INTERVIEW WITH JIM SALYER
BY MARK MADISON AUGUST 3, 2000

MR. MADISON: This is Mark Madison, August 3, 2000 AT NCTC. We are interviewing Jim Salyer today about his career with the Fish and Wildlife Service. The first question that we usually ask is; how did you come to work for us?

MR. SALYER: Well, I had an interest in the out of doors since High School. Several friends of mine in High School hiked annually to a Forest Service lake in the Ozarks in Missouri. There was a Forest Service person there by the name of Claude Ferguson who was willing to spend time with us boys and show us about timber management and the outdoors and wildlife. My interest started there. I knew then that that is what I wanted to do. At that time, the profession was referred to as Foresters. Everybody working in wildlife was a Forester. As it turned out, when I went through college, I didn't take one single Forestry course. I wanted to but they were difficult to schedule in to the curriculum with other things that I knew I had to have. That's where it all started.

MR. MADISON: So what did you study in college, Wildlife Biology?

MR. SALYER: I guess I thought that I wanted to be a Fisheries Biologist when I started and my course work was primarily aquatic oriented type courses. There was a lot of chemistry, physics, aquatic ecology, limnology and that sort of thing. When the opportunity came for a summer student job with the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service I wrote to the Regional office in Minneapolis and asked for a job at a Fish Hatchery. But I did say that I would take any position that they had, if they didn't have one available at a Hatchery. The job that they offered me was at Des Lacs in North Dakota. I went back two other summers, so I spent three summers at Des Lacs during my graduate and under-graduate years. This lead me to use that same course work in aquatic ecology for waterfowl. I have spent my career working with refuges, wetlands and aquatic habitat.

MR. MADISON: What did you do after college? Did you come to work for us full time?

MR. SALYER: Yes. I was hired as a trainee-Manager at Lower Souris National Wildlife Refuge in North Dakota, which is now the J. Clark Salyer Refuge. J. Clark and I are not related but we did work together. I had the privilege of meeting him and spending quite a bit of time with him while on an assignment in Washington. I was there for a couple of years and then I was sent to the Departmental Training Program, which is currently called Executive Training, or Executive Management Training, I think. After that, I had a series of Refuge assignments mostly on major rivers in the Midwest. I was on the Illinois and the Mississippi and the Missouri rivers. Following that I went to Washington. I worked in the Resource Management branch of the Division of Refuges. I was an Area Manager at Pier, South Dakota. We had South Dakota, Nebraska and Kansas in our area. The

Missouri river was a major part of the ecosystem and habitat resource management activities that we were involved with in that area. They closed the area offices, which in my opinion was unfortunate. I felt that area offices put management and management decisions at an appropriate level in the field. But that didn't work too well in the opinion of the Service administrators so area offices were eliminated. By that time, I had over twenty years of active service and I was offered positions in Denver, Minneapolis, and Washington, D. C. I had been in all three of those places and didn't want to go so I left the Service. I took my retirement option on Friday, and on Monday, I went to work as the Director of South Dakota Game and Fisheries Department. I was there for a few years, and then retired again. I went back to Missouri and was pretty restless. I started looking for things to do. I asked the Service if they had part-time work for me, and they did. Since 1989 I has been writing EISs, Environmental Assessments, and now, CCPs. I have been writing Comprehensive Conservation Plans for De Soto Refuge where I was once the Manager, Squaw Creek Refuge. Both of those are on the Missouri River. That's kind of a thumbnail sketch. Actually my very first job with the Fish and Wildlife Service was in 1956. I was a laborer at a Fish Hatchery in Fort Worth, Texas. One of the interesting things that I recall about that was: as a laborer, I had two main jobs. One job was to mow grass; the other was to feed the fish. We fed them a prepared, dried food in some cases. In other cases it was beef products and bi-products, and things like that from butcher houses. We would chop that up and feed it to the Catfish. Each pickup had a "22" rifle in it. We were supposed to kill anything that would eat fish. That included Egrets, bullfrogs, and Herons; anything but people. We were not allowed to shoot any people. Things have really changed. We are much more sensitive to the total environment. The birds have to eat too. Whether or not they eat a few of our fish in a Hatchery is not too much of a concern. However, birds and fish are not really compatible. Birds carry a lot of diseases that Fish Hatchery managers are very cautious in wanting to avoid birds that might bring diseases into their hatcheries. But we're not shooting Egrets anymore to protect the Bluegill or the Bass.

