

Oral History Cover Sheet

Name: John Ellis

Date of Interview: January 7, 2003

Location of Interview: Eden Prairie, Minnesota

Interviewer: Dorothe Norton

Approximate years worked for Fish and Wildlife Service: 29 + years; Fall of 1961-January of 1991

Offices and Field Stations Worked, Positions Held: Summer student assistant at Shiawassee National Wildlife Refuge, Michigan; Assistant Manager at Shiawassee National Wildlife Refuge, Michigan; Agassiz National Wildlife, Minnesota; Refuge Manager at Lacreek National Wildlife Refuge, South Dakota; Regional Biologist for Region 3, Fort Snelling, Minnesota; Regional Migratory Bird Coordinator, Region 3, Fort Snelling, Minnesota; Regional Refuge Supervisor for the four southern states in Region 3, Fort Snelling, Minnesota; Refuge Supervisor for the four northern states in Region 3, Fort Snelling, Minnesota.

Most Important Projects: Initiation of the “Moist Soil Management Concept”

Colleagues and Mentors: Frank Martin, Jack Frye, Claude Alexander, Ed Smith, Lynn Greenwalt, Forrest Carpenter, Jack Hemphill, Ellis Klett, Harold Benson

Most Important Issues: Canada goose concentrations, specifically at Horicon Refuge

Brief Summary of Interview: Mr. Ellis was born in Caro, Michigan and grew up in Cass City, Michigan. He was in the Navy for four years before he got in degree in Wildlife Management from the University of Michigan. He would start his career with in the Conservation Department for Ohio Department of Natural Resources before working full time for the Fish and Wildlife Service. He talks about what his general duties were, people’s view of the Service, what he felt the major impediments of the job were, changes that affected his work, and what he would tell people about a career with the Service.

National Heritage Team of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Oral History Program
Subject/USFW Retiree: John Ellis
No. 3010703
Interviewed by: Dorothe Norton

Dorothe Norton:
Well good afternoon John, it's good to see you.

John Ellis:
It's good to see you, too.

Dorothe Norton:
And I'm glad you had time that you could give me this interview, okay. This will go to the Conservation Training Center of Fish and Wildlife, and then it will be transcribed there and go into the archives. If you'd like a copy we can send you a copy of it.

John Ellis:
That would be nice, thank you.

Dorothe Norton:
So we'll start with some personal information like your birthplace and date.

John Ellis:
My birthplace is Caro, Michigan. September 10, 1934 (DOB).

Dorothe Norton:
And what were your parent's names?

John Ellis:
Ann and Howard.

Dorothe Norton:
And what were their jobs and their education.

John Ellis:
Well, they were both high school graduates. My mother was a homemaker and my father owned and operated a filling station.

Dorothe Norton:
Oh, okay. And where did you spend your early years?

John Ellis:
Well, we moved from Caro, about 16 miles away to another small town called Cass City. They are located in the "Thumb" of Michigan, and I spent the rest of my elementary and high school years there.

Dorothe Norton:

And what did you do during your early years?

John Ellis:

Well, I spent a lot of time on my grandmother's farm, I think that's where I learned how to appreciate the outdoors and the natural things that occur out there. And then after high school I enlisted in the Navy, it was during the Korean War, and I spent 4 years in the Navy. After being discharged from the Navy, I worked for an electrical contractor for one year. And then I took advantage of the GI Bill and went to college.

Dorothe Norton:

Where and what high school did you go to and when did you graduate?

John Ellis:

I went to Cass City High School and was graduated in 1952.

Dorothe Norton:

Then what university did you attend?

John Ellis:

I started out at Central Michigan University and then finished up at the University of Michigan.

Dorothe Norton:

And what degree did you get then?

John Ellis:

A BS degree from the University of Michigan.

Dorothe Norton:

In what?

John Ellis:

In wildlife management.

Dorothe Norton:

What year did you get that?

John Ellis:

In 1960.

Dorothe Norton:

In 1960, okay. Did you go on for a masters?

John Ellis:

I did take graduate courses, but then a job offer came [from Ohio Department of Natural Resources] and I decided I'd better go and take it.

Dorothe Norton:

So you were in the Navy you said?

John Ellis:

Yes.

Dorothe Norton:

For 4 years?

John Ellis:

Yes.

Dorothe Norton:

Okay. And your duty stations were?

