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19 February, 2008 8:22AM AEDT

## The Wimmera fire spotter

By Fiona Parker and Jemina Wilson

Ron Jardine works as a fire spotter on Mt Arapiles near Natimuk in Western Victoria, and he says it's hard to feel bored when you've got a 360 degree view of the Wimmera in front of you.

Sometimes the toughest jobs are the ones where you have to keep your mind occupied.

But Ron Jardine, who works as a fire spotter on Mt Arapiles near Natimuk in Western Victoria, says it's hard to feel bored when you have a 360 degree view of the Wimmera in front of you.

Ron is one of many fire tower operators employed by the Department of Sustainability and Environment to scan the horizon for any sign of smoke. The fire towers are located in strategic locations across the state to ensure maximum coverage of Victoria's parks and forests.

In remote areas like the Wimmera, fire towers are one of the best means of detecting fires. Spotting the fire early is also the best way to restrict its spread, and Ron says he has to make sure that his mind doesn't wander as he looks out at the view.

"Particularly on a total fire ban day you've really got to be on the ball. On days when it's a bit stormy you've got to be looking for lightening strikes because that's one of the biggest problems we have."

Ron explains the procedures that he needs to follow when he spots a fire.

"The job is basically to look out around the whole 360 degrees of the Wimmera for a distance of about 60 kilometres looking for any signs of smoke, which is obviously caused by fire. If I see any smoke I work out roughly what bearing it's at and I call headquarters up - which is the Department of Sustainability and Environment in Horsham - and let them know that there's smoke. Then they put a helicopter up with people looking out for things," he says. "But if it's a fire in open land - which is obviously in farming lands or in the towns - we call up 000 the same as anybody else does if they see a fire."

Once Ron has reported a fire he still tracks its progress.

"The fire that was in the Little Desert the other week, I kept an eye on it all the time. Sometimes you may see spotting ahead of the fire which they haven't picked up and you just

radio in and tell them that you've seen it. If they haven't seen it they'll do something about it as well."

Victorian fire lookouts are staffed during the fire season for varying periods of time depending on the fire danger index, the likelihood of lightning storms and the presence of going fires. Ron says that days in the fire tower can be long and hot during the fire season.

"Most days in the high fire season or in total fire ban days can be up to 12 hours a day. But mostly it's either working from 10 until six or in a lesser fire day, from 12 to six."

But Ron believes the job takes a lot of concentration and he's becoming adept at reading weather patterns and cloud formations.

"We look from which way the storms are coming - we have a fairly good weather station here that gives us wind direction as well so that helps - and we just look for lightning coming out."

When lightning does strike, Ron usually waits to see smoke appear before he reports it to headquarters.

"We can report the lightning strikes but usually we just take a while, and it doesn't take long for lightening to cause a bit of a fire somewhere or other. About a fortnight ago in the Grampians I think we had about six in a matter of a few minutes."

Fire spotters are equipped with radios supplied by the Country Fire Authority and the Department of Sustainability and Environment. The Mt Arapiles fire tower also contains a telephone and a UHF radio which helps Ron communicate with farmers around the area. Ron says the most useful piece of equipment he has is a set of binoculars.

"There's quite a powerful set of binoculars here and it's quite easy to pick up places like Dimboola. Just looking out you can't see them with the naked eye, but [through the binoculars] you can actually see the towers and the hotel and at Dimboola amongst the scrub."

To anyone who thinks his job seems boring or isolated, Rob says it's just a matter of keeping your mind occupied.

"In a day where not much is happening I read the papers and listen to the radio - mostly to the ABC. I read a book occasionally but it's a bit hard to read a book because you can't concentrate on reading too much because you've got to keep a look out."

Ron says he never gets tired of looking out at the landscape because there are always subtle changes in the farmlands and the lakes.

"Actually the farming land changes quite considerably. In fact right now there are people out there slashing stubble and making a bit of dust, so you have to keep your eye on the dust and make sure it's not smoke as well. And since we've had the rain the landscape changes every day with the greening of the land."

With a 360 degree view before him, Ron admits it's hard to pick his favourite place to look at.

"Probably towards the Grampians - it's a little bit hazy today - but in the summertime there's always a little bit of blue eucalyptus haze around - but I know the Grampians region pretty well so I don't mind looking out there," he says. "Strange as it may seem I even like looking out at the Little Desert. It's sort of plain but I do a lot of four wheel driving out there and I know a lot of it so I look for places that I know. When you look closely out there you can see Dimboola and Wail and Jung and Drung Drung and Nhill and all those places so it's just an interesting thing."

As Ron looks out from his fire tower at the place where Natimuk Lake should lie, he says there's only one thing he'd change about his view of the Wimmera: the lack of water.

"I've not counted trees but I have counted all the lakes, and I forget how many there are so I'll have to do it another day," he says.

"But there's about a dozen out to the north and about another dozen out to the south, so I count those. When there's a little bit of rain there's water in them [the lakes] for a day and you can actually watch it evaporate away.... I'd love to see Natimuk Lake and the freshwater lakes get some water in them - that would be really great."



