

NATIONAL INTERDISCIPLINARY  
**LOOKOUT  
CONFERENCE**

The National Conference Dedicated to the Study of Fire Lookouts in the Human Environment.

**FIRE**  
**LOOKOUTS**  
**AND**  
**THE**  
**WILDERNESS**

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*Book of Abstracts*

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## Conference organizers

Michael Decker

College of Graduate Studies

Andrea Alberto Dutto

College of Art and Architecture

## Conference board

Billy Cooter

Idaho Fire Lookouts

Michael Decker

University of Idaho

Andrea Alberto Dutto

University of Idaho

Mike Guerin

Forest Fire Lookout Association

Cat House

Idaho Fire Lookouts

Gary Weber

Forest Fire Lookout Association

# 2026 National Interdisciplinary Lookout Conference (NILC)

Cover image: View from Sheephill Lookout near the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness.

# FIRE LOOKOUTS AND THE WILDERNESS

*This 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of the National Interdisciplinary Lookout Conference (NILC) focuses on exploring both the history and the evolving role of fire lookout towers and content adjacent to fire lookout towers.*

*This year's theme "Fire Lookouts and the Wilderness" explores the fire lookout and Wilderness as mutual concepts, examining how they are connected and relate to one another. It will investigate the mutual infrastructures and relationships that these concepts create in both humans and human institutions.*

*The conference is sponsored by the University of Idaho's College of Art and Architecture, College of Graduate Studies, Center for Digital Inquiry and Learning and is developed in partnership with the Forest Fire Lookout Association.*

Michael Decker, Andrea Alberto Dutto

# CONFERENCE SCHEDULE

- 8:00-8:30 am— Registrations
- 8:30-8:50 am— Welcome and Opening Remarks:  
Michael Decker, Andrea A. Dutto, Mike Guerin
- 8:50-9:40 am— **OPENING DISCUSSION** | Vandal Ballroom  
Speakers: Bill Fordyce  
*In addition to fire detection, what are the purposes of a Wilderness fire lookout?*
- 10:00-11:00 am— **PANEL 1** | Room 321  
*The Stories of Fire Lookouts: Lived History and the Memory of Place*  
Chair: Brayden Jones  
Speakers: Betsy Booth  
*Sheepeater and Sheep Hill Lookouts*  
  
Michael Decker  
*Keeping Watch: Mapping Idaho's Fire Lookouts through Lived History*
- 10:00-11:00 am— **PANEL 2** | Room 105  
*Preserving Idaho Fire Lookouts: A Regional Specific Approach*  
Chair: Andrea A. Dutto  
Speakers: Kevin Roach  
*Timeless Guardians: Wilderness Fire Lookouts*  
  
Cat House and Billy Cooter  
*Idaho Fire Lookouts*
- 10:00-11:00 pm— **PANEL 3** | Room 231  
*A Wild Character: Lookouts in the Wilderness and on the Wildland Urban Interface*  
Chair: Aaron Lavery  
Speakers: Pam Aunan  
*Sundance Mountain Lookout*  
  
Mark Wetherington  
*A Tale of Two Lookouts: Location, Visitation, and Wilderness Character*
- 10:00-11:00 am— **PANEL 4** | IRIC Atrium  
*Being Somewhere: A Juxtaposition Between Staffing and Visiting Fire Lookouts and the Wild Experience*  
Chair: Brandon Light  
Speakers: Maryann Green  
*Oregon Butte Lookout: The Sumer of 1978*  
  
Kristie Wolf  
*Comfort is a Slow Death: Lessons from Building Moonpass Lookouts*

- 11:15-11:45 am — **TALK 1** | IRIC Atrium  
Speaker: **Mark Moak**  
*What is the value of a Wilderness Fire Lookout?*
- 11:45-12:45 pm — Lunch | Light snacks in IRIC Atrium
- 12:45- 1:15 pm — **TALK 2** | IRIC Atrium  
Speaker: **Luke Channer**  
*Remote Fire Lookouts of Idaho*
- 1:25-1:55 pm — **TALK 3** | IRIC Atrium  
Speaker: **Bill Moore**  
*Wilderness Fire Policy Statement*
- 2:00-2:30 pm — **TALK 4** | IRIC Atrium  
Speaker: **Katie Russ**  
*Collaborative Partnerships: Restoring a Lookout in the Plumas National Forest*
- 3:00-3:45 pm — **PANEL 5** | Vandal Ballroom  
*How to Restore and Staff Fire Lookouts*  
Speakers: **Katie Russ**  
**Leif Haugen**
- 4:00-4:45 pm — **KEYNOTE** | Vandal Ballroom  
Speaker: **Tim Casperson**  
*Hot Shot Wake Up Podcast and the Future of Wilderness Fire Policy*
- 5:30-7:30 pm — Dinner | 1912 Center  
*Lookout Post Card Contest*

