

Cal Lensink Stories

As told by Jim King at Cal's Retirement Party:

It is a pleasure to talk about Cal Lensink because I've known Cal for a long time – 35, 36, 37, maybe even 38 years. The stories come bubbling up in my head now but I have to be careful to select a couple that would interest you.

One of the things I always think about of Cal was how he kept an open house in Bethel when he was the Refuge Manager there. He was the Refuge Manager there for some 15 years. Anybody in the wildlife business that came through was always welcome at Cal's house. In fact, he wanted us to stay there because he enjoyed the evening seminars that always evolved. We didn't talk about ball scores or television programs or any of the sort of things you hear in the normal run of conversation. We had a really high level of wildlife seminars just about every night at Cal's house. They were wonderful evenings and I think for that 15-year period, just about every program that was worthwhile was discussed. That included the inception of the eagle program in Southeast and the seabird programs that evolved in Western Alaska and just many, many more programs and production studies were first discussed at a seminar in Cal's living room.

One example of something with international percussion that happened there was one year when Bill Sladen came up. He was a professor at John's Hopkins University who had recently changed his interest from penguins to whistling swans. He had the assumption that nobody knew anything about whistling swans until he got to Bethel and he began to see that really there were a quite a lot of people knew something about swans. So he broached this subject of "gee, maybe we ought to have an international symposium on swans and how would Whitehorse be?" Cal and I almost simultaneously said, "Slimbridge." That's where we thought it ought to be. Much to our surprise, a few months later, we each got an invitation signed by Sir Peter Scott who presented a paper at the first International Swan Symposium to be held in Slimbridge. The Washington Office, in its wisdom, declined to fund either one of us to go to such a meeting but we had this proprietary about the conception of this meeting, and besides that, how could you

refuse Sir Peter Scott, so we both went on our own time with our own funds. We had a wonderful time. So there was this little thing that started in Cal's living room. Now there has been a second International Swan Symposium held in Japan and a third International Swan Symposium has recently been announced that it will be held in England again next year. A few ripples from Cal's living room that continue to work their way around the world.

We had a lot of good times in the boreal forest. We banded boat loads of ducks together, did a lot of things on the tundra, had a few adventures of cars and airplanes but I think maybe it would be interesting for you to know the time Cal and I entered politics. There were some congressmen back East that decided that if Alaska's federal lands were going to be all divided up and given away that some of them should be given to the American public as wildlife refuges and national parks, i.e., the national interest lands. As a result, Cal and I were directed to go back to Patuxent and produce a paper on the waterfowl resources of Alaska and what was needed for their protection and what areas might be suitable for waterfowl refuges. We zipped back there. We had a high priority for working on the data at Patuxent. Cal was to analyze 30-40 years of banding data and my mission was to edit and help Dick Pospahala put 15 years of breeding pair survey data into the cumbersome computers they had available at that time. We launched into that. With the high priority that we had, whatever we needed we were supposed to ask for and we were supposed to get. There were some people at Patuxent that didn't think this was such a hot deal to be up-staged by a couple of Alaskan's but we didn't know or care much about that. We were provided a car, put up in a motel next to the main road between Canada and Florida which had an enormous amount of traffic. The next morning we got up, had our breakfast and rushed out to head over to Patuxent which opened up at 8:00 a.m. Cal took a look at the traffic whizzing around and he said, "why don't you drive." I took a look at the traffic and I said, "why don't you drive, you know more about this than I do." We talked about this awhile and then decided to have another cup of coffee and see what happens. We went back in and had our coffee. At about 8:15 in the morning, we checked the traffic situation again. It had died down to the point we thought we could cope with it so we got in the car and made our way over to Patuxent

and went to work. That's the way we were doing things for a few days. Patuxent is a taut ship; I guess Washington, D.C. is a taut ship also. It was just a few days later that somebody felt obliged to give us a little lecture. They said to us, "you know you guys have a high priority around here and you are the only people that come in here late every morning to work. We want you here at 8:00 a.m. tomorrow." Cal and I were able to explain our dilemma in the fact that neither one of us felt competent driving in that early morning traffic. We told them that if you want us at 8:00 o'clock, we'll be ready and you can send someone over to get us that knows how to drive in this traffic. This explanation took the heat off. Nobody came to get us and we kept going in at 8:30 – 8:45 each morning.