John Ellis:

Well, I went to boot camp in San Diego, California. After boot camp I went to the Seabees construction electrician school, in Port Hueneme, California. And then I was stationed at the Coronado Amphibious Base. And then from there I went to the Adak out on the Aleutian Islands for 2 years. And then from there I returned to Seattle, and was discharged there.

Dorothe Norton:

And what did you do while you were in the service? What was your job?

John Ellis:

I was a construction electrician, as in the Seabees. And while I was out on Adak I was on a power line crew.

Dorothe Norton:

Did you get any decorations from the military?

John Ellis:

Nothing, no, other than the normal citations.

Dorothe Norton:

So did the military service relate in any way to your employment with Fish and Wildlife Service?

John Ellis:

Not at all.

Dorothe Norton:

So can you tell me when and where and how you met your wife?

John Ellis:

I met her [Sally] when I was stationed at Shiawassee National Wildlife Refuge. I went home to my hometown for a weekend with my parents and met her in church, and then called her up and asked for a date and then it went from there.

Dorothe Norton:

And when and where did you get married?

John Ellis:

We got married in Gagetown, Michigan; it's about 4 miles from my hometown of Cass City.

Dorothe Norton:

And do you have any children?

John Ellis:

We have 2 boys.

Dorothe Norton:

And what are their names?

John Ellis:

Mike is the oldest, and he is 36. And Andy is the youngest, and he is 34.

Dorothe Norton:

And what do they do? What are their jobs?

John Ellis:

My oldest son lives in Rapid City, South Dakota, and he works for the Veteran's Administration at Fort Meade Hospital [Sturgis, South Dakota].

Dorothe Norton:

And the other one?

John Ellis:

The other one [Andy] works for the General Electric Corporation in the Twin Cities area.

Dorothe Norton:

Well, that's all the personal information we're going to get John. Now we're going to go to your career. Why did you want to work for the Service?

John Ellis:

Well, for the field that I chose for a profession the Fish and Wildlife Service was probably the ultimate employer to work for in the field of wildlife conservation.

Dorothe Norton:

What was your first professional position other than being in the Service?

John Ellis:

I worked for the state of Ohio in the Conservation Department for about 6 months before I came over to the Service.

Dorothe Norton:

And so then when did you start with Fish and Wildlife?

John Ellis:

The fall of 1961.

Dorothe Norton:

And where did you from there?

John Ellis:

Well, my first job while I was still in school I was chosen by Frank Martin to become the job of a student assistant at Shiawassee Refuge. That was during the summer of my junior year. And so I had had some contact with the Fish and Wildlife Service as I worked at Shiawassee National Wildlife for one summer. Well, then my first job with the Service was at Shiawassee National Wildlife Refuge, where I was the assistant manager.

Dorothe Norton:

And where did you go from there?

John Ellis:

While I was there that's when I got married in 1964; then I was transferred to Agassiz National Wildlife Refuge near Thief River Falls, Minnesota. So we spent our honeymoon traveling between the 2 refuges.

Dorothe Norton:

From Agassiz then you...?

John Ellis:

I went to Lacreek National Wildlife Refuge as the refuge manager, in South Dakota. And then in 1969, I was offered the Regional Biologist job in the Twin Cities out of Fort Snelling and accepted that. And then from there I became the first Regional Migratory Bird Coordinator, the first one in the Fish and Wildlife Service. And then as time went on I was offered and accepted the job as Regional Refuge Supervisor for the four southern states in Region 3. And my partner had the northern four states. Then prior to

retirement we swapped positions and I had the four northern states in our region as the regional refuge supervisor. In January of 1991, I retired.

Dorothe Norton:

And what did you feel the pay and benefits were like when you started?

John Ellis:

Well, I think that it didn't seem like that mattered a whole lot. In those days just to have a job and doing what you liked to do was the most important thing. And I guess they were adequate. I think my first job when I was at Shiawassee, I think like I came in as a GS-5 it was \$4,042.00 salary. And then after the first year you go up to [GS-7], and then from on it went.

Dorothe Norton:

So you had promotion opportunities then?

John Ellis:

Yes..

Dorothe Norton:

And did you socialize with the people you worked with?

John Ellis:

Oh yes, all the time. The Service was a family, and it still is. I think when you retire that's what you miss the most are the people.

Dorothe Norton:

That's right. So did you ever get into any recreation in the field like the ball teams or the bowling?

