INTERVIEW WITH DONALD HANKLA
BY GEORGE GENTRY MAY 15, 2003

MR. HANKLA: My name is Donald Hankla, H-A-N-K-L-A. I live in Anna, Illinois.

MR. GENTRY: Where are you from? Can you give us some background information?

MR. HANKLA: I was born and raised in Union County, near Anna, Illinois and I have gone back there to retire. After getting out of high school and a short stint in World War II I went to Southern Illinois University and got the first degree in Wildlife Management from that small school in 1951. I went to work for the North Carolina Natural Resources Commission as a Biologist. Ten years later, I went with the Fish and Wildlife Service as an east coast Waterfowl Biologist.

MR. GENTRY: Your date of birth?

MR. HANKLA: February 25, 1927.

MR. GENTRY: What was your career span with the Fish and Wildlife Service?

MR. HANKLA: Twenty-seven years with the Fish and Wildlife Service. I retired in 1987.

MR. GENTRY: What were your main areas of expertise in the Service?

MR. HANKLA: My main areas of expertise had a biological orientation. I started seeking and identifying areas to be purchased for the National Wildlife Refuge System. When that ended, I immediately became the Regional Biologist in Atlanta for all refuges. I went to the Departmental Manager Training Program from that, in 1966. I came back from that program and became as Assistant Regional Supervisor of Refuges for the States of Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas, and Tennessee. From there, after a few years, I went to the Washington, D.C. office where I was on the Refuges staff for about a year. I was doing biological support work. Then I became the Chief of the Branch of Resource Management in Washington, D.C., which dealt with hunting and fishing programs and management of all of the resources on national wildlife refuges. From there, after four and a half years, I went to Portland as Associate Regional Director for the Northwest Region. After about four and a half years in that position, which was a wonderful position, I accepted a job as Area Manager. The Fish and Wildlife Service reorganized again, they do that every few years, and I became one of eighteen Area Managers. I applied for two Area Manager positions; one in Asheville, North Carolina and one in Jacksonville, Florida. Luckily, I got the one in Jacksonville, Florida. I was the Manager for Puerto Rico, The Virgin Islands, Georgia and Florida, of all the Fish and Wildlife Activities except Law Enforcement. Then Area Offices were wiped out in 1982 and I retreated back

to Atlanta. I had luckily kept the house that I had purchased when I was there earlier. I just moved back into that house. I was the Deputy Assistant Regional Director for Wildlife for two or three years. I ended up as the Deputy Assistant Regional Director for Ecological Services. I was kind of cooling my heels waiting to retire. That has been the span of my career.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Could you tell us some of the highlights, some of the accomplishments that you are most proud of, or that you think made the most impression on the Service?

MR. HANKLA: I have thought about this a lot. I am convinced that the legacy that I want to be remembered for is first work that I did on land acquisition. I actually worked by myself to establish, or locate the sites for new National Wildlife Refuges. The first one that I located, completed an Acquisition Report on, and was purchased, was the Pee Dee National Wildlife Refuge in North Carolina. The second was Lake Woodruff in Florida. The third was the Hatchie Refuge on the Hatchie River in west Tennessee. There was the St. Vincent Refuge, which is in Florida, and Pungo Lake, which no longer has that name; I think it's in with the Pocosin Lakes Refuges. I first recommended the Mason's Neck Refuge in Virginia, which is now a refuge. It wasn't acquired at that time but I recommended that it be acquired. So land acquisition and the establishment of refuges is, I think, the most exciting thing. I didn't know at the time that it would be all that important. But I know now that that little bit of work that I did, helped shape, a little bit, the direction of what's happening. I had good advice from a number of people. But still, I had to go out and work on the ground and find a suitable location. I had to identify it, decide on its size and how it would be managed. I talked to the State Fish and Game Departments and everybody else about it. That was kind of exciting. Each one had its own story. As is happened, at the Pee Dee in North Carolina, I had hunted there one time when I worked for the state. There were geese and Black Ducks and things like this. So that became the first one that I recommended; not because I had hunted there, but because I knew of the quality of it. The second one, which was at Hatchie, I was excited about the Hatchie. I conferred with the Habitat Committees of the Atlantic Flyway Council and the Mississippi Flyway Council. I got recommendations from them. The Corps of Engineers had just permitted the Obion and the Forked Deer Rivers in western Tennessee to be drained, draining a huge amount of fantastic habitat that wintered many, many thousands of birds.

