

# LIFESTYLE



OLYMPIC PENINSULA

## FIRE LOOKOUT

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POETRY BOX  
BUS ROAD TRIP  
DRAWING ON FAMILY  
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WALKING AMERICA COUPLE  
DRAWING ON FAMILY WINS PULITZER

# BIRDSEYE VIEW

## FIRE LOOKOUTS: THEN & NOW

BY HINAA NOOR

**A**long the misty Olympic Peninsula and jagged Cascades, fire lookouts stand for centuries as still watchmen, defending forests and towns against the ravages of fire. Their stories now fall into two categories: abandoned hulks reclaimed by nature over time and lovingly restored cabins that provide visitors with a rare chance to sleep above the timberline.

In Washington, there were hundreds of fire

lookouts in the past, and their watchful eyes were the key to wildfire preservation in the mid-20th century.

With technological advances and changing paradigms in forest management, they have been all but abandoned or decommissioned, except a couple that have been preserved or repurposed as snug overnight cabins — enticing adventurous visitors for a remote wilderness experience unlike any other.





A CLOSE-UP OF THE HEYBROOK FIRE LOOKOUT, WHICH IS 1,700 FEET HIGH. ORIGINALLY BUILT AS A TENT IN 1925 AND ONE OF THE FEW REMAINING LOOKOUTS FOR OVERNIGHT RENTALS IN WASHINGTON STATE, THE LOOKOUT IS FAMOUS FOR ITS SUNSET VIEWS AROUND THE CASCADE MOUNTAINS. PHOTO BY USFS AND JOHN HEARING

John Hearing, president of the Washington Chapter of the Forest Fire Lookouts Association, places the historical value of these towers in perspective. "Fire lookouts were important for early detection of fires," Hearing said. "Before the era of satellites and air observation, those towers allowed people to observe fires when they ignited and alert crews to put them out before they became uncontrolled."

Hearing's tie to these towers is personal and historic. His father was a lookout on Kelly Butte in 1939, and Hearing, who retired from the Navy and from Boeing in 2018, has helped keep lookout history alive. "When I ascend up to Kelly Butte, I feel close to him," he said. "These locations are not buildings — these are personal and public landmarks."

Hearing started volunteering with fire lookouts back in 2008 with a restoration project that was going up at Kelly Butte.

According to Ray Kresek, a lookout veteran and writer known as the godfather of Washington's fire lookout history, the state once had 686 lookouts. "Now, 28 remain staffed for fire detection," said Kresek, 88. The last state Department of Natural Resources (DNR) staffed lookout was bulldozed in 2024 on Aeneas Mountain, he added.

On the Olympic Peninsula, where forests shroud jagged peaks and mist rolls in thick, just three remain, and "none are occupied," Hearing said. Travelers seeking out these early relics can find the locations through the National Historic Lookout Register or

EXTERIOR VIEW OF THE HEYBROOK FIRE LOOKOUT IN THE NORTH CASCADES, SERVING OVERNIGHT STAYS AND AVAILABLE FOR RENTALS. THE ROCKY HIKE TO HEYBROOK IS DESCRIBED TO BE AS SHORT, BUT A MODERATELY STEEP ONE. PHOTO PROVIDED BY KATIJO MAHER, U.S. FOREST SERVICE, SKYKOMISH RANGER DISTRICT



[firetower.org](http://firetower.org), where maps and photographs are available.

Corina E. Rendon, community engagement officer for Olympic National Forest, names two public lookouts: Ned Hill and Kloshe Nanitch. The Kloshe Nanitch site, close to Forks, has an observation deck on a rock outcropping with stunning views of Lake Crescent and Mt. Olympus. "This was where the first fire lookout was located, where the first forest fire in the area was found in 1918," Rendon said. Ned Hill, reachable via a trail but sharp climb near Sequim, offers seasonal flowering of rhododendrons and limited mountain views despite having only remains of the original structure.

