



The base of Cougar Pass Lookout is wrapped with metal fencing and this DANGEROUS STRUCTURE sign.

Condition of Cougar Pass Lookout

This page describes Cougar Pass Lookout's physical condition as of February 2020.

The Cougar Pass Lookout hasn't been actively used since 1985, so it's no surprise to find it has deteriorated badly. Simply put: unattended wooden structures in western Oregon rot and decay rapidly.

The photos and video on this page show a lookout tower in deplorable condition: all the cabin's windows are broken or missing, the roof's hatch cover is missing so rain comes right into the cabin, floor boards are so rotten they are falling apart from their own weight ... the list of obvious problems goes on and on. These obvious problems could be fixed, but the most serious problems are more subtle and are impossible to repair reasonably.

The most serious problems come because this lookout tower was built in 1965, and the Coos District Annual Report says "\$2,467 was expended for materials and supplies." Even accounting for inflation, this was a remarkably low figure that was made possible because the builders choose a very inexpensive design that involved serious shortcuts. Rather than using bolts and split-ring connectors to hold the base together, in most places the design relied on just using nails. Rather than carefully splicing 8" x 8" timbers, the builders just used 2" x 10" and 2" x 6" lumber nailed together. So this fire lookout tower was made in a particularly cheap and temporary manner as compared with standard U.S. Forest Service lookout tower designs from the 1930s. As a result, the corner post columns have lots of places for water to hide between adjacent lumber pieces, and that means insects and rot almost certainly are hiding behind the cracks. So after 35 years of complete neglect, the only way to know the base is safe would be to disassemble and inspect everything, but that brings other problems. Because the base is nailed together with lots of crimped nails rather than bolts, it can't really be taken apart without damaging the lumber even further.

So one theoretical approach would be to completely disassemble the tower, number and measure everything, build identical replacement pieces, and reassemble the essentially brand new tower. This would preserve the 1965 design, but would destroy any historical sense because the building materials would look brand new. This approach has another problem: it would rebuild an unsafe design. For example, the tower's steep and narrow stairs simply aren't safe for children to climb. Yet another problem comes because replicating the current design would also replicate the flaws that caused the tower to rot.

All this is a long-winded way to say the best way to preserve this tower's historical heritage is to:

- Carefully restore the 14-by-14-foot cabin,
- Keep the first 12 feet of the tower's base in place, and
- Shelter these two historical parts inside a brand new tower that is safe and won't rot.



A rotten floor board. Other floor boards might look OK until someone tries to...



Photos of the lookout's base

This image carousel shows photos of the lookout's base taken on February 23, 2020.



Virtually everything has been stripped from the cabin's interior.



Photos of the lookout's cabin

This image carousel shows photos of the lookout's cabin taken on February 23, 2020.



YouTube video of Cougar Pass Lookout

This 3-minute, silent video of drone footage shows Cougar Pass Lookout as of February 21, 2020.