MR. GENTRY: Let me just interrupt for a minute. If you could just sprinkle this with a little bit of dates, so that for those of us who don't have a clue about this, even if it's just an approximate date.

MR. HANKLA: Surely. It was 1962, in March, when we submitted the proposal to acquire the Pee Dee. That was the first one. It went to Washington and it was reviewed. I got a personal letter from J. Clark Salyer, the famous Salyer whom I consider to be the

father of the Refuge System, really. He said, "You sure did a good job on this reconnaissance, keep up the good work"! So, if I can just digress for a minute; when I went to Washington I went along with the proposal when it went before the Migratory Bird Commission to answer any questions they might have. You can't spend Duck Stamp money without getting the approval of the Migratory Bird Commission. That's where I met "Clark" Salyer. He had retired from his position as Chief of Refuges but was in a consulting position. He was blind, and everything had to be read to him. But he had a mind that wouldn't quit. He remembered all of the places in the United States where he had been and he thought there should be new wildlife refuges. He pulled me aside and told me of some great places. He insisted that I find a place for a refuge in Florida for the Sand Hill Crane. But where he wanted me to locate it had already been drained and there were citrus groves there. He had seen that habitat years before when he was out making his surveys. We had many discussions, and I was up there several times. All of sudden I didn't go anymore because we had completed the acquisition work. The Hatchie was in 1962, later. The important thing there was that the Corps had permitted the drainage of those rivers and wiped out the habitat. The Habitat Committee of the Flyway Council said, 'see if you can find something in west Tennessee to replace that'. So I found a beautiful place on the Hatchie. We established it to straddle the river thinking that if the Corps was going to drain that, maybe we could get enough fuss caused about them destroying a National Wildlife Refuge. They never did. I don't know if they ever would have, but nevertheless, we have two refuges on the Hatchie now. [Lower Hatchie, and Hatchie] They are big bottomland hardwood refuges. That was in 1962. This all was done in 1962 through 1964. The Congress had passed legislation called The Wetlands Loan Act. They were actually loaning the Fish and Wildlife Service that was the intent of the legislation one hundred and five million dollars that would have to be replaced with the sale of Duck Stamps. So it was actually a loan, and the one hundred and five million dollars became available, and when I was hired to represent Region 4 in Acquisitions, other biologist were doing the same thing I was. We were all competing for the money. They set aside about one third of the one hundred and five million, or maybe a fourth, for the wetland production areas in the Pothole country. The rest of it was up for grabs. I think that the refuges that I found in about three years took about thirty five million of the one hundred and five million. One refuge stood out in all of those. I found, just by chance; I went down to the Gulf Coast to look for a refuge and couldn't find one in a certain area. I looked offshore and there was an island there. That turned out to be the St. Vincent National Wildlife Refuge. I went out there and there were Zebras on that island, and Sambar Deer. Two brothers owned it, and they had stocked these Zebras there. The Sambar Deer are still there. The Zebras are long since gone. But when I came back to Atlanta and wrote this up, I said that we didn't have any funds for this. Only a part of this would qualify for Duck Stamp funds. The rest of it would have to wait until we find some. This was in 1964. In 1965 the law passed making offshore oil revenues available. So the Land and Water Conservation Fund came into being in 1965. I was training in Washington and the Regional Director came by one day and he asked me to come back to Atlanta. He said that they were going to meet with the owners and try to buy St.