Outside of the peninsula, Olympic National Park offers Dodger Point and Pyramid Peak lookouts, described by Molly Pitman, park trails program manager. "Dodger Point Lookout was built by the U.S. Forest Service in 1933, likely

"THE INTERIOR CLOSELY MATCHES THE ORIGINAL 1970S SETUP," SAID CARSON TAVENNER, DIRECTOR, FRIENDS OF NORTH MOUNTAIN. INTERIOR OF THE NORTH MOUNTAIN LOOKOUT, LOCATED OUTSIDE OF DARRINGTON, MANAGED BY THE FRIENDS OF NORTH MOUNTAIN AND AVAILABLE FOR OVERNIGHT RENTALS THROUGH AIRBNB. PHOTO BY CARSON TAVENNER

WOODEN BALCONY RAILING OF THE MOUNT PILCHUCK'S HISTORIC FIRE LOOKOUT CABIN. LOCATED IN THE NORTH CASCADES, NORTHEAST OF SEATTLE AND ONCE USED FOR WILDLIFE DETECTION, MT. PILCHUCK IS A POPULAR HIKE FOR ITS PANORAMIC VIEWS AND AVAILABLE SEASONALLY FOR HIKERS WITH NO OVERNIGHT STAYS. PHOTO BY JULIA DAHLQUIST, FOREST SERVICE, MT. BAKER-SNOQUALMIE NATIONAL FOREST

