



Story Lookout: On the Watch for Illegal Burning

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You might assume that all fire lookouts were built to watch for wildfires, but the Story Lookout, just outside of Houston, was built in 1988 to keep an eye out for another problem: illegal burning. At that time, you could have a campfire without a permit, but anything larger – burning a slashpile or a field – required a permit. Infractions were frequent enough that the Ministry of Forests decided to place a lookout observer on a knob near Houston, with the added benefit that this observer could also keep an eye out for wildfires.

Ironically, Story Lookout was only used for about five years. In 1994 regulations changed with the new Forest Practices Code, and there was no longer a need to keep an eye out for illegal burning. The lookout cabin stood idle until the trail to it was refurbished five years ago thanks to the Houston Hikers (<http://houstonhikers.ca>). Set in a natural clearing atop a ridge extending north from the main mass of Morice Mountain, the square cabin has a commanding 360° view that takes in both the Pleasant Valley (that is, Houston) to the northeast, and of the Morice River valley to the southwest. In its name we read an informal tribute to Marge Storey, commemorating her long career as a lookout observer across the North.

The trail is four kilometres and 400m elevation (allow one-and-a-half to two hours) up to the old lookout. You can tent outside – sleeping on the floor inside is not recommended until the lightning arrester system is repaired! There's an outhouse, but no water.

The trailhead is about 20 minutes from Houston. Leave town on the Morice River Forest Service Road, which turns south off Highway 16 just west of Houston, at the large sign for the Canfor mill. At KM 7 pass a turn on the left for the East Peacock FSR, and 1 km later, right opposite the KM 8 marker, turn left on a small dirt road where there is a sign for “Story Lookout Trail.” Some maps call this the “West Peacock FSR,” but there's no sign for that.

This quiet, flat two-track road is a little bit rough for the first kilometer, but soon smooths out. It is drivable by two-wheel-drive vehicles with normal clearance, but watch out for a few road-wide potholes. Drive in 5.6 km to the trailhead, indicated on the right by flagging tape and a sign.

The trail immediately enters spruce and fir forest with devil's club in the understory (although none of it barring your way: the trail is well cleared). It ascends in gentle switchbacks up the side of a ridge, on top of whose broad back the under-story changes to blue- and huckle-berries, and you walk a surprising distance (for the Bulkley Valley) without going uphill. Finally the trail dips past a meadow surrounding a swampy lake, and then ascends the ridge to the lookout.

The lookout is a bit of a museum. Inside one finds the old sighting instrument used to determine the bearing to a fire, while the “Lookout Observers' Manual” details everything you ever wanted to know about how lighting works and how it starts forest fires.

It is quite compelling to imagine being the lookout observer, whose job – at the very moment that lightning was most likely to strike her humble shelter -- was to not run downhill but to stay put and scan for smoke! The thick steel cables securing the structure to the ground suggest the weather it was designed to withstand.

There is no water at the lookout, but hikers (and dogs) will find water along the trail at several spots, where small streams are crossed. The Houston Hikers' long-term hope is to refurbish the lookout building itself (for overnight stays) and create a trail to link it to the ski cabin on Morice Mountain.