Vincent. They did buy it. I just went along. I am real proud of that Refuge. It was purchased with Land and Water Conservation funds and I think it was established in 1968. That is a beauty. That took care of my Land Acquisition chores, except for one. President Johnson's wife, Lady Bird. He had become President in 1964, and somewhere along in there she wanted to beautify the Potomac, and the Washington, D. C. area. So all of the federal agencies that had any responsibilities in that area were called in. I represented the Department of the Interior, because Virginia at that time was in Region 4. I went up there and spent almost three months searching up and down the Potomac looking for a suitable site for a National Wildlife Refuge, and could find nothing that I in mind's eye would make a good NWF. Except there was this one place at the mouth of the river which is Mason's Neck, which is now the Mason's Neck NWR.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: But it wasn't made a refuge at that time?

MR. HANKLA: No, it wasn't.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: How much later, or longer did it take?

MR. HANKLA: I really don't know. I looked yesterday, on the planks but I didn't see it, so I don't know. I did recommend it. It's in my file. I got a letter back from the Director thanking me for the time that I spent away from my family up there making that survey.

MR. GENTRY: Take St. Vincent's Island for example; you went there the first time to scout that out as a refuge. What year was that?

MR. HANKLA: I'd say it was in 1963. It could be early 1964.

MR. GENTRY: Other than finding those exotic species there, what was that habitat like? Give us a picture of that in the 1960's. Where it was located, and all of that.

MR. HANKLA: St. Vincent's Island is located near Apalachicola, west of Tallahassee in the panhandle, just offshore. On one end it's about half a mile across, into the ocean. But on the other end it must be ten or twelve miles. It's a twelve thousand acre island. It is largely upland pine. In fact, at one time there was a bridge across to it so they could harvest the pine off of it. I was interested in it because there was one ownership. It had not been developed, and it had fantastic, really beautiful salt marshes and fresh marshes. I saw blind there. At the time of the year when I was there, no duck were there, but I saw duck blinds, which indicated to me that ducks were there in the wintertime and people were seeking them there. So I knew it was a waterfowl area. Then I got on to it and saw it and it was just wonderful salt and fresh marsh there, but not enough to qualify it to purchase for a whole refuge. But I knew that it ought to be in public ownership. At that time, all of those beautiful places were being scarfed up for commercial development.

That was a beautiful one and I thought it should be in public ownership. It turned out that the Regional Director went to the Smithsonian, and the Smithsonian Institute wanted to be involved in it. They wanted to do research there. We thought that might encumber us too much, in terms of what we wanted to do in NWR, so we didn't get involved. But it was just a beautiful island; with one ownership and no in holdings or other problems that refuges have when they are adjacent to anybody else.

MR. GENTRY: That one wasn't owned by the Reynolds family was it?

MR. HANKLA: It was owned by the Loomis brothers. One of the Loomis brothers was the head of Voice of America in World War II. He came back, and the other brother was in New York. They got together and wanted to sell it. Thank goodness, the Fish and Wildlife Service was there at the right time.

MR. GENTRY: Maybe you can tell me kind of a general picture of the history of most of those barrier islands, not along the Atlantic but on the Gulf. They were owned by wealthy families for one reason or another.

MR. HANKLA: They were.

MR. GENTRY: Are there other examples of that that you are aware of?

MR. HANKLA: I looked at another island off of Southport, North Carolina; Bald Head Island, right at the conjuncture of North and South Carolina. I thought that would make a nice NWR as well. I don't know who owned it at the time. It hadn't been developed. That's the key, to get there and acquire it before it's been developed. Because we can't afford; "we" the Fish and Wildlife Service, can't afford the prices of buying big plantations and developments. Usually, they are spoiled anyway, from the standpoint of NWR.

MR. GENTRY: At that time, did you ever feel like you were in this race against time with development, to acquire these places?

MR. HANKLA: There was a race against time. That's why I was so excited about finding St. Vincent; because it was still whole, nobody had gotten hold of it yet. I couldn't afford it. But there are several other barrier islands around Florida that have been developed. And price is something else. The Fish and Wildlife Service can only do an appraised price and we don't want to spend all of our money buying as island which has limited value in the sense that it's not available to the public and so it has to have something special about it. I thought that St. Vincent had something special with all of those wetland marshes there, of value to Fish and Wildlife.

