

Australian Rural & Regional News

On the lookout for fires

By **Viv Markham, Tarrangower Times**

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On days of high fire danger, you'll find Rob Howe in the cabin on top of the Mount Tarrengower tower, on the lookout for fires. This is his first year as the designated tower operator on top of Mount Tarrengower. He worked there as a reliever last season.



[It's a long way to the top! Rob Howe before he begins his climb to the cabin on top of the tower. Photo: Forest Fire Management](#)



[Rob climbing up the ladder to the cabin.](#)
[Photo: Forest Fire Management](#)

Rob's no newcomer to the job; this is his tenth season as a tower operator, having previously worked on the tower at Mount Brenanah, near Inglewood. His shifts usually begin at 11am and run until 7pm. "We're rung at 5pm the day before to let us know whether we're working," he said. "It all depends upon the weather conditions."

When he's not up on the tower, Rob works in the vineyard at Water Wheel Wines in Bridgewater. "They're very understanding and supportive of my job with Forest Fire Management during the Fire Danger Period," Rob said.



[Rob with some of the tools of his trade: the round map table that takes up much of the space in the cabin and his binoculars.](#)
[Photo: Forest Fire Management](#)

Obviously at ease with his own company, Rob doesn't mind the solitary life up in his cabin. He does appreciate the fact that the new cabin, installed in 2018, has mod cons that didn't exist in the old cabin. The new cabin has UV protection on the windows and air conditioning, and the access stairs are easier than the old vertical ladder.

"We have Peter Skilbeck to thank for his input during the new cabin design," Rob said. "Peter worked on the tower for many years, and I'm grateful for his ongoing support. He is a great mentor."

The Mount Tarrengower tower is part of a network of 62 towers covering much of the Great Dividing Range and other fire-prone areas in Victoria. The tower operators each have a special radio for communicating with the CFA, and other radios for communicating with Forest Fire Management. They are in regular contact with other towers.

Tower operators spend their days looking for smoke. “If two towers can see the same smoke, then we use triangulation to identify the fire’s exact location,” Rob said. “But sometimes, a fire is visible from only one tower. Last week there was a fire near Maryborough and I was the only tower operator who could see it. I was in communication with the CFA crews and I helped to guide them to the fire. It’s the fires in the remote locations that are important for us to spot.”

During days when there are lightning strikes, the tower operator logs the location of each strike. “If a tree gets struck, it might not start smoking for a day or so,” Rob said.

Three questions Rob often gets asked: is he up there on top of the tower every day, does he ever work at night and does he ever get bored? “I’m called in only on days of high fire danger,” Rob said. “And I don’t work at night. I’m looking out for smoke, not flames and smoke isn’t visible at night. And what do I do if I ever get bored? I just keep on looking for fires!”



[Rob, with a bird’s eye view of Maldon in the background. Photo: Forest Fire Management](#)

While Rob’s not on watch on top of Mount Tarrengower or working in the vineyard, he enjoys camping and fishing and is an amateur beekeeper. He’s also a member of the Victorian Tower Operators Association, which has around 40 members on its books.

According to Rob, the first fire lookout tower was built in Victoria in 1924 and he believes the tower on Mount Tarrengower became a fire lookout tower in 1948. “If you’re interested in more information about Australia’s lookout towers, there’s an excellent website

– www.firelookoutsdowntounder.com – that has plenty of information,” Rob said.

Here’s an interesting snippet of information from the website: before the 1950s, the Mount Tarrengower tower was lit up for the Maldon Easter Fair by over 100 lanterns that were made

using ginger beer bottles, hemp wicks and kerosene. The tower caught fire once and the Fire Brigade had to be called!

Rob said that he's looking forward to the 100th anniversary of the tower, which will be on 26 January, 2024. "Whether I'm up in the tower or down on the ground, I'll be there," he said.

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