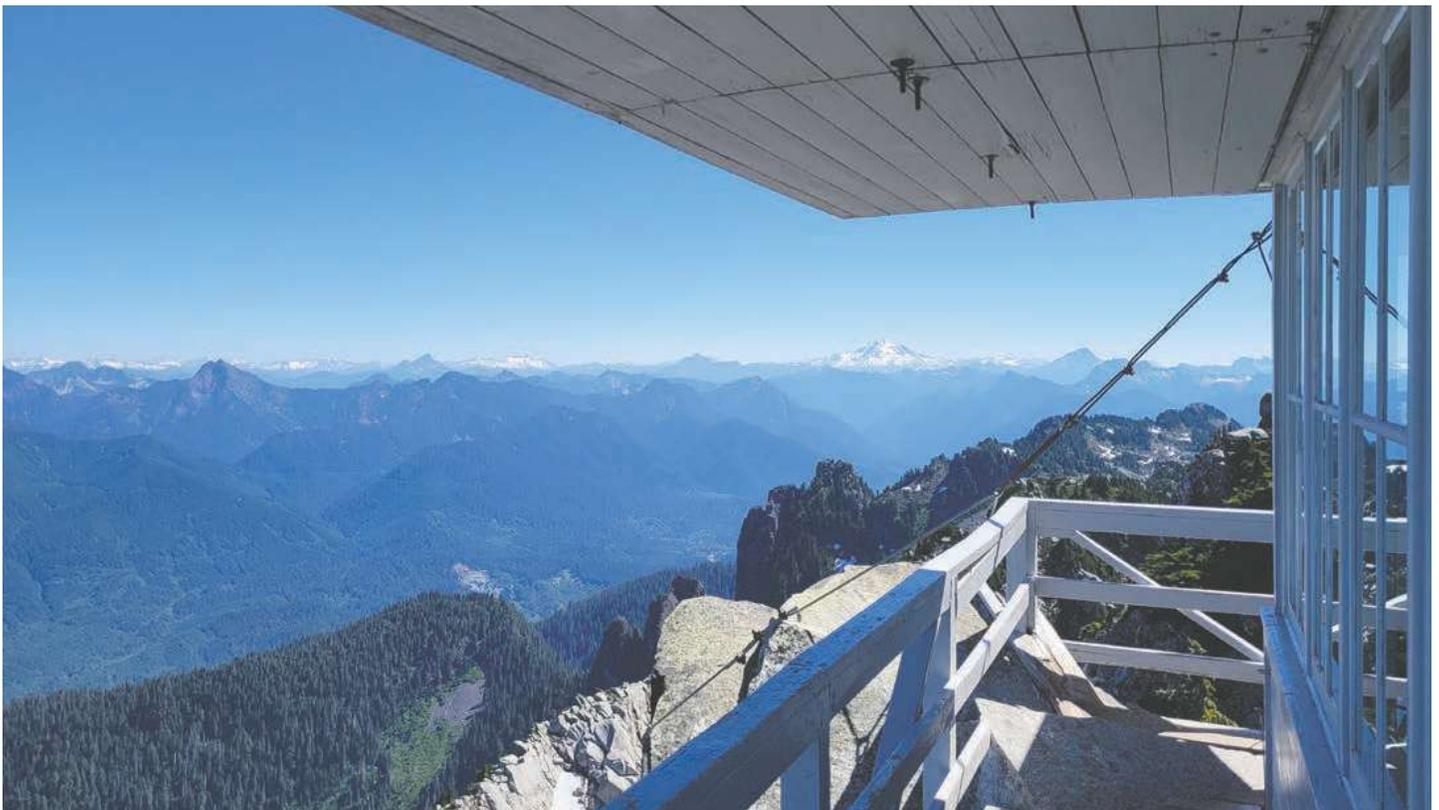


with the help of Civilian Conservation Corps." Though only a single story in height, it stands out above the tree line, providing 360-degree views," Pitman said.

Pyramid Peak Lookout, constructed during World War II to spot planes, was subsequently used for wildfire detection. Both are visited by hikers. Several others have been forgotten and left to deteriorate.

When they fell into disrepair or became liabilities," said Katie Maher, a U.S. Forest Service employee officer who oversees the fire lookout rentals within the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest. She manages the rental cabins for Haybrook and Evergreen Lookouts and has witnessed the delicate balance between preservation and modernization.

"We replaced the old wood stoves for fire hazard but retain propane stoves and lanterns. Overnighting is like camping, but with amenities — beds, books, and beautiful views." The rental lookouts offer travelers a unique chance to