MR. GENTRY: I think you also in acquiring St. Vincent's, acquired a pretty interesting cultural, archeological site there; the oyster [sounds like] middins.

MR. HANKLA: How'd you know about that?

MR. GENTRY: I know a lot of things! You might be surprised!

MR. HANKLA: Yes! I am not familiar with all of the values. But on the north side there, it's obvious that there were some prehistoric culture. As my wife and I would go down to visit, others saw it too; the waves were washing out all of these beautiful artifacts. We have some of those little potshards. There are a number there. And I hope that somebody, some time, if they haven't, will go in scientifically and study it. But that wouldn't be involved in any of the value that I would place on the island as a NWR. Another area that has the same kind of value that I was involved in, was Lake Woodruff. It was on the St. John's River in Florida and there, somebody was mining shell. There was all kinds of archeological things in those shell mounds.

MR. GENTRY: St. Vincent's wasn't a pristine area. It had already been harvested and things like that right?

MR. HANKLA: That's true. It was not, in the sense that the owners had no doubt previously harvested the timber and was well aware of in managing large blocks of land like that, you need roads, or fire barriers. So it had been blocked off with roads that would permit periodic burning or at least permit fire control in the event that a fire broke out. Of course a lot of lightening strikes would set the woods on fire. Yes, it had been managed in that sense. There was nobody there at all. I don't know who they hired to do it, but the roads were drug, and kept open. But there was no active management going on at that time. I know that timber was harvested, and from the looks of the size of it, it had all been replaced at one time, either naturally or planted.

MR. GENTRY: What about Hatchie? What was that ecosystem like?

MR. HANKLA: Hatchie was something different. I had to learn anew how politics works on Hatchie. I wanted something that we didn't have to wait forever to be able to see the benefits from. So I found a place on the Hatchie where a timber owner had been managing carefully the timber. The hardwoods were spaced nicely and were growing well. I thought, "My goodness, we could make a green timber reservoir out of this. Just flood this and bring all the ducks in here!" It was just a fantastic place. The owner, Powell Lumber Company didn't like that a bit, that anybody was thinking about buying it and taking it from them. I wasn't aware of this, but when it was approved at the Washington level, and I guess they checked with Powell to see if he would sell it, why, he realized that he might loose it and he doubt went to a Congressman. So the Fish and Wildlife Service then had to negotiate. And the negotiation was, which I thought was terrible at the time;

but really it wasn't, it was fine; they would permit him to cut the timber down to a certain diameter level. I thought, "My God, you've ruined it!" But they really hadn't. Within just few years after he removed the bigger stuff, it was all right back just like it was. Timber will restore itself, and is renewable. So we got it a lot cheaper by letting him cut that timber, but it was a beautiful timberland area that flooded periodically from the Hatchie. It had not been channelized. The water came down slowly and worked out into the land of either side.

MR. GENTRY: The Hatchie is a tributary of what?

MR. HANKLA: The Hatchie is a tributary of the Mississippi. It's near Brownsville, TN and now we have a nice large refuge down on the Lower Hatchie, right at the mouth. It has even additional greater values than that one did.

MR. GENTRY: What about the Pocosin area like? Did you say Pungo?

MR. HANKLA: I said, Pungo.

MR. GENTRY: What was Lake Pungo and the Pocosin area like?

MR. HANKLA: We were encouraged to buy a refuge there. I never felt that the refuge was really necessary. But we were encouraged to buy a refuge there and unfortunately, we were kind of told where to buy it! I don't know how much about politics I should get into here. It could be embarrassing.

MR. GENTRY: It doesn't matter anymore! You are retired!