John Ellis:

Well, when I was at Thief River Falls I played for their baseball team, and I injured my arm and then that was the end of that. I also coached Little League and Babe Ruth baseball for 14 years. And we had in the regional office we had golfing tournaments and things like that I participated in.

Dorothe Norton:

And so how did your career affect your family?

John Ellis:

Well, after coming to the Regional Office and getting settled in the Twin Cities area, and after several years went by we decided that we would like to stay right here. And that was mostly a family-oriented decision.

Dorothe Norton:

And so you left the Service when you retired, and when did you retire?

John Ellis:

January of 1991.

Dorothe Norton:

In 1991, before I did? Okay.

John Ellis:

Yes, you were still working then.

Dorothe Norton:

What kind of training did you receive for all of your jobs with the Fish and Wildlife?

John Ellis:

Oh, it was all kinds. I just couldn't even begin to mention them all. There was something almost every year. And I went to Penn State for a manager-type oriented training that was for 2 weeks. I went to Washington on a training program where we went up on the Hill and learned about the government and how it operates and that type of thing. So it was pretty well rounded.

Dorothe Norton:

What hours did you work when you were at the refuges?

John Ellis:

Oh, 24/7, you know. I remember one time that the Service did a survey, I think at the time I think the agents were trying to claim some overtime. And so they had us all help to try come up with the amount of overtime. The surveyors were doing. And I think the year that they did that I was at Lacreek Refuge. I think I put in over 700 hours of overtime that year, something like that. It was quite a bit. And you did a lot of that when you were out, you know. You had a quota to band ducks so you'd get up in the morning at 3:30 and go out and fire the cannon net to band ducks and go right to work in the office, and then do that same thing in the evening, and you're banding ducks in the headlights of the pickup, you know! And then you'd get up early to run your brood counts and all kinds of things like that.

Dorothe Norton:

When you were on the refuge what were your day-to-day duties?

John Ellis:

Well, it was a lot, a lot of paperwork was involved, and it was just doing management work.

Dorothe Norton:

And when you came into the regional office what was your day?

John Ellis:

Well, it was more regimented then, you just put in your time. There were times when you'd go in on a weekend or something to try to catch up, especially because it was always there. You'd go on a trip somewhere and you would come back and the work would still be there, so you had to catch up on it. I did quite a bit of traveling as Regional Refuge Biologist, as Regional Migratory Bird Coordinator, and as a Refuge Supervisor too, you're always busy in field stations.

Dorothe Norton:

What tools and instruments did you use in your job?

John Ellis:

Well, just about anything you got on a refuge you had to know. In the earlier days you learned how to run a dozer, you learned how to run a grader, you operated a lot of heavy equipment which, unless you're qualified you can't do anymore, but in those days you could. And a lot of the pickups. When I was Lacreek was when we got our first calculator, and that was a big to-do instead of having to do anything longhand, you know. And we got our first electric typewriter and that kind of thing.

Dorothe Norton:

Did you witness any new Service inventions or innovations?

John Ellis:

Well, I think might have gotten a couple of awards or something for coming up with some new technique to do things. I can't remember what they are now. But the field people, the maintenance people did, I remember I wrote up several techniques that they developed that would be applicable nationwide. They got some incentive awards for that too, so.

Dorothe Norton:

Did you work with animals at all?

John Ellis:

Well, the wildlife out there every day.

Dorothe Norton:

And how did you feel toward the animals?

John Ellis:

Well, they were all a part of the whole ecosystem that you were trying to maintain, and they were an integral part of everything you did.

Dorothe Norton:

What support did you receive locally, regionally, federally like when you were on the refuges?

John Ellis:

Well, it depends on where you were, you know. Like when I was on the Lacreek Refuge I felt like I was a marble rolling around in a pail because it was very seldom you saw anybody from the Regional Office. But then of course when you came into the Regional Office then you had more people to contact to work with. And I got real good support from them. But if you could explain your case and make other people believe in what you would like to do then I think that we got a lot of support.

Dorothe Norton:

Good. How do you think the Service was perceived by people outside of our agency?

John Ellis:

Well, I think at the time, in the earlier days, I think it was probably the best wildlife conservation agency or organization in the entire world. I think it deteriorated some as it got more political. And it's not as, I don't think, as perceived as well as it was in those earlier days.

Dorothe Norton:

So agency-community relations you felt were good?