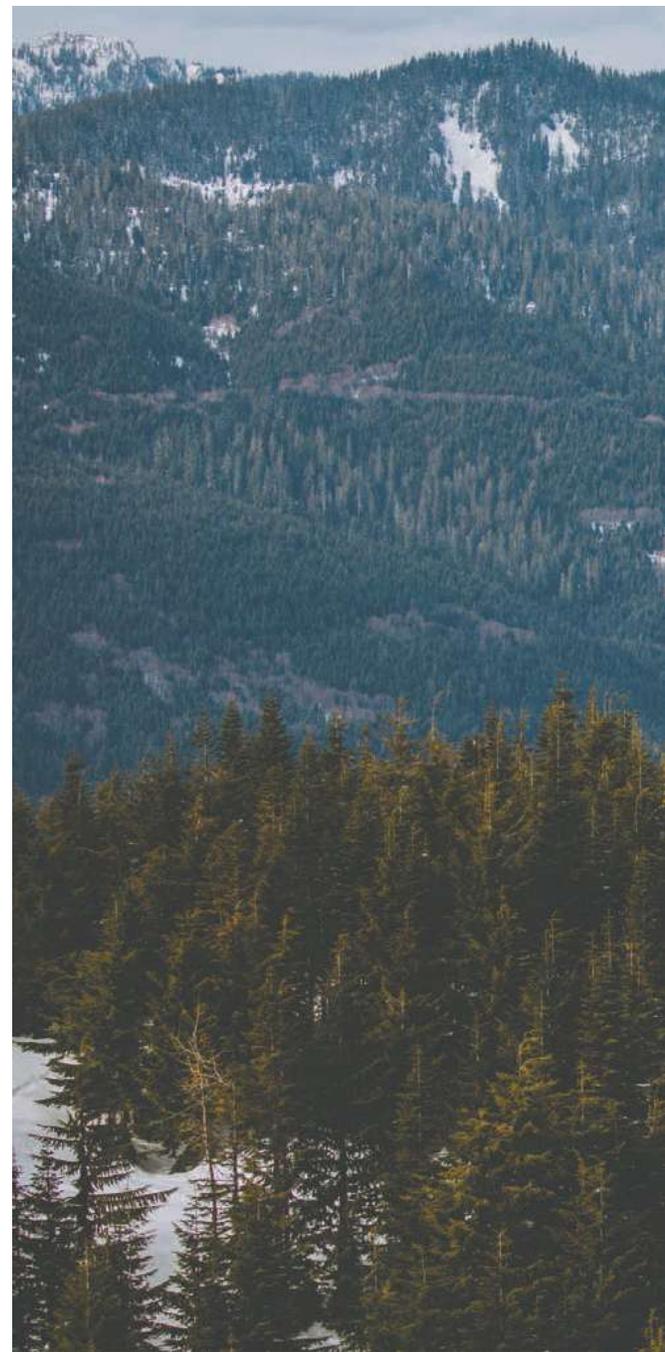


SUNSET OVER THE SEGELSON RIDGE, LOCATED NEAR SWEDE HEAVEN, NORTH OF DARRINGTON. SEGELSON IS POPULAR FOR ITS DRAMATIC SCENES AND IS FAMOUS SNOWSHOE ROUTE IN THE WINTER. PHOTO BY SCHERIS SHURING, FRIENDS OF NORTH MOUNTAIN

disconnect while sleeping in a historic structure. "People want to come for the history, the quiet, and the views," Maher said. "The cabins are rough but well enough appointed for a night's sleep. No room service, but plenty of peace high above the trees."

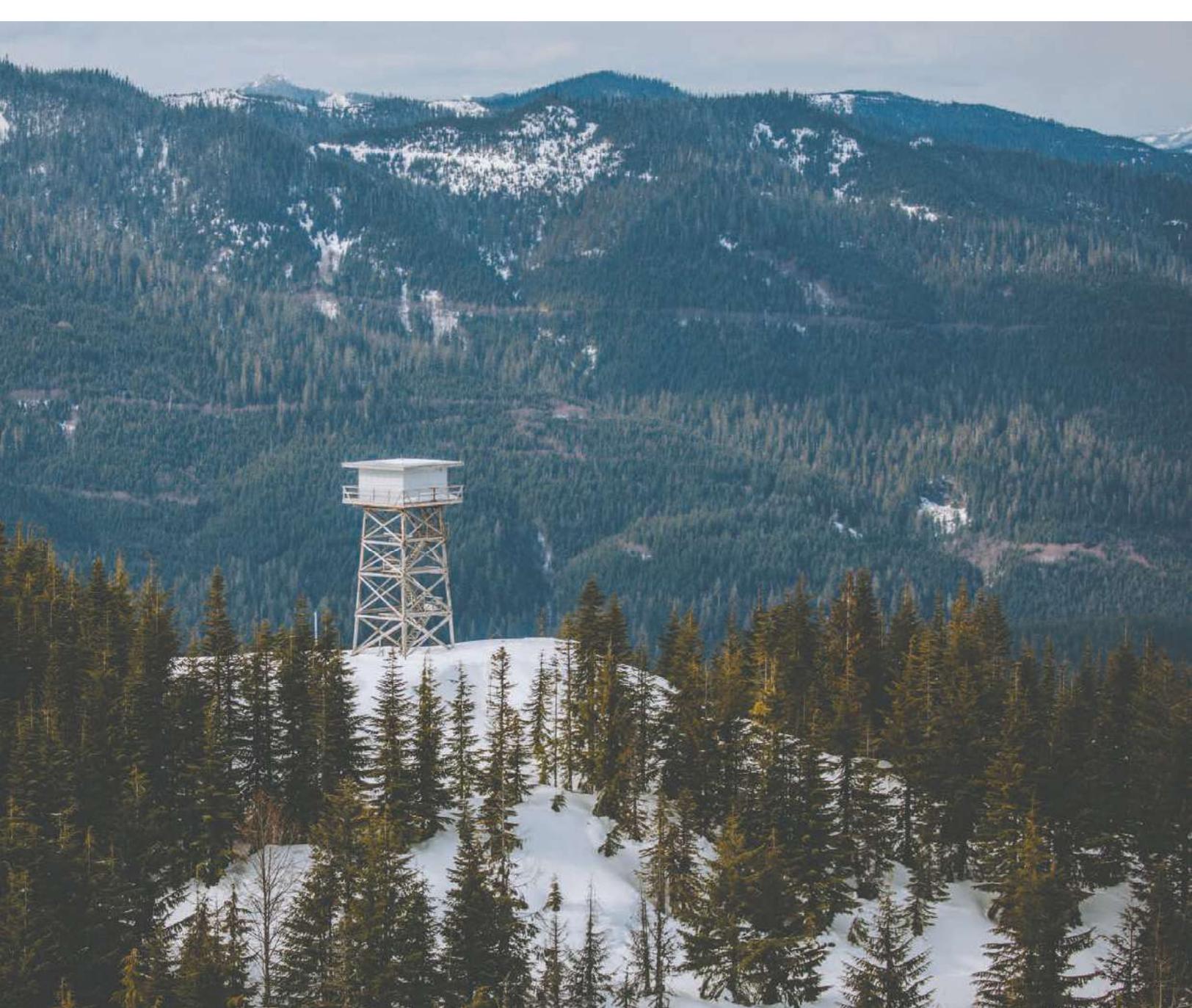
Snohomish County tourism marketing specialist Richard Porter rings the same siren call. "Being at a fire lookout is equal parts glamping and romance," Porter said. "You wake up at the tree line, watch the sunrise, and are completely isolated." He spoke about the popularity of lookouts like North Mountain, Pilchuck, and Heybrook. "These vacation homes are in high demand, with some openings coming in minutes. Mount Pilchuck, being state-run, is first-come, first-served, so it's a matter of getting there early."

