Oregon Cascades may now be viewed through a pair of powerful Japanese naval binoculars mounted atop Lava Butte, forest service lookout point 10 miles south of Bend. The binoculars, which have five inch lenses and magnify 20 times, were found by McLeod while he was stationed on an island in the South Pacific during world war II. About a year ago he donated them to the Deschutes national forest. Forest service employees have constructed a special mount for the delicate instrument which allows it to be rotated and raised and lowered. A full sweep of the Central Oregon area is covered by the binoculars." (The Bend Bulletin)
- **May 1, 1950:** "Forest service officials announced today that the spiral road from The Dalles-California highway to the top of Lava Butte is to be surfaced in the present season. Bids for the 1.155 mile job will be received by the United States forest service up to 10 a.m., daylight time on May 24, in the regional office in Portland. Work will be completed in the present season. It is estimated that 66 tons of asphalt will be required to surface the road." (The Bend Bulletin)

- **May 27, 1950:** "Low bid for the improvement of the Lava Butte spiral road to the forest service viewpoint on the crater rim was submitted by Babler Brothers, of Redmond, it was learned here today. The amount of the bid has not yet been learned, forest officers said." (The Bend Bulletin)
- **July 28, 1950:** "Surfacing operations were completed this week on the spiral road to the top of Lava Butte. Work on the project was begun last week and the final sealer coat of oil was laid on Monday and Tuesday of this week."



Lookout in 1950 - Photo Courtesy of USFS

- **August 25, 1954:** "Annually, some 30,000 persons, by actual count, visit the butte, location of a Deschutes National Forest lookout. The count is made only when the butte is occupied by a lookout. The many who visit the lookout earlier in the season or late in the fall are not included in the 30,000 count." (The Bend Bulletin)
- **June 26, 1962:** "To provide for the new information center, the lookout house on Lavva Butte is being

reconstructed, with its base to be devoted to information quarters. Staffing the center through the summer will be two U. S. Forest Service employees, who will be available to meet the public from 14 to 16 hours daily on shifts. The information center, under the elevated lookout house, is to have tinted glass enclosures on three sides, south, west and north, with the entrance to the east. The center will have a stone base, with glass on top of this. Above the glass, the stone work will reach to the base of the elevated lookout station." (The Bend Bulletin)

- **July 1, 1962:** "A visitors information center is to be established by the U.S. Forest Service on Lava Butte, a cinder cone which overlooks the Deschutes region from the edge of Highway 97 just ten miles south of Bend. A.A. Poust, Deschutes National Forest supervisor, said the center, first of its kind on the forest, will be opened soon with attendants on duty daily. The information center will be in the lower part of the Lava Butte lookout, with large glass windows facing the Cascades in the west. Newberry Crater in the south and the Smith Rock country and Mt. Hood to the north." (The Sunday Oregonian)

- **September 27, 1964:** "The new information center on top of Lava Butte, old volcanic cone adjacent to U.S. Highway 97 a short distance south of Bend, has been visited so far this season by 87,400 persons, Deschutes National Forest officials reported. This is an all-time record. The information center, under the lookout station, has been closed for the season, but the spiral road to the viewpoint remains open. Forest officials predict that before the road to the summit crater of the butte is closed, attendance will reach the 90,000 mark." (The Sunday Oregonian)

- **September 19, 1997:** "Demolition of the lookout will begin October 1 with plans to finish on October 11. Forest Service employees will be dismantling and hauling away the building." ("Friday News")



Visitors to the Butte in July of 1962 - Photo Courtesy of USFS

- **June 8, 1998:** "A new lookout was constructed to replace the 40 year old building that had reached the end of its usable life. The lookout had suffered through the freeze-thaw conditions that weakened its foundation and caused cracks so the rain and snow would run into the lookout and visitors center below. The new structure was constructed by Forest Service personnel, bids from private contractors came in higher than the budget. The footings were sunk four feet into the top of the Butte, with 40 cubic yards of concrete used in the footings and foundation. Solid one foot square Douglas fir beams were used to support the walls and second story lookout area, thus, the need for guy wires was eliminated. The weather became a challenge when the timbers had to be moved around the rim trail on wheeled trailers, with winds that can reach as much as 50 miles per hour." (The Bend Bulletin)