John Ellis:

Oh yeah, the community... That was one of the major jobs as a refuge manager was good community relationships, to be part of the community. And that's the way you were able to accomplish your job a lot of better if you had public support out there.

Dorothe Norton:

What projects were you involved in?

John Ellis:

The most important project that I was involved in was the initiation of the 'moist soil plant management concept' in refuge management. This was a cooperative research effort with Leigh Frederickson at Gaylord Lab of the University of Missouri. Most of the field research was completed at Mingo National Wildlife Refuge, Missouri.

Dorothe Norton:

Were there any major issues you had to deal with?

John Ellis:

I suppose there were lots of them. I think that probably one of the biggest issues was the [Canada] goose concentrations, specifically at Horicon Refuge, where we developed a program to try to reduce the concentration because it was all related to depredation on the local farmers crops. I always felt like I spent a lot of time and effort on trying to resolve that problem.

Dorothe Norton:

And how were they resolved?

John Ellis:

Well, there was some success. I can't tell you now what's going on out there, but I think the relationship between the refuge and the farmers in that area is much better and the goose problem there is probably better controlled now.

Dorothe Norton:

Do you consider that was your most pressing issue that you were involved in?

John Ellis:

Well another area that I mentioned earlier was the development of moist-soil plant management where we were able to get rid of a lot of row crops on the refuges, specifically corn, and provided diverse nutritional foods for waterfowl, especially ducks and geese. We used Mingo NWR as a laboratory and were able to develop a whole new concept of management in lieu of row crops.

Dorothe Norton:

What was the major impediment to your job or your career?

John Ellis:

It was politics, and that was more so in the later years than it was in the earlier years.

Dorothe Norton:

Who were your supervisors?

John Ellis:

Well, my first one at Shiawassee Refuge was Frank Martin. And then he left and Jack Frye came. And then when I went to Agassiz Refuge, Claude Alexander was the refuge manager. And then at Lacreek I was my own boss there and Ed Smith was my supervisor in the Regional Office. And then in the Regional Office when I came here it was Lynn Greenwalt and then Forrest Carpenter. And then when I became the Regional Migratory Bird Coordinator I actually worked almost directly for Jack Hemphill for awhile, and then after that it was Ellis Klett and Harold Benson.

Dorothe Norton:

That's good that you can remember so many of them.

John Ellis:

A few of them, yeah. And they were all good people; I enjoyed working with them too.

Dorothe Norton:

Who were the individuals who shaped your career?

John Ellis:

Oh, there probably wasn't any one. I suppose Frank Martin, being my first supervisor, had more to do than anybody. And then everyone after that certainly played a part.

Dorothe Norton:

And who were some people you knew outside the Service? And do you think they'd be able to work, or would have been able to work for the Service?

John Ellis:

Oh, I can't give you a name but there are a lot of folks out there that would certainly be capable employees and good employees with the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Dorothe Norton:

Do you remember what presidents, secretaries of the interior, or directors of the Fish and Wildlife that you served under?

John Ellis:

Oh, gosh! I don't know, let me think, I don't if I can or not. Lynn Greenwalt is the only one that comes to mind.

Dorothe Norton:

Those senior moments happen to all of us John! How do you feel the changes in the different administrations affected our work?

John Ellis:

Changes in administrations; well, everyone reinvents government, every time they change administration. Actually, if you stay long enough, well what goes around comes around, and that's happened. You know Dorothe that all of the budgeting procedures we've gone through, Zero-Based Budgeting, you know, on and on and then pretty soon here they come again! I guess that's one of the problems is if you start a project, get funded for it and then get a change in administration, or even on an annual basis Congress may not fund it, you know. It's only year-to-year budgeting cycle as far as we're concerned.

Dorothe Norton:

In your opinion John who do you think the individuals were who shaped the Service?

John Ellis:

The field people. It's not the people in Washington or the Regional Office, it's the people in the field, and thank god for them because they maintain the stability of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Dorothe Norton:

Okay. Well this doesn't take very long because we're just right down to the end here. Now here comes the fun stuff, what was the high point of your career?

John Ellis:

Well, I think I've already mentioned it. I think the high point was the moist-soil management program that we were able fund the research and then apply it on the land. That was probably the highlight of my career.

Dorothe Norton:

What was the low point?

John Ellis:

I don't know if there was any, I don't know if there was any.

Dorothe Norton:

Do you ever wish you'd done anything differently when you were doing your job?

John Ellis:

When I think back on it no, I don't think of anything.