IN  
ADDITION  
TO  
FIRE  
SUPPRESSION,  
WHAT ARE  
THE  
PURPOSES  
OF A  
WILDERNESS  
FIRE  
LOOKOUT?

## Bill Fordyce

Bill Fordyce has staffed fire lookouts since 2009 on several national forests, wilderness areas, and national parks. After a year off due to government cuts, Bill is back staffing Black Mountain Lookout on the Nez Perce National Forest in Idaho.

While the future of fire detection relies on the integrated “handshake” between IR satellites, aerial reconnaissance, and ground-based observation, the role of the Fire Lookout extends far beyond spotting plumes. This dialogue explores the multifaceted responsibilities of Lookouts in modern wilderness management. Beyond fire monitoring, Lookouts serve as vital communication hubs, acting as human radio repeaters during Search and Rescue operations and providing emergency tracking for field personnel like Trail Crews and Wilderness Rangers. By examining these different duties—from reporting downed aircraft to assisting lost hikers—this discussion highlights the Lookout’s enduring necessity as a cornerstone of backcountry safety and coordination.

THE  
STORIES  
OF  
FIRE  
LOOKOUTS:  
LIVED  
HISTORY  
AND THE  
MEMORY  
OF  
PLACE

Speakers: Betsy Booth  
Michael Decker

Chair: Brayden Jones

## **SHEEPEATER AND SHEEP HILL LOOKOUTS**

*Betsy Booth*

**T**old through the experience of working and living on lookouts for the better part of a decade, this presentation tells the unique perspective of a lookout specifically in official Wilderness areas. More commonly referred to as “Capital W Wilderness.” This presentation will specifically detail what life is like on a remote Wilderness lookout. How this lifestyle interacts and potentially contradicts the intended purpose of the Wilderness Act of 1964, and what the changing roles of lookouts are in Wilderness

## **KEEPING WATCH: MAPPING IDAHO’S FIRE LOOKOUTS THROUGH LIVED HISTORY**

*Michael Decker*

**K**eeping Watch is a geo-spatial narrative project that embeds oral history testimonies by former and current fire lookouts on a GIS interface. These stories were collected by Jack Kredell, Chris Lamb, and Michael Decker in the Summer of 2021 across the state of Idaho. The goal of this project is two-fold: to create an online archive for this vital yet disappearing component of Idaho history and to reconceptualize the space these fire towers define via the juxtaposition of the map’s inherent grid and GIS structure, and the subjective experience of those who have, are, and will experience these places. Keeping Watch also aims to elucidate the relationship between Wilderness and fire lookouts.

**PRESERVING  
IDAHO  
FIRE  
LOOKOUTS:  
A  
REGIONAL  
SPECIFIC  
APPROACH**

Speakers: Billy Cooter  
Cat House  
Kevin Roach

Chair: Andrea A. Dutto

## **TIMELESS GUARDIANS: WILDERNESS FIRE LOOKOUTS**

*Kevin Roach*

**A**s budget cuts and technology advancements impact wildfire detection, the value of Wilderness lookouts remains vital. Trained eyes detect early flare-ups invisible to technology, provide real-time, localized context, and offer critical on-the-ground insight that enhances fire response. Wilderness lookouts embody the Forest Service's mission, connecting people, land, and legacy. Beyond efficiency, they offer ecological wisdom, public engagement, and lower-impact alternatives to expanding technology infrastructure and reducing human impact in Wilderness areas. We will look at the history of two lookouts in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness: Bear Wallow and Shissler.

## **IDAHO FIRE LOOKOUTS**

*Billy Cooter and Cat House*

**L**ast year, Billy Cooter and Cat House introduced Idaho Fire Lookouts and their mission to document and preserve Idaho's historic fire lookout history. This year's presentation offers a brief update on the work completed since last year's presentation. In this session, they will share notable lookout history uncovered through boots-on-the-ground fieldwork, archival research, and conversations with those connected to these sites. The update will also touch on ongoing efforts to raise awareness and support preservation of fire lookouts, emphasizing their continued relevance to Idaho's history, landscape, and fire management.