MR. MADISON: That's a good story! Was the work on the Hatchery different as opposed to work a Refuge? Were the environments different and the working conditions?

MR. SALYER: Yes, it was different in that Hatcheries are a very compact unit. They are small places. There is a lot of activity in a small area compared to large refuges. Most refuges are at least a few thousand acres. Many of them are many thousands of acres. Fish Hatchery work seems to be a lot more focused on the objective of producing and distributing fish, than a National Wildlife Refuge which is very spread out, and the focus is not nearly so sharp on the production of wildlife or care of the habitat. It is more spread out and a lot more broad, in the applications as compared to a hatchery.

MR. MADISON: You have worked at quite a variety of Refuges too. Some, like De Soto are very heavily visited with the riverboat Bertrand and so on. Was it different

working at a place like De Soto than some of the other Refuges that might have been more migratory waterfowl based?

MR. SALYER: Oh yeah. I was at Des Lacs and Lower Souris in my trainee period and I was Manager at Chautauqua Refuge, which is on the Illinois River. Chautauqua Lake is a side channel lake. One of its functions was to absorb floodwaters. It was a side channel, reservoir type area. It brought in a lot of silt, and made it very difficult to manage. While I was there I had the privilege to work with Frank Belrose. Frank Belrose is one of the world-renowned Waterfowl Biologists. I thought it was a great privilege to spend a lot of years with him. That would have been back in the early 1960s and to this day, thirty-five or forty year later, Frank and I are still good friends. We write every Christmas. I went from there to the Mark Twain Refuge. The headquarters for Mark Twain are in Quincy, Illinois. There are three hundred and fifty miles of Mississippi River bottomlands and islands and river-marine habitat that make up that Refuge. It is not all in one box, or one big block. But there are units scattered over that three hundred and fifty mile area. From there, I went to Washington and then back out to the field at De Soto. So all three of those Refuge assignments were on rivers. De Soto was very different. At the other two Refuges, the concentration, or focus, was on habitat and wildlife management. While we had lots of ducks and geese and good fishing and good fish populations at the other places, at De Soto we had lots of people. They were allowed to swim and boat. There were two hundred fifty horsepower speedboats out there on the weekends. On holidays we might have ten thousand people there. That's like a small city. A Police force is necessary; you've got family squabbles going on, you have speeders on the roads. And there are people getting sick and needing emergency attention. Your focus is not really on wildlife when you are in a situation like that. Just before I got there, they had discovered the steamboat Bertrand. I got there just as the last of the cargo was being removed from the excavation. So my stay at De Soto was the period when the cargo was stored in cardboard boxes in a seven-stall garage. I go there now and look at a multi-million dollar Visitor's Center facility with controlled environments and backup diesel engine driven power units to make sure that the environment is constant for that valuable steamboat cargo collection. The Visitor's Center is sitting on the banks of the old Ox Bow-De Soto Lake, and it gives the visitors and outstanding view of the River and a feeling for steam boating on the River as well as wildlife. In the fall you can stand there in that Visitor's Center and see three hundred to four hundred thousand Snow Geese setting on the banks of the old Missouri River channel. In that period of time from my Refuge Manager period, to the present, they have eliminated all of that boating. There is no swimming any more. But boats are still allowed with small motors to sport fish. There is a good Sport Fisheries population there. Lots of people visit the area, but they are coming more now, for education and to experience large concentrations of waterfowl. It is not so much for speed boating and racing up and down the waterway. Which is good. We have learned a lot of lessons in the forty some years that I have been around Refuges. Some public use in compatible and some isn't.