MR. HANKLA: Okay, I'll just tell you what I know about it! The Chair of the Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee in Congress that had our budget and looked after Fish and Wildlife was from the Mattamuskeet, Pungo Lake area in North Carolina. At this minute, I can't think of his name, but that's irrelevant really. We got a map in the office in Atlanta with a red circle around it saying, 'give consideration to buying this area for refuge purposes.' Well, it was adjacent, or very close to Mattamuskeet. And Mattamuskeet was a beautiful functioning Refuge with geese, and waterfowl and everything we wanted; Swan Quarter was nearby. We didn't need another refuge there, but he felt we did. So what happened was that a person had purchased Pungo and the lands around it. It was the North American Land Company, as I remember it; this was many years ago. They had attempted to farm it, and that is peat soil. It is very poor soil. You couldn't grow anything unless you watered it and fertilized it, and watered it and fertilized it. They were going broke. They had cleared a lot of it. To bail them out, they went to the Congressman; I am guessing this. But anyway we were told to buy and by golly, we bought it! I've got that on my record. But later they purchased additional Pocosin Lakes that were not cleared around, and joined them all. Now it's the Pocosin

Lake NWR. We were kind of encouraged to buy that, and when I talked to the Director about; I knew him quite well, he said, "Don, it's a small to pay. That guy controls our budget and everything we need nationwide!"

MR. GENTRY: What year was that, about?

MR. HANKLA: That was in 1964.

MR. GENTRY: What is a Pocosin, anyway?

MR. HANKLA: Oh my, you are reaching into… I am an interior biologist, not a coastal biologist!

MR. GENTRY: I've seen a lot of other people try to answer that question. Nobody really knows I don't guess.

MR. HANKLA: Well, I can describe the looks of one. A Pocosin is a low wet area that normally in that part of the country is dominated by what's called Pond Pine. It is a fire species. They have to run a fire through it to get it to reproduce. They are short and dumpy and they'd never make a tree but they just occupy land. It's on peat soil; so it's a very marginal type of situation where plant succession hasn't proceeded far enough yet from the water receding to make the soil rich enough to grow anything. So you've got peat soil and a species that are normally found on those kinds of soils; which are not rich, or even support wildlife. It's good cover perhaps, but not food. That's a Pocosin. And the coastal part of North Carolina has a number of Pocosin areas.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Those ponds must not be very rich then, either?

MR. HANKLA: No, you're right. They are almost sterile. Its black, or stained water. It's very dark. Once in a while you'll see some white water lilies floating. I was involved in another one when I was with the State at Horton Plantation which had a pond called Horton Pond. It was a large pocosin surrounded by Cypress and a few Cypress out in the water. There were Ospreys nesting there.

MR. GENTRY: You came into the Service in what year?

MR. HANKLA: In 1961.

MR. GENTRY: Before that, or even in that period, what was the wildlife situation like as far as the diversity and numbers of species? Have you seen any change in numbers or diversity over the years?

MR. HANKLA: The greatest change I have seen, and I saw it after I came into the Service was when I became interested in Canada Geese when I was in Atlanta as soon as I finished the acquisition work and became a biologist. I followed the migrations of waterfowl in both flyways. This is how I decided, by the way, where some of the refuges needed to be. I looked at the flyway pattern, and I looked at the pattern of the National Wildlife Refuges, and State Management areas and looked for gaps. This is way Pee Dee was a beautiful example. There was nothing there that was suitable for expanding waterfowl or providing waterfowl habitat, and that was the Pee Dee. And of course, it was the same way with the Hatchie because it was replacing something that had been lost. But yes, the Canada Geese are especially of interest to me. I was on the Canada Goose Flyway Committee of the two Flyway Councils for a number of years. The Canada Geese, some people would say that they have been short stopped; they have changed their habits. I am concerned now because I live in southern Illinois and that's been the "heart" of the Canada goose population in the Mississippi Flyway. And this year, for the first time, we didn't have hardly any. We had very few. My records show, and I published on this, that Canada geese used to go all of the way to the mouth of the Mississippi River on what is now the Delta National Wildlife Refuge, and to other suitable lands on the lower Mississippi. There are no geese there now. Maybe a few go down there alone. Used to, they'd go down there in the wintertime. But then, through management, I think and through our efforts to concentrate them and provide food, we've inadvertently short stopped them. So now, they are short stopped clear up in to northern Illinois. That is something that is very distressing. I told everybody it was going to happen and nobody would believe it. Now, my friends that run hunting clubs are at home, near where I live. They want some studies made. They want to know, "What's happened to our Geese?" Well, what's happened is that they have been short stopped for the north.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: They don't have to go as far south?