Reservations, especially for popular places like Heybrook, are extremely competitive. Porter recommends that visitors anticipate primitive conditions: "Bring warm clothes, plenty of food, and a good sleeping bag. Many lookouts have outhouses, no running water, and minimal electricity."



While the rental lookouts provide a modern experience full of heritage, the abandoned towers offer a different story — one of nature reclaiming that which was accomplished by humans. Hearing inspires the public to appreciate their significance. "These buildings are more than just buildings; they represent a heritage of woodland management and people protection."

The preservation of fire lookouts boils



A SNOWY DAY AT THE NORTH MOUNTAIN FIRE LOOKOUT. PHOTO BY ELISE GIORDANO / SEATTLE NORTH COUNTRY

down to dedicated volunteers, such as those who belong to the Forest Fire Lookout Association, restoring locations and telling visitors about them. Hearing applauds such efforts but acknowledges limitations: "Not all lookouts can be saved. Some are too ruined or unavailable, but we do our best to save as many as possible for future generations.

"Although their active function in fire detection has declined, lookouts remain

valuable as cultural icons and quiet sentinels of the wilderness. "They connect people to nature and to history," Hearing said. "And for those overnight, they offer a magical panorama few see." Whether wandering between abandoned towers or ascending the stairs of a rental cabin, Washington's fire lookouts remain vigilant over the forests and evoke awe from their heights.

*Hinaa Noor is a freelance writer based in Lawnside, N.J.*

# FIRE LOOKOUTS

## HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

COMPILED BY HINAA NOOR

Consider a closer look? There are many watchtowers either on or within reach of the peninsula. Some watchtowers that stand hollowed by time, others are open for guests. All of them offer a glimpse into Washington's mountaintop past — no plane ticket required.

### **Kloshe Nanitch Observation Deck (Olympic National Forest)**

At Forks, this site preserves remnants of the 1918 original fire lookout. The public accesses it via the Kloshe Nanitch Trailhead and witnesses spectacular views of Mt. Olympus, Lake Crescent, and Sol Duc Valley. (Source: Corina Rendon, Olympic National Forest)