MR. MADISON: Did you have any idea that when the Bertrand was discovered that it would be such a big deal? That it would become the focus of new exhibits and so on? What was the story of discovering it?

MR. SALYER: The two men, Purcell and Trebbino [sic] had made a lot of effort over the years to study the likely locations of steamboat wrecks. There were a lot of them on the Missouri. There were over three hundred between Kansas City and Fort Benton, Montana. They kind of knew where to look for them. At the time they were looking for that, I was working in the Division of Refuges in Washington, D.C. I was pretty much involved in the progress of that search. Once they found it, the Service didn't really know what to do about it. "What arrangements, agreements, commitments do we make with these people? Do they get what they are looking for?" The treasure was mercury. They were expecting to find that. Mercury was used in the gold fields in an amalgamation process to separate gold from its ore. There was supposed to be perhaps as much as a quarter million dollars worth of mercury on board. Unfortunately the owners of the boat, and the insurance company had likely gotten to that wreck soon after it sank and removed all but nine flasks of mercury. They did find nine. What about all of those bottles and shoes and hats and raincoats and dishes and tools, tons of cargo? The Antiquities Act helped somewhat. It was actually property of the U. S. Government in accordance with the Antiquities Act. But, the salvagers were entitled to certain things and what it amounted to is that the salvagers were allowed to take those things that were in a natural state, such a mercury. The U. S. Government claimed anything that was man-made and was actually considered an artifact. They really didn't leave much for the salvagers, there being only nine flasks of mercury. They did get some compensation for their expenses, based on the value of the bottles and other artifacts that were taken out of the boat. Those things that could be marketed; for instance, there is a market for bottles. There is not much of a market for old raincoats that have lain on the bottom of the Missouri River for one hundred and three years. Their compensation was based on those things that did have some kind of market value. They lost money, and people who more or less collaborated or took the adventure and paid some of their own way, such as dragline operators and equipment owners and operators, there were several that were there and helped dig this out at no cost, hoping that they would be able to claim some of the treasure. That didn't happen, and they lost. But the public gained an awful lot. It's very fascinating. The Service has done a great job in designing the Museum and Visitor's Center telling the story of steam boating on the Missouri River. I am particularly impressed with that combination of a National Wildlife Refuge and steamboats. The steamboat represented a change in the culture of the West, west of the Mississippi River. That change included agriculture, breaking the sod. It including mining of course, that was the main thing; gold mining and prospecting. But those people who went out there had to eat. And they liked steak. So cattle were being introduced on the ranges out there. And they wanted bread with that, so wheat was being planted and the prairies were being changed over from grasslands to wheat land. Plowing of the prairie made a lot of changes. Some people will say, "What business does the Fish and Wildlife Service have in

maintaining a Museum about a sunken steamboat"? Well, my justification would be that the boat represents a change of culture in the western United States from a primitive prairie with mountainous pristine forests and natural areas over to an agricultural culture. Later on, it became more of a cattle country with lots of pressure put on grasslands by cattle producers. They also proved to be compatible, and that we could have all of these things. But it made changes in the Missouri River, and the fact that people were up there, as well as downstream on the Missouri, led the Corps of Engineers to start building dams on the River. That changed everything. We still argue about how the dams, reservoirs or rivers should be managed. Maybe we will never settle that. But I think that steamboats represent that change. They were the forerunner of changes on the Missouri River.

MR. MADISON: They give us a historical context to understand why we needed Refuges. But it brings up an interesting point; you worked in the Midwest, North Dakota, Missouri and so on. You worked in a heavily agricultural area. What were your relations like with the agricultural communities? Did you have any interaction?