**A  
WILD  
CHARACTER:  
LOOKOUTS  
IN THE  
WILDERNESS  
AND ON  
THE  
WILDLAND  
URBAN  
INTERFACE**

Speakers: Pam Aunan  
Mark Wetherington

Chair: Aaron Lavery

## SUNDANCE MOUNTAIN LOOKOUT

*Pam Aunan*

This presentation will discuss the history of fire detection near Priest River, Idaho in the Selkirk Mountain range. Specifically, it will talk about the history of Sundance Mountain Lookout detection program, the evolution of fire watching over time, and how new technologies are impacting the future of lookouts. This presentation will also cover how public support has actually helped put several lookouts back into proposed operation in recent years.

## A TALE OF TWO LOOKOUTS: LOCATION, VISITATION, AND WILDERNESS CHARACTER

*Mark Wetherington*

St. Mary Peak Lookout, located in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness and staffed by volunteers, sees over a thousand visitors during the approximately two months that it is staffed each year. Diablo Mountain Lookout, also located in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness and also staffed by volunteers for a similar length of time, sees only a few dozen visitors. While both are in "Capital W" wilderness, their locations and the massive differences in visitation by the public result in profoundly different wilderness experiences for both the volunteer lookouts and the visitors. This presentation would discuss the differences between these two lookouts and how location, landscape, and recreation impact their wilderness character.

**BEING**  
**SOMEWHERE:**  
A  
JUXTAPOSITION  
BETWEEN  
STAFFING  
AND  
VISITING  
FIRE LOOKOUTS  
AND THE  
WILD  
"EXPERIENCE"

Speakers: Maryann Green  
Kristie Wolf

Chair: Brandon Light

## **OREGON BUTTE LOOKOUT: SUMMER 1978**

*Maryann Green*

**O**regon Butte Lookout stands atop a high peak in the Gospel Hump Wilderness Area, serving as a firetower lookout with breathtaking views. Oregon Butte Lookout one of the most remote lookouts in Idaho. This presentation will detail the Summer of 1978 when I landed a job as a remote wilderness lookout. I spent the summer. I spent most of this summer along with my newborn son, Jeff. This presentation will cover my daily life and adventures from this summer.

## **COMFORT IS A SLOW DEATH: LESSONS FROM BUILDING MOONPASS LOOKOUTS**

*Kristie Wolf*

**C**omfort is a slow death is the philosophy behind my career building immersive, off-grid places in unlikely locations. After purchasing the Crystal Peak Lookout in 2017, I fell in love with lookouts as I spent months restoring and turning it into an AirBnb. It has come to be called Moonpass Lookouts: inspired by historic designs, built entirely off-grid and accessed by snowcat in winter. The project required crowd-funding hundreds of thousands of dollars, hauling materials up steep mountain roads, designing for brutal snow loads and fluctuations in temperature, and learning (often publicly and painfully) where my ideas were wrong.

WHAT  
IS  
THE  
VALUE  
OF  
A  
WILDERNESS  
FIRE  
LOOKOUT?

## Mark Moak

Mark Moak, a Professor Emeritus of Art at Rocky Mountain College in Billings, Montana, is a photographer, artist, art historian, world traveller, musician, and a long-time fire lookout with 43 seasons of experience.

**M**odern wilderness fire policy has transitioned from automatic suppression to the strategic monitoring of “managed” fires. Consequently, the fire lookout’s role has evolved beyond simple detection into a multifaceted position centered on safety and stewardship. By providing 24/7 “ground truth” on fire behavior and weather, lookouts serve as a critical safety net for field crews. Furthermore, they act as wilderness ambassadors, offering public education and fostering support for public lands. As long as human activity continues in protected areas, lookouts remain indispensable for operational safety and cultural heritage.

# REMOTE FIRE LOOKOUTS OF IDAHO

## Luke Channer

Luke Channer is a fire lookout enthusiast from Montana. He has committed much of his summer and free time over the last seventeen years to visiting and documenting every fire lookout in Idaho.

Using materials collected over seventeen years of visiting Idaho's most remote fire lookouts, this presentation shares archives of these "forgotten gems" and highlights the urgent need for their preservation. Luke will detail the navigational challenges and logistical strategies required to access these isolated peaks, offering a firsthand account of the history discovered at each site. Beyond the photography, he aims to foster a community of enthusiasts by providing practical advice and assistance for those seeking to explore, respect, and protect Idaho's high-altitude heritage.