### **Ned Hill Fire Lookout (Olympic National Forest)**

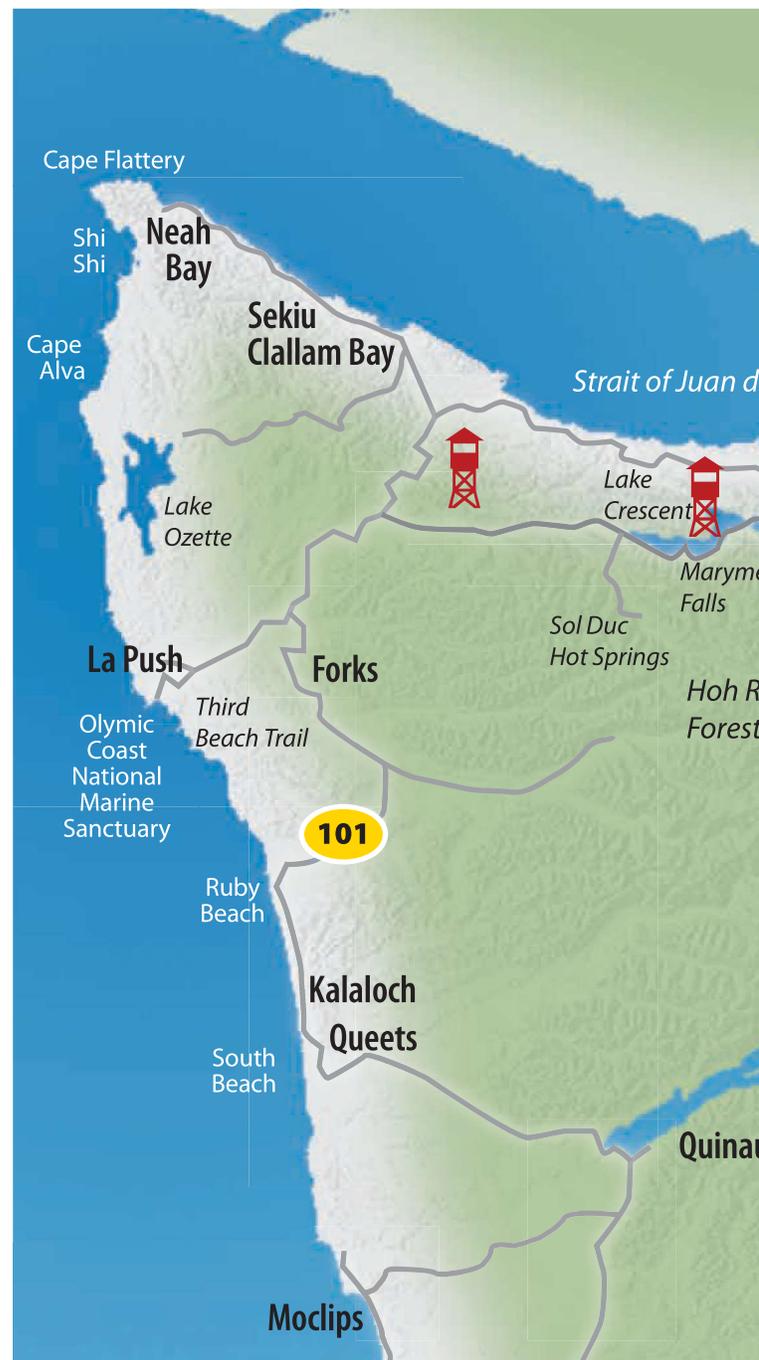
A short but steep hike from Sequim locates the remains of this 1930's lookout. Scenic highlights include seasonal rhododendron flowers and limited mountain views despite minimal structure remaining. (Source: Corina Rendon)

### **Dodger Point Lookout (Olympic National Park)**

Built in 1933, most likely with Civilian Conservation Corps labor, this one-story structure is perched above the level of the trees with 360-degree vistas. Although people must hike to access it, the breathtaking views are well worth the effort. (Source: Molly Pitman, Olympic National Park)

