Oral History Cover Sheet

Name: William Eldridge
Date of Interview: October 25, 2006
Location of Interview: Regional Office, Anchorage Alaska
Interviewer: John Cornely

Approximate years worked for Fish and Wildlife Service: 28 years (1977-2005)

Offices and Field Stations Worked, Positions Held: Ecological Services Research Group; Alaska. Also did work in Russia and Mexico working on surveys.

Most Important Projects: Aerial breeding surveys for geese, swans and cranes on the Yukon Delta NWR, Dusky Canada Goose surveys on the Copper River Delta, Waterbird surveys in Russia, cooperative projects with Mexico, and work in Africa

Colleagues and Mentors: Bruce Conant, Dave Ward, Milton Weller, Bob Birdman, Kurt Friese, Dave Trauger, Dirk Derksen, Rod King, Jim Voelzer, Bill Butler, Bill Larned, Jack Hodges, Doug Alcorn, Rich Malecki, Jeff Haskins, Dan Nieman, Fabiola Yepez, Evegeney Syrochovsky

Most Important Issues: Developing long term breeding bird aerial survey data bases and coordinating projects with Mexico and Russia

Brief Summary of Interview: Mr. Eldridge grew up an avid pheasant, duck, and quail hunter and spent a lot of time on his grandparents' farm. After obtaining his master's from Iowa State, he went into the Peace Corps and spent 1974 to 1977 in Chile doing deer surveys. Upon returning to the U.S., he went to Alaska where his work involved doing waterfowl and seabird surveys, and banding. Mr. Eldridge has made several trips to Russia to do bird surveys there, and he talks about some of the experiences he had there. He has also helped with work done in Mexico and Africa.

JOHN: This is John Cornely, it's October 25, 2006. We're in the Regional Office of the Fish and Wildlife Service in Anchorage, Alaska, and going