MR. SALYER: You bet! In fact, that is a basis of a sensitive point that I have right now. They rehired a militant to prepare CCPs. There is a very strong movement to have very little or no crop land on National Wildlife Refuges. When I as at De Soto we were farming three thousand acres and I sometimes claimed to be the biggest farmer in the State of Iowa! That is, the biggest single farmer. I probably wasn't, and I would admit that we probably didn't really need that many acres. Since then, those acres have been reduced. But we asked farmers to come in, as is common throughout the United States, on National Wildlife Refuges, to do the cooperative farming. Let the farmer bring his tractors and plows and combines and so forth and leave some of the crop for the wildlife. Work something out. I feel that a lot of our Refuges are located in the agricultural environment. In other places, it is the grazing environment. I believe that we have an obligation to be neighborly. You know the old saying, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do". I don't know that we need to do exactly as the ranchers or farmers do, but we need to be respectful of what their process is, and what their techniques are. I think that some of the best lessons I've even learned in land management, I learned from neighboring farmers, either in North Dakota or Illinois or South Dakota or Nebraska or Iowa. A lot of Refuge Managers were labeled "Duck Farmers". And we didn't really resent that; it wasn't too bad of a label. But it really wasn't a respectful term that was being applied. It was intended to be a little bit degrading. I think that even know there may be a stronger attitude to avoid duck farming. I wouldn't be able to entirely support *big* agriculture programs on Refuges, but I believe that we need to indicate to the farmer that we are aware of his needs. That we are not totally dependent on his crops to feed our wildlife, and that we are doing some of it. Deer populations can cause a lot of damage on nearby corn. Waterfowl can destroy wheat in North Dakota. When they swaft [sic] the grain in the fall and let it ripen in the swafts before they harvest it with a combine, if the ducks get on that before it is harvested, they can destroy it. We can alleviate some of that by allowing birds to feed on the Refuge. At least we need to show that we care, and that we

don't expect the farmer to shoulder the entire load. I have a little bit of a problem with the current policy to minimize crops. They say; 'they' being the Administration and the Wildlife Improvement Act that these kinds of things must be justified biologically and I agree with that. I also think that there is some room for some social obligation, and social relationship with our neighbors. I am afraid that our current administration is denying any responsibility or any obligation to be socially responsible to our neighbors. My opinion is that this is not right.

MR. MADISON: Do you remember the Leopold quote: "Wildlife Management is comparatively easy. It's human management that is difficult"? That really seems to apply to what you were saying about working with the farmers in the Midwest.

MR. SALYER: Very good.

MR. MADISON: I am from Wisconsin, so I agree with you. They like wildlife too, if you can bring them aboard, but they are very concerned. They are loosing their crops and their farms.

MR. SALYER: It's common knowledge, and we do admit this quite often, we may not live by it, but we do admit that survival of wildlife in the United States is dependent on private land. Neither Federal' or State government will ever be able to own enough land to ensure the long term survival of Snow Geese or Mallards or whatever. So I think it would be good politics to acknowledge the contribution that farmers make, and that we try to should some of the responsibility for wildlife welfare with that farmer and the local community.

MR. MADISON: I have two more questions for you. First, do you have any memories of working with J. Clark Salyer? What he was like as a person?

MR. SALYER: Oh yeah!

MR. MADISON: Can you share any of them?

MR. SALYER: By the time that I met him, he was already blind. But he had a terrific memory. We would say that it was "photographic". Youngsters like myself, at that time, had no basis on which to determine whether he was right or wrong. But I recall being ready to leave Washington to go on a tour or an orientation trip of Refuges in Region 1, and he wanted to know what Refuges I was going to. They included Desert Game Range, Stillwater, Malheur, and a series of Refuges starting from the Portland area and working down towards Desert Game Range, and catching a plane in Las Vegas and coming back to Washington, D.C. He told me what to look for. Then when I came back, he asked my intimate details about turns in the roads, and "Is that big tree at the corner of the fence?" at such and such a place? I am told that when he made his bid for Desert

