

The 2020 River Fire as Seen By Dorothy and Peter Denning



The River Fire of August 2020 burned up to the edge of our property and other properties in the Las Palmas subdivision off River Road in Monterey County. The photos and narrative in this slide show tell our story.

The photo at left was taken of our house in February 2005 shortly before we purchased the house. The mountain in the background is Black Mountain, which is part of Toro Park. The closer hill and ridge is also part of Toro Park and joins up with the Marks Ranch addition to Toro Park. It is a few hundred yards from our house. The top of Black Mountain is a 3.5-mile hike from our house.

Notice how green the grass and oak trees are on the nearby hill.



The fire broke out before dawn on Sunday morning, August 16, 2020 after a bolt of lightning struck somewhere nearby around 2:30am. We saw the lightning strike. When we saw the smoke some time later, we called 911 and were transferred to Cal Fire. In a later follow-up call, Cal Fire told us we were the second call reporting it.

This photo was taken Sunday afternoon from the back of our house facing Black Mountain.

Notice the oaks and brown grass on the nearby hill. All the grass burned in the fire, but many of the trees survived. Black Mountain was covered mostly in dense chaparral. It is now ash.



This photo shows Black Mountain on fire the night of Tuesday, August 18, two days after the fire had started. It was a sleepless night as all we could do was stare at this from our bed and watch the fire come down the mountain and then start burning the nearby ridge. Here, it is three ridges away.

We were prepared for evacuation and had everything packed and ready to go.



Here is another photo of the fire burning at dusk on Tuesday August 18. Now it is only two ridges away.



This photo was taken the next morning, Wednesday, August 19. It shows Peter watching the fire coming down the nearby hill towards our property. The fire has crossed the near ridge and is coming down the slope toward the ravine at the base of our property. Peter is watching its slow advance. It was burning mostly dried grass and brush beneath the oaks.

We were ordered to evacuate late that morning and left right after lunch. A fire engine was at our house and firefighters said we have good defensive space. They were lamenting the fact they didn't have a bulldozer. Our next-door neighbor had brought in someone with one who bulldozed his property and part of ours. Soon the bulldozer was put to work for the fire crew.



After evacuating and taking our belongings to the Naval Postgraduate School, where we have offices and had booked a room in the former Del Monte Hotel, we returned late afternoon on August 19 for one last look before the road blocks went up to keep everyone out.

This photo shows that the fire coming down the hill is now quite close. The fire crews were still at our house and in the canyon below. In the canyon, they were bulldozing a path and initiating controlled backburns to keep the fire from our properties. That was the last time we were at the house until we returned 5 days later on the evening of August 24.



This photo was taken August 25 after we were back home and shows what happened to Black Mountain and the nearby hill. All the grass and shrubs burned and turned black. The oaks seen on the hill can survive a fire, but many of them were severely stressed from draught so might not make it.



The previous photos were all looking south. This photo, looking southwest, shows the trail to the nearby ridge in the Marks Ranch addition to Toro Park. From there you can hike around in Marks Ranch or access the Black Mountain Trail and go to the top of Black Mountain or to other trails in Toro Park.

The lower trail (going uphill from left to right) goes up through the canyon below our house and then joins the trail we take (going uphill from right to left to the nearby ridge).



On Sunday, August 30, we walked up to the nearby ridge and walked around in Marks Ranch. This photo is taken along the ridge. Everything we saw in Toro Park, including the Marks Ranch addition, was burned.



This photo was taken on the Whiskey Shack Trail, which goes through a wooded area in Marks Ranch to join the Black Mountain Trail. The remains of burnt trees are lying across the trail.



This photo was also taken on the Whiskey Shack Trail. The fire burned down what remained of the shack that gave the trail its name.



Here is the photographer of the previous image of the Whiskey Shack. How much more colorful than the ashen land!



The white areas in this photo are where the fire burned especially hot. It almost looks like a dusting of snow on the hill.



This photo shows what's left of one of the hills near the Black Mountain Trail that had been covered with chaparral. Much of Toro Park now looks like this.



This photo is looking down a canyon in Marks Ranch towards the far end of Las Palmas 2 at Crowne Point. The fire burned very close to the subdivision all along its border with Marks Ranch.

Pink fire retardant is visible down in the bottom in the canyon. From what we saw, the fire retardant seemed less effective than the fire breaks made by the bulldozers.

Although Marks Ranch and Toro Park were severely burned, the firefighters were awesome. They saved all the properties in Las Palmas. No one was injured and no house damaged. We are deeply grateful.



This last photo shows the hills behind our house 6 months later on February 25, 2021.

The nearby hill is now covered with green grass. Some of the oaks look healthy despite the lack of rain over the winter.

Black Mountain, however, is still charred as it was previously covered with chaparral rather than grass and trees. It will take much longer to recover.