# WILDERNESS FIRE POLICY STATEMENT

## Bill Moore

Bill Moore is an elder statesman in the fire lookout community. He and his family have a long and storied history in the Lochsa region of Idaho, and he has been instrumental in spearheading and managing the volunteer fire lookout program on Diablo Mountain Lookout.

For forty years, wilderness fire policy has shifted from total suppression to allowing natural fires to burn. While intended to restore natural mosaics, this approach now faces challenges from unnatural fuel loads and climate-driven “monoscapes”. Bill Moore proposes a strategic update to current management practices, advocating for the pre-identification of vulnerable ecosystems and historic sites for immediate suppression. By integrating public and interagency collaboration into National Forest planning, this plan seeks a balanced approach: protecting critical areas from devastating reburns while avoiding excessive suppression costs.

**COLLABORATIVE  
PARTNERSHIP:  
RESTORING  
A  
LOOKOUT  
IN THE  
PLUMAS  
NATIONAL  
FOREST**

## Katie Russ

Katie Russ is a fire lookout on the Plumas National Forest in California. She has done work to restore lookouts using grants awarded by the Forest Fire Lookout Association. Katie is also a University of Idaho graduate student at the U of I McCall Outdoor Science School.

**H**istoric fire lookouts are more than just sentinel posts; they are anchors of community heritage and forest history. Using a recent restoration project at Smith Peak Lookout in the Plumas National Forest as a case study—specifically the revival of the original wood floors—this presentation explores the collaborative “village” required to preserve these iconic structures. We will highlight the vital roles played by the Forest Fire Lookout Association, whose grant funding catalysed the project, alongside the essential contributions of local hardware stores and passionate community volunteers. We will also take a look at other restoration projects happening now on the Plumas, and the future of lookouts in Regional 4. Discover how grassroots engagement and diverse partnerships turn specialized preservation tasks into a shared mission for stewardship.

# HOW TO RESTORE AND STAFF LOOKOUTS

## Katie Russ

Katie Russ is a fire lookout on the Plumas National Forest in California. She has done work to restore lookouts using grants awarded by the Forest Fire Lookout Association. Katie is also a University of Idaho graduate student at the U of I McCall Outdoor Science School.

## Leif Haugen

Leif Haugen is a veteran fire lookout who has spent over 30 years monitoring the vast wilderness of Northwest Montana. Since 1994, he has staffed remote towers for the U.S. Forest Service and National Park Service.

This panel will allow two lookouts to discuss the process of restoring and staffing lookouts. A large amount of keeping lookouts around depends on policy and procedure. This will be a conversation between Katie Russ and Leif Haugen. Katie recently oversaw a partial restoration effort of Smith Peak Lookout on the Plumas National Forest in California. During this process, she relied heavily on documents and procedures created by Leif Haugen, a long-time Montana Lookout. This conversation will help bring two generational perspectives together: those that created procedure and guidance and those who are inheriting and building upon it.

# HOT SHOT WAKE UP PODCAST AND THE FUTURE OF WILDERNESS FIRE POLICY

## Tim Casperson

Tim Casperson is a former wildland firefighter, digital creator, and media personality who has become a prominent voice in the wildfire community through his platform, The Hotshot Wake Up. Casperson worked as a wildland firefighter for 12 years before transitioning into media and content creation. His background includes experience in hotshot overhead and crew supervision, providing him with a first-hand perspective on the operational challenges of elite firefighting crews.

**A**s the United States enters a new era of wildfire management, the current trajectory of policy is being redefined by both legislative reform and environmental pressures. This keynote addresses the intersection of wilderness fire policy and operational reality. Tim Casperson explores how divergent agency approaches—from aggressive suppression to the complexities of managed fire in protected areas—impact both the landscape and the boots on the ground. Drawing over a decade of experience as a squad leader for the Lone Peak Hotshots, crew supervisor for the Twin Peaks fire crew, and years of investigative fire journalism, Tim provides a look at the science, management, and increasingly polarized politics of wildfire in America.



**I** University of Idaho

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COLLEGE OF GRADUATE STUDIES,  
CENTER FOR DIGITAL INQUIRY AND LEARNING**  
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the **FOREST FIRE LOOKOUT ASSOCIATION**