Dorothe Norton:

Did you ever have a dangerous or frightening experience?

John Ellis:

Well, one time when I was up at Agassiz. It was 30 below zero and I went out to do something on our end of the refuge, and was walking down this old drainage ditch that was ice-covered, and I fell through, because there was some bacterial action going on underneath the ice and the ice was thin and I didn't realize it. And I went up to my waist. So then I crawled out and instantly my trousers froze. And I got back to the pickup and it wouldn't start, so I ended up walking back 11 miles with the frozen trousers. And when I got back my legs from the icy trousers, well my legs were raw when I got back. I was kind of lucky I didn't get hypothermia or something. But I just kept walking and I made it. So that was a little scary.

Dorothe Norton:

I guess so! Well, what was your most humorous experience?

John Ellis:

Oh, just every day there was something humorous! The people that we worked with had a good sense of humor and that helps.

Dorothe Norton:

No one special thing you can think of then?

John Ellis:

No, not really, no.

Dorothe Norton:

What would you like to tell others about your career and about Fish and Wildlife Service?

John Ellis:

Well, I would do it all over again. And encourage anybody that is so inclined to work for the agency that I would say you couldn't show them a better agency or vocation. You really have got to feel the need, the want to do something for the critters out there. It's something you don't learn in school; you've got to have the feel for it. And if you have that I think you can do a real good job. But if you don't then if it's all just numbers and figures and just maybe a career type of thing, without that feeling for resource, then I don't think you're going to be very happy or do a very good job.

Dorothe Norton:

What were some of the changes that you observed in the Service, like in the personnel or in the environment?

John Ellis:

Well, I think it's a confirmation of the retreating cause, its one step forward and two back. And the only thing we can do is try to slow it down. But we're being nicked and dined out there. The habitat and the critter that the habitat supports is being nicked and dined to death. And it's quite obvious that we're losing ground and we'll continue to as long as the politics are as they are, you know more exploitation and more concerned about the economy than they are anything else. Yeah, that's my feeling on that aspect of it.

Dorothe Norton:

What are your thoughts on the future as far as the Service? Where do you think the Service is heading in these next years?

John Ellis:

I don't know. It all depends on how deep that the politics get into running the agency and how many decisions are made on biology and not politics.

Dorothe Norton:

Okay, we're just about to the end here. Do you have any photographs or documents or anything you'd care to donate or share?

John Ellis:
Nothing that would be of any significance I don't think.

Dorothe Norton:
Okay. Who else do you think we should interview?

John Ellis:
Well...

Dorothe Norton:
I mean you're my number 49!

John Ellis:
Oh, okay. Well, I think, you know I don't know who you've interviewed but I think as many as you can on that list.

Dorothe Norton:
Well, I'm working primarily with those right here in the metropolitan Twin Cities area but then I have others too as I can work them in, so. And we're trying to work to, not that you are old, but like I did Bernie Palas and I did Art Hawkins and some of the older ones because while they still have their memories and their good thoughts. So we're trying to...

John Ellis:
Well, there's one I can think of, he's up in the Aitkin area but Claude Alexander. He was a former game agent in Iowa before he became a refuge manager. But he, I don't know, I heard that he is... I don't think he can hear anymore. It probably wouldn't work out for him because of his health.

Dorothe Norton:
Okay. Well, we're going to do as good a job as we can do John.

John Ellis:
How about did you get like Les Dundas?

Dorothe Norton:
We'll talk about that when we're through with the interview.

John Ellis:
Okay, how about Goody Larson?

Dorothe Norton:

Yes, I've done Goody. And I've done Harvey.

John Ellis:

How about Kermit Dybsetter?

Dorothe Norton:

No, but I'm going to try and do him soon.

John Ellis:

When he was the manager at DeSoto that's when they dug up the Bertrand, the steamboat, so that was real big deal. And let's see, well there was... Well, Harold Benson would be a good one.

Dorothe Norton:

Yeah, I've done Harold.

John Ellis:

Okay. Let's see... Well, I'm sure there are many others.

Dorothe Norton:

I'm working on them. Well thanks so much for your time this afternoon, I appreciate it.

KEY WORDS: employee, military, history, management, biologist, migratory bird coordinator, regional refuge supervisor, cannon-projected net trap, goose concentration issues, moist-soil plant management, wildlife refuges, banding, public attitudes, waterfowl, surveys