

A couple weeks ago I sent out a message stating that the Oren Krumm Shelter had not been impacted by the wildfire raging in the vicinity. My assessment was based on a fire location given to me the night of the fire by the Michigan State Police.

A couple days later, I found an online map of the fire, and the shelter was shown as being in the area that burned. Subsequently, I was sent an email from a local resident who visited the site and discovered that the shelter had indeed burned. I did not send out this revised report before now, however, because I have been gathering info and talking to relevant folks. The shelter situation has changed day by day.

On Friday, April 27, the Ottawa National Forest undertook two controlled burns in an area about a mile and a half northwest of the shelter, on Baraga Plains. Baraga Plains is a rolling, sandy glacial outwash plain. While there are areas of wetlands and small lakes on the Plains, most of the area is home to jack pine and related drought-tolerant trees, as well as, in some years, an abundant crop of blueberries, sugar plums, and other fruits. Before the era of fire suppression, areas of the Plains burned fairly frequently, perhaps an average of every 30 years at a given location. More recent management has resulted in less frequent burning, and an increase in available dead and live wood for wildfire fuel. The prescribed burns that took place on Friday the 27th were intended to provide a small area on the Plains where the natural process of fire could take place. Prescribed natural fire not only has ecological benefits, but it often results in great blueberry crops for several years.

Conditions were excellent for a prescribed burn on Friday, and the fires went off without a hitch. The Forest Service monitored the fire sites on Saturday, and put out any observed hot spots. Sunday, wildfire potential became extreme due to high winds, very low relative humidity, and tinder dry fuels due to a long-term drought. The Forest Service once again monitored the fire, but only sent one engine (fire truck) to the area where the fire took off that day. They were successfully putting out hot spots, but eventually the engine needed more water, and left the area to fill up, presumably at Big Lake or the Sturgeon River. While it was gone, a hot spot erupted, and by the time they returned the fire was out of control.

As I see it the mistake was made not on Friday, when conditions were good, but on Sunday, when not enough engines (and perhaps firefighters) were on the scene. The extreme fire danger on Sunday had been forecast for several days.

The fire raced southeastward toward the Sturgeon River. The attached telephoto shot showing the fire from a distance was taken from my house, 18 miles north of the fire, on Sunday afternoon. My wife Marjory and I visited the burned area two weeks later, well after the fire was out, and it was apparent that the intensity of the fire had varied greatly within the fire perimeter, due to different forest types, stronger winds in some areas, terrain, and, of course, the luck of the draw. The fire "crowned" in some areas, resulting in charred trees from the ground to their tops. In other areas, only a light ground fire occurred, resulting in minimal damage to larger vegetation. In most areas, it seems, enough ground vegetation and small trees and shrubs burned to bake the needles of

conifers and turn them yellow. Often, all the needles on trees, even some tall trees, were affected. Everywhere the fire burned we found a layer of soot on the ground. Hiking on the NCT was almost eerie, and actually somewhat pretty in a way, with the black ground and the yellow needles. See the attached photo of the trail less than ¼ mile west of the shelter.

Attached also you will also find a map of the fire, with the shelter area indicated.

Marjory and I began hiking to the shelter from the Tibbets Falls trailhead. (be careful where you park at the trailhead; a number of tall aspen are down or leaning over the trail, apparently due to very strong south winds at some point. I would not park there on a windy day unless you have a chain saw, since a good gust could drop one of the aspens over the road out.)

As we walked downstream toward the shelter, we monitored the amount of fire damage. There are three bridges and two boardwalks between the falls and the shelter, but none of these was damaged, even though there was at least a ground fire near some of them. We entered an area where the fire had obviously jumped the river, as there were burned trees on the south side. The NCT, though, was in excellent condition all the way to the shelter. In fact, we did not walk any section of the NCT that day that was not perfectly passable.

As we approached the shelter area, it was obvious that the fire had crowned in some of the large pines along the river. At the junction of the shelter trail and the NCT, the sign was in perfect condition, even though a ground fire had been just a few feet away. The sign with the shelter area map was likewise untouched, even though a fairly intense fire had burned nearby. We also visited the first campsite, and found its sign in perfect condition, and the large trees nearby did not seem to be seriously damaged. We did not visit the second campsite. The wilderness latrine with privacy screening was untouched, though a ground fire had been just a few feet away. Likewise, the benches at the fire ring had not been damaged, though the fire came to within three or four feet of them. The shelter, on the other hand, was another story. As the attached photos indicate, the shelter burned completely. Not a trace of wood was found. The intense heat of the fire melted a glass item into a blob, and warped the cooking grate for the campfire.

