

Transcript for Interview with Jerome Ford

[Valerie Fellows]: Hi I'm Valerie Fellows with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Migratory Bird Program. And today I'm talking with Jerome Ford, the Assistant Director for the Migratory Bird Program, and he's going to tell us his story, his background, how he got into conservation, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the path that he's taken with those that have inspired him, as part of our effort to honor Black History Month.

Jerome, when did you know you wanted to work in conservation?

[Jerome Ford]: Since I grew up on a farm in Louisiana, I had a lot of animals, horses, cows, chickens, typical stuff. And my closest sibling is about 9 years older than me, and so I didn't have a lot of friends around or people to visit so I spent most of my time watching the animals and I realized, you know, that they were doing things very similar to us, and doing it based on the seasons. So I got very interested in biology. You know at that moment, probably about the age of 7 or 8, after watching those critters and trying to figure out why do they do that and how do they communicate? So I spent a lot of time on the fencerow and down at the pig pen and down at the cow pasture, so yeah, about 8 or 9 years old, that's when I realized "oh there's something we have in common and I want to know more." I want to know more about life, and not just life in humans, but whether there was in other animals or plants. So it started from there and here I am today.

[Valerie]: Who inspired you as a child?

[Jerome]: My grandfather, again, kind of was the lead of the family that when we were small. And we noticed that something as simple as hunting white-tailed deer, we were never allowed to shoot a doe deer. And my grandfather used to say all the time, "hey that's how does, that's how deer continue their life." And that's with the bucks and then you have the fawns and that's kind of like the female deer was kind of the lead of that population. So we were never allowed to do that. So hearing that from my grandfather, who again led all the farming operations, to see him, it motivated us to be like him, to be the best. His name was of course Bert Ford, we're proud of that. But he was the person who kind of started me off. And in school, I learned more about George Washington Carver, and was like man, how do you do that? How do you take peanuts and you know, potatoes and doing all these great things with that and it was so innovative. So George Washington Carver was definitely someone that I wanted to grow up to be. Wanted to somewhat of a lab technician and do the great things that he had done. And we heard the Director this morning and talk about, you know Frederick Douglass. You know, being such a great abolitionist, that its not just for people, but I looked at that as also doing that for conservation for land and for animals. Someone needed to be the abolitionist for critters and I thought I could do that and serve in that fashion. We talk about my story, and here's a piece, going back to young folks period, um, keep that dream and that hope alive. Something that most people don't know about me - when I was in high school, just started college I should say, my father passed away when I was 18 years old. So that was kind of my rock, the person who was trying to guide me as a young man and I really depended on that. Thirteen months after that, my mother passed away. Uh, so I've kind of been on my own since I was 19 years old. And I can hear their voices today. And the guidance that they gave us as we were

growing up, I still follow that today. And not a day go by where I don't say "thank you" to those two people, they were my role models. I think often times, when I'm out recruiting, and I ask people "who were your personal role models?" and they have a hard time thinking about it, and then I suggest "maybe it was your parents." And then they go "oh yeah, that's true." So I try to remind people of that, but those are the things that kept me going, those two people, even in their absence and today. At my age, I still call upon that knowledge that they gave us when we were young to try to keep going. So definitely want people to know, find those people out there who are pushing you, who definitely supported you and give you that motivation to continue. And for me it was my parents, and I did from the time that I was 19 years old up until now, so it can be done. If I can do it, anybody can do it.

[Valerie]: What was your educational training and background? What path did you take to get here?

[Jerome]: I graduated from a little small town, in Lisbon, Louisiana, called Pineview High School. And after graduating from Pineview High School with a 4.0 GPA, and I admit I mention that I'm not ashamed of that, I'm pretty proud actually, right? I went to Grambling State University, spent 4 years there, and was ready to graduate, filling out the application for graduation and a young fellow named Dr. Benjamin Tuggle came onto the scene and was talking about starting a curriculum in Wildlife Biology. So I spent 2 extra years at Grambling State University to get those courses to earn my Wildlife Biology degree. And of course Benjamin has been a great friend and a mentor of mine. So I stayed those extra two years, got that degree, and went off to Louisiana Tech University and got a couple of courses there, and Arkansas Tech University and ended up being a Refuge Manager Trainee shortly thereafter. But again it was the Benjamin Tuggles of the world and the Hannibal Bolton's that kind of inspired me to kind of continue my career in wildlife conservation.

[Valerie]: When you were in college, were there other African Americans studying biology or any of the natural resource management fields or disciplines?

[Jerome]: Actually, no. Being at Grambling State University which is a Historically Black College and University, Dr. Benjamin Tuggle was our Coop Unit Leader there and there was a small group of us at Grambling State, 6, 7, 8 people. And that was it. And I can remember taking trips, he would take us places in south Louisiana to different meetings and we would be the only diverse people in that meeting. And it was kind of striking at first, to realize that you were it. 6, or 7, or 8 people. And thinking about how do we grow from here. But Dr. Tuggle instilled in us we were in the future, and to keep doing that and it would grow. So coming up early on, being in meetings where you were the only African American or the only person of color period, that was kind of tough. But I didn't focus on that. My focus was on what am I supposed to learn while I'm here, do I have something to contribute, and again, I try not to look at the color thing. I think that's a stumbling block for all of us if we approach it that way. But yeah, coming up without seeing a lot of people who look like you or any other brown people, that was kind of tough. But you have to know what your purpose is. Your purpose in life was to do great things and you always had something to say that would be important and relevant so that's kind of been my motivator.

[Valerie]: Who inspires you today?

[Jerome]: I would go back to Benjamin but he since retired, but to be honest it's the people, the young folks that's coming through. All of them inspire me, because I can remember myself looking for someone to kind of guide me. And so to see young people out there who are willing to ask questions and to dive into conservation and say help me reach that next level. All of those young folks kind of help me. If there's anyone I would say in particular, it's Hannibal Bolton. Hannibal is a good friend. I told him this story, I don't know, maybe a year or so ago. Hannibal came to Grambling State University when I was a student there, and he didn't even know I existed. But I was watching come in and said there's a young black man that's wearing a nice expensive suit, and I want to do that one day. So Hannibal and all the years he spent in the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and I'm sure endured whatever it is he had to endure, he was always walking around with a smile on his face and encouraging us to do the best that we could do. So Hannibal was always a mentor of minds and I just talked to him this past weekend and he's still kind of motivating me to do those things, is look forward and go achieve your dream because nobody has the right to tell you not to dream.

[Valerie]: When you hear Black History Month, what does it make you think about? What does it make you feel?

[Jerome]: I try not to see color, and we all do, no matter how hard we try not to. But the contribution that African Americans have made to this country, I'm proud of that. It happens a lot of different ways, whether we're talking about the refrigeration system or you're talking about traffic lights, the things that we see and we utilize every day, I just wish, and I'm hopeful that every American will take hold that and realize that we all have something to give to this wonderful country of ours. It doesn't matter what race you are or what your sexual preference is, it doesn't matter, we're all people. So when I hear about Black History Month, yeah, I'm proud to be African American because I like to think I'm contributing each and every day to wildlife conservation, but to people as a whole and to this world. That's my number one motive is to try to save the place that we call home, which is earth.

[Valerie]: What advice do you have for African Americans today, especially those that might be considering a career in conservation or the outdoors?

[Jerome]: I do a lot, I used to do a lot of recruiting out there and I take that tag line, that I just mentioned that Hannibal gave, you know, it's your dream. You have the right to dream whatever it is you want to dream, and go get that. And be persistent, there is no cook book out there, no special way to do that. And always be yourself, you know who you are and don't change for the world. We all kind of live in our own distorted world ourselves and trying to see and determine what success looks like, but go get it. And if you want it, go get it. And I think the Director talked a little bit about that this morning, and nobody should hold you up. The only person that should make that change is you. But don't let people tell you you can't do something. If you're going to do that you will be failing the rest of your life. But to be successful, you have to see it, you have to believe it and you have to taste it. And if that doesn't happen now, then when? And if not you, then who?