### **Pyramid Peak Aircraft Warning Service Lookout (Olympic National Park)**

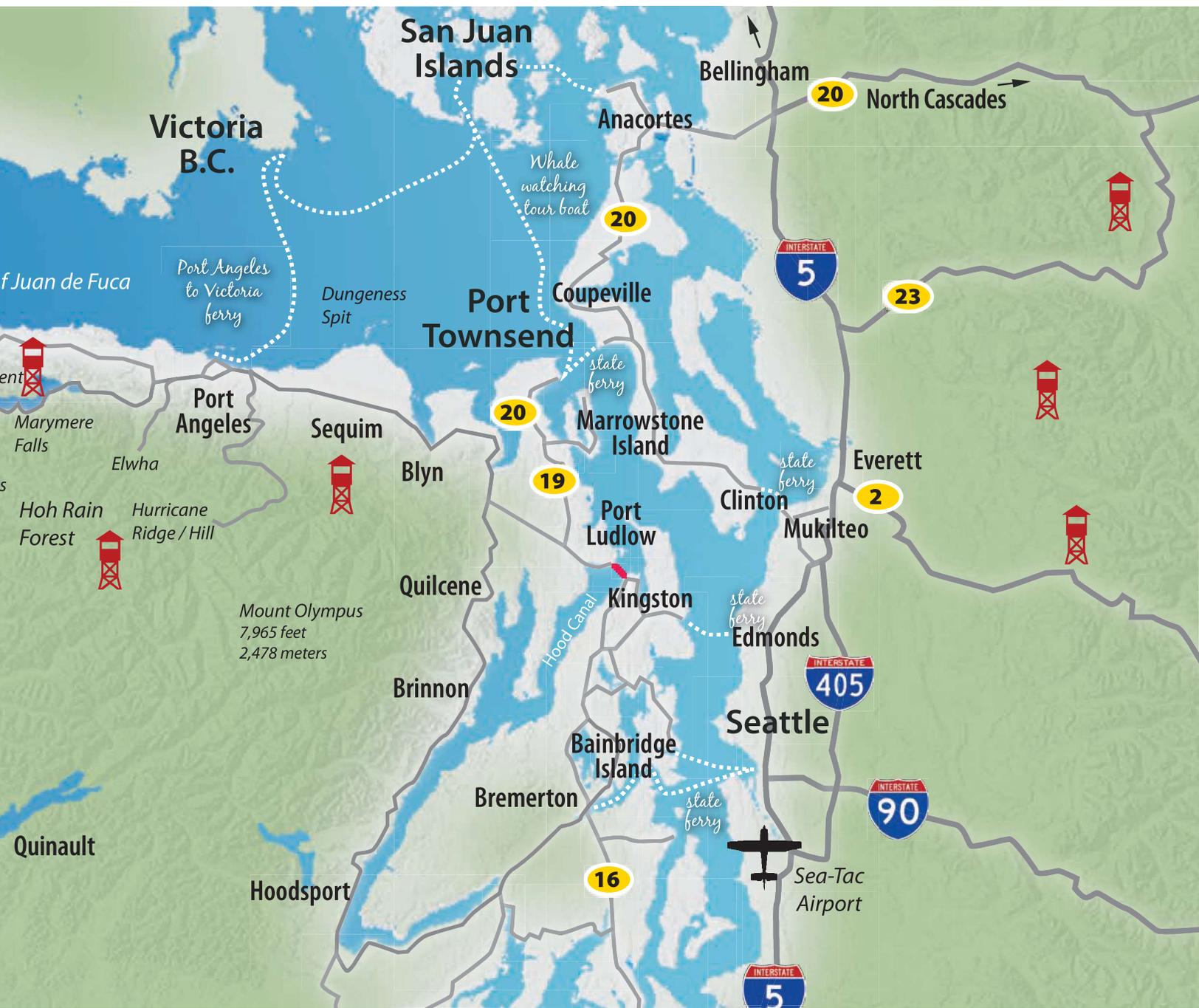
Constructed in World War II as an airplane detection station, later used as a wildfire lookout, Pyramid Peak offers an intriguing historical angle and sweeping views for those who hike in. (Source: Molly Pitman)



## RENTABLE LOOKOUTS

### **North Mountain Lookout (Snohomish County)**

Refurbished by volunteers and managed by Friends of North Mountain - Darrington Strong, Inc., this cabin rental sits atop a wooded ridge. Guests stay in rustic comfort, wake up to breathtaking sunrises, and enjoy the peacefulness of sitting above the trees. (Source: Richard Porter, Snohomish County Tourism)



FIRE LOOKOUTS ILLUSTRATED IN RED ON A MAP OF THE OLYMPIC PENINSULA.

**Mount Pilchuck Lookout (State of Washington)**

First come, first served. This lookout offers a typical overnight stay with few comforts, drawing patrons who are willing to be one of the select few who can spend the night in these ancient towers. (Source: Richard Porter)

**Heybrook and Evergreen Lookouts (Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest)**

Resided in by Everett chapter Mountaineers, the cabins are a favorite with tourists. They fill up hardly months ahead, and travelers have the luxury of rough comfort, complete with propane stoves, lanterns, and breathtaking vistas. (Source: Katie Maher, U.S. Forest Service)