MR. HANKLA: They don't have to go as far south. They've learned to…I used to talk about distribution of species, but this is something that mankind did. I am not sure it would have happened if we hadn't been involved; we hunters and we managers in managing the refuges. We are providing sanctuary and enabling a few to be killed along the way; the regulations permit that, so you still have all of the birds you need to replenish the number. But Canada geese are something that I think we have destroyed, or done something to a beautiful distribution. They used to come to Lake Mattamuskeet. I asked the Manager who was here yesterday. There are just a few hundred now. There used to be thousands coming to Lake Mattamuskeet in western North Carolina. But you can see the migration patterns changing; going further and further north. So that's something that man has done. I don't think we would have done it purposefully, except that every group of hunters wants to hunt more all of the time. So they encourage planting and establishing sanctuaries for them and whatever. So that's been a major change.

MR. GENTRY: That's one of the major things that stuck me about the Refuges when I first came to work for the Fish and Wildlife Service; the public probably has a perception, as I did, before I came to work, that you guys went out and acquire these pristine wilderness areas. And it was almost kind of shock when I started to travel around, to realize that you guys went out and were basically making farms for wildlife.

MR. HANKLA: I found in my file last week; I didn't know I had it, I don't ever recall seeing it; a paper presented by J. Clark Salyer. It was prepared by him in 1954. I gave that to Lynn Greenwalt this morning. It will go into the file. In this paper he describes the situation with regard to Canada geese and ducks in each Flyway. He proposed at that time additional refuges, and that's all laid out on a map. And what's remarkable; I was listening yesterday to what the Secretary said, that 36 million visitor use days, now in the National Wildlife Refuges. J. Clark Salyer, in 1954 quoted three and a half million visitor use days. He talked about the need then. We had to be concerned about the loss of habitat. And there was a loss of habitat, in a large way happening at the time. He was concerned about the Intra-Coastal Waterway that had been constructed across the marshes of Louisiana. It permitted the intrusion of salt water and it wiped out a lot of habitat. He was looking at it from a national perspective. They were glad to get that paper, and it was in my file and I had not seen it before. I don't know where it came from.

MR. GENTRY: It sounds like there was this science to finding the strategic places to put these things. Is that true?

MR. HANKLA: Many of us felt that the Refuge System is a series of stepping-stones. It wouldn't do for all of them to be in the same place. They are kind of like stepping-stones down the Flyway. Every thirty, or fifty or one hundred miles, the birds can pick up and find habitat at the next place, and the next place as their migration takes place. That's always how I've kind of looked at it; a series of stepping-stones in each historic flyway that would maintain habitat for each of the different kinds, not just Canada geese and Mallard ducks; the common ones, but all of the variety of ducks. I always look for good habitat, deep-water habitat, and shallow water habitat, habitat that could be developed because they all don't want the same kind of habitat. Another thing that I have been concerned about is wading birds. I have seen a definite loss in wading birds in the last fifteen or twenty years. And they require a specific kind of habitat. They have to have a place first of all for their rookies. That's usually a wooded area. Then they need shallow water that they can rear their babies in; where they wade around in and feed. A lot of times we will drain our areas for ducks and plant something in there, so we have destroyed the shallow-water areas that otherwise provide good summer time habitat for rearing wading birds and water birds of all kinds. That's one of the things that the Refuge Managers in this day and time, I'm sure, are concerned about; making sure that they take care of the diverse needs. It is diverse because of all of the different species of birds and

animals. That's one of the values I think of the National Wildlife Refuge System. We don't just buy a marsh. Usually, it's a wide enough area with several different types of habitat on it that can be managed or manipulated so that it maintains or provides all of the different types of habitat. I think that's real important.