It wasn't long until another emergency arose, and this time it was just about 5:00 o'clock in the evening. We got a call from downtown Washington telling us we were to be in the refuge office the next morning at 8:00 o'clock to brief the Director on what we were doing there and what the refuge proposals for Alaska ought to be. We went back to our motel and we discussed this all through supper and all evening. What we discussed, of course, was not any of what we were going to tell the Director. What we discussed was how in the hell we were going to get from Patuxent, 25 miles into downtown Washington, by 8:00 o'clock in the morning. But like good pilots, we analyzed the weather, the field conditions, equipment, and all the things that go into analyzing a trip. As pilots will do, we calculated the chances of success and decided they weren't favorable. So the results of that was the next morning, Cal and I got up real early and called a taxi. It costs us every dime we had in our pockets to pay that cabby off! We got to Washington on time, however.

We went into Lynn Greenwalt's office. He was the Chief of Refuges then. As it turns out, we weren't supposed to go up and see the Director until 11:00 a.m., and then we were told we had a whole 10 minutes to tell him all we knew and there are a few ground rules in how you tell somebody all you know in 10 minutes. We got about an hour-long pep talk on how to do this. When it was all done, we were supposed to go get ready but before we left, some guy there with a white shirt and green necktie said, "you need to

remember that careers have been made in a 10-minute interview like this with the Director.” Then some guy in the back of the room, he probably had scars on his face said, “yes, careers have been ruined in a 10-minute interview like this too!” I looked at Cal and I had to think “there’s a guy that’s wheeled around the Aleutian Islands in a skiff and had flown his way from Hooper Bay to Bethel under 60-foot ceilings hundreds of times, whizzed around Nunivak Island on a snow machine when the wind chill factor was 120 below zero and I began to think about some days when I wasn’t sure I was going to be alive in 10 minutes if I didn’t behave pretty well, let alone further my career.” We went up to see the Director at 11:00 o’clock. We didn’t crash and burn there. In fact, we stayed an hour with him and then he said, “oh, it’s 12:00 o’clock, let’s go have lunch.” That was with Director Spencer Smith. Cal and I both felt he was a really great Director. He didn’t last as Director very long because of health problems but we thought he was a great conservationist and we had a lot of respect for him.

The next day, we had to do the same thing with the Under Secretary of the Interior, who was Nat Reid and then the Secretary of the Interior, who was Rogers C.B. Morton. He was a great big man. He made two of Cal and me combined. Then we got directed to go to a whole series of meetings with Congressmen and Senators. The Congressmen and Senators are used to being approached by lobbyists and so the first thing they wonder when they see somebody coming through their doors, is what does this guy want. They don’t have time to fool around. We walked into the first Congressman’s office and he pointed his finger, raised his eyebrows and said; “just what is it you want? Hey, Cal and I weren’t used to that kind of a question. We were biologists. We were brought back there on orders from our employer, the Government, to provide information; not to tell what we wanted. It didn’t take us long to learn the ropes back there and shortly, when we would go into a Congressman’s office and he would say, “now just what is it you want?” We’d say, “well, want the Yukon Flats, we want the Yukon Delta, we want the Koyukuk River Valley, the Selawik River Valley, the Kanuti Flats, the Nowitna Flats, the Innoko Flats, the Bristol Bay Lowlands, the Innoko River, --- that’s what we want and we need about 2500 of these islands off the coast here that nobody wants, that’s what we want. We want those because they are the places that produce the birds in Alaska.” And you

know what, you would never believe what happened. We got what we wanted. They gave it to us!

Cal has had a wonderful career with the Fish and Wildlife Service and has achieved a national and international reputation as a person who has provided a tremendous boost for the cause of conservation and protection of birds and sea mammals and other wildlife. I'll always remember Cal as a person who was never too busy to lend a hand whether it was to a professional in a dilemma over how to handle a certain project or somebody with just a flat tire on the road or some Native who was a little to drunk to walk home – Cal was always available to help solve a problem.

He is retiring now from the Fish and Wildlife Service but I know and you know that Cal is not finished with his career and I expect that we will be hearing a lot of good things from him in the future and we wish him all the luck in the world and hope to be seeing more of him.

Tape transcribed by:

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