

# Solitary, but not alone

Owen Smith, Fire Tower Operator

No matter what else Owen is doing – playing his flute, talking to friends, listening to music – when he is on duty his eye is constantly scanning the horizon. He apologises if there is anyone in the tower with him as it seems as though his attention is diverted ... it's not of course, it's merely that a quick scan of the horizon every minute or so is part and parcel of the role and has become an unconscious, but highly valuable, action.

Not that Owen has visitors often: he obviously can't invite strangers up into the small hut that sits up four flights of ladders, although he does call out from atop the tower from time to time as hikers go past (heading for the Magical Forest between the peaks at the true summit of Mount MacGregor).

The role of a fire tower operator is a solitary one – solitary but not isolated. (Certainly not like it used to be a hundred years ago, since these days we are all always more or less connected and, in the tower, this holds true just like anywhere else).

But regardless, Owen quite likes the remoteness. "I love the mountains; the environment is stunningly beautiful. And the birds! They are unafraid – the tower is fairly uninhabited, and it's become part of the landscape and so they just come and visit."

This responsibility of operating a fire tower is a job – Owen is on call for around 6 or 7 months again and fairly humble about the job he does – but it's also a community service. He keeps an eye out on a landscape that has definitely proven to be a fire risk to his local community.

"I was the first to call in the Dunalley fires. I was up here, and I saw it come up from where it began in Forcett and I just saw this plume of smoke come up... they don't usually start like that and I knew it was big. I called it in right away and locals had also reported it.

"After that I didn't stay very long, the conditions were fierce – hot and windy – and I wanted to get back and protect my home. I was lucky and my home wasn't hit but it was a terrible event."

That was one of the biggest and most dramatic fires that Owen had seen, but after operating the tower for over 10 years, it certainly isn't the only one.

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Last year, Owen was in the tower when a fire at Murdunna could be seen heading very quickly towards the tower. With a 30-minute hike to get back to the car, things can turn dangerous in a heartbeat. The radio operators had to make the call quickly and they told Owen to leave right away since spot fires can be up to a couple of kilometres ahead of a main fire when the wind is blowing. In this instance, everything happened quickly: he was told to leave, and left, very quickly but the response was also very fast and the fire was dealt with before anything major happened.

It is that kind of dramatic day that makes Owen feel very comfortable spending most of his time playing his flute to the birds, scanning the landscape and making sure his part of Tasmania stays safe from fires.



Image: Fire tower operator Owen Smith at McGregor's Peak Fire Tower, identifying smoke coordinates.



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Image: Owen Smith at McGregor's Peak Fire Tower