In looking back at what went wrong, hindsight is 20:20. The location and intensity of the fire in the shelter area was not entirely random. Those items that did not burn were surrounded by cleared areas, albeit small ones. The back of the shelter was almost immediately downwind from a thicket of young balsam fir, of which only the charred skeletons remain. I strongly suspect that had we cleared an area 15 to 20 feet deep behind the shelter, the shelter might have survived.

Marjory and I followed the NCT west from the shelter, to where the fire had been very intense. While the NCT was in excellent shape, most of the paint blazes had been burned off. Someone had placed blue flagging on the NCT everywhere the fire had been severe. Thanks to whoever did that! When we reached the trailhead at Forest Road 2233, at the

east boundary of the Ottawa, we discovered that the sign that the chapter had installed had been burned, and the Ottawa's sign was nearly burned. The two posts holding the signs had been badly burned. Nearby we found the remains of a carsonite post, which had been partially melted.

While the loss of the shelter is very unfortunate, the loss is of particularly great significance because it had been built as a memorial to Oren Krumm, a Michigan Tech student and son of Marj and Ray Krumm, who died suddenly of a rare disease in the 90s. The shelter could be rebuilt, but the shelter logbook, where Oren's friends and various shelter visitors over the years had expressed their thoughts about Oren and on the shelter, and added comments on their hikes, overnight stays, and the weather, is irreplaceable. The shelter was also the base of operations for a number of Eagle Scout projects along the trail in the area.

Marj had had plans to take a metal box to the shelter to keep the logbook from being damaged by rodents. I had once thought of removing the logbook temporarily, copying the pages, and returning it. I was concerned that the logbook might be taken or used to start a fire. Of course, neither of us acted on our ideas.

**** Marj hopes that perhaps those who visited the shelter over the years and added their comments to the logbook could recollect some of what they wrote and some of the thoughts they had while there. She would like to reconstruct as much of the logbook info as possible. Recollections need not be perfect. If you can think of anything you wrote or thoughts you had while there, please send them to Marj at mkrumm@up.net or Marj Krumm, P.O. Box 1, Pelkie MI 49958. Thanks.

Some of you may know that the shelter was built on land owned at the time by Wisconsin Electric Power Company. About three miles of the NCT was also built on their land. The current owner is now officially We Energies. We Energies is attempting to sell the land where the shelter was located, and Michigan DNR is beginning negotiations to purchase some of the land We Energies is selling in the area. If the sale goes through, it will probably be finalized in 2008, and will likely involve an intermediary such as a land trust.

One interesting complication is that Michigan DNR does not permit shelters on State Forest lands, and the land purchased, if the sale goes through, would be an addition to the Baraga State Forest. However, our local DNR office and We Energies are working to have the sale language stipulate that the DNR would have to accept all developments in existence on the land at the time of the sale. This would include the NCT, various signs, the wilderness latrine, several bridges and boardwalks, etc. If the shelter does not exist at the time of the sale, it will not be grandfathered in. We Energies has given us permission to rebuild the shelter. Their terminology is very specific. We would need to construct a new shelter that is very similar to the shelter that burned. I got the strong impression that this means an open-front lean-to design. The size could differ slightly, but the amenities the shelter provides could not exceed what were there before. In other words, not a

closed in building, no attached sauna (!), etc. We might be able to argue for more fireproof siding, though I believe the main reason the shelter burned was the lack of a “fireproof” space around the building. The location could also be slightly different, I suppose.

To be sure the shelter is in place before it can no longer be grandfathered in, we need to act soon, which to me means building a new shelter in June, though site prep and cutting some lumber could probably be done earlier. The Kenton Ranger District of the Ottawa has a big stack of 2” thick pine boards we can use for structural lumber and bunks. We will also need foundation blocks, screen, siding, and roofing. The source of funds for those items is uncertain at this time. Some funds may be available from the Forest Service, but we should also investigate the Park Service, NCTA, and local donors.

It is amazing how many people have used this shelter, and care deeply about it. Within a week of the fire and before there was a formal announcement that the shelter had burned, I began receiving emails, many from people I had never heard of, asking how they could help.

I will send more info when I learn more about funding and the schedule for rebuilding the shelter.