Game Range that they were on a very high ridge. And that BLM had control of the land, and BLM person turned to J. Clark and said, "How much of this land to you need for the Big Horned Sheep"? And J. Clark said, "Everything that I can see"! He stood and pointed his finger and made a circle along the horizon and went three hundred and sixty degrees. It turned out that what he could see was two and a half million acres! That's what became the Desert Game Range. And even that probably isn't enough. At the time there was a serious conflict between miners of cinnabar for mercury and the sheep and horses and cattle grazing. Sheep need a very wide range, and don't tolerate horses or cattle or miners very close to their lambing areas. They need a lot of space. So that was the reason that Mr. Salyer said, "I want everything that I can see". But he had that kind of foresight. De Soto Refuge was one that I know that he picked out. And he picked it out because of the sandbars in the Missouri River, and the Canada Geese sitting on those sandbars. But the Corps of Engineers changed the Missouri River and the sandbars disappeared. We still had a good piece of property there. I enjoyed working with him because of his photographic memory, that is, his detailed memory of areas where he had been and what he had seen. In those days, I don't think he flew. I think he traveled by train. Have you heard that?

MR. MADISON: Yeah, we've heard that he covered a lot of area on at train. He was afraid to fly. Let me ask you the last question. For somebody who has been in the Refuge System a long time, even post retirement, what are some of the most striking changes you've seen happen? Has it been personnel changes or management changes? I am curious to hear from someone who that the kind of perspective that you do.

MR. SALYER: There are probably a couple of areas. One of them is a story that I like to tell. I didn't personally witness it, but a Refuge Manager friend of mine was manager of Seney Refuge in Michigan. He needed to talk to his Maintenance man and went out to the shop looking for him. He found him at the workbench and he had two, three pound coffee cans. In one can was a pile of rusty, bent nails. He was taking the nails out of that can and straightening them, and putting them over in the other can. The Refuge Manager asked him why he was doing that. He said, " We need them, they are good nails". He was a Norwegian man and spoke with an accent that I can't emulate, but anyway, that was the attitude. I and have referred to that era as the "Bent Nail" era. In that time, all of our heavy equipment: graders, dozers, tractors, draglines, cranes, whatever, came from the Army. They were handoffs, or Military surplus. Buying a new piece of equipment was simply unheard of. I remember being in Washington when Winnie Baum was an Administrative Assistant. She was really J. Clark Salyer's Secretary but she had the responsibilities to review some of the budgets, and Refuge Manager Lyle Schoonover asked for a new tractor at Sand Lake Refuge in South Dakota and it was going to cost five thousand dollars. And I, being rather new from the field, she thought that she would try me out. "Why does this man need such an expensive tractor"? I tried to support the Refuge Manager. But the point is that Washington bothered itself with things like farm tractors and whether or not *a* Refuge Manager needs a farmer tractor out in South Dakota.

Fortunately, things have changed, and we *are* able to budget for new equipment. And most of that his handled at the Regional level, Washington is not going to look very hard at a tractor request for a specific Refuge out in the prairie states. I think that this is a big difference that I see from the days I started, using worn out, hand-me-down, military equipment to build dike and levies and water control structures and roads and bridges and that sort of thing, to using new equipment that we can depend on to get the job done, and doing a better job.

The other thing is the science. I would hate to have to compete with the young people who are coming to work for the Service now, because they are technicians, and they are more scientists that we were back in the 1950s and 1960s. College preparation is a lot more technical than it was when I was there. I think it is paying off. We are able to measure, proscribe and implement management in various habitat situations that pay off in terms of improved populations. There is an Endangered Species program. There was no Endangered Species Act in the early days of my career. And I'm not sure, but I think was one that was kind of slow in being committed to the Endangered Species Act. But I am for it now, and was long before I retired. It is gratifying to see the Eagles, and the Alligators and Condors and the Whooping Cranes and many, many species being assisted by the science and technology that is available to us.

MR. MADISON: Do you have any advice to young people entering the Refuge System who we get through here, every week?

MR. SALYER: We often have these workshops, and you hear little jewels quoted or spoken to you. One, day before yesterday from a lady who I think is Dr. Patricia Woods who is with the Woods Institute and teaches and helps people understand how Congress works. She said, "Knowledge is power". It may surprise you, but I think that one of the most important attributes and capabilities that a Refuge Manager can have is to be able to express themselves, verbally and in written text. We have too few people who can express their knowledge that can be persuasive with Congress, or an adversary group, or in soliciting help. My advice to young people is to learning how to speak; how to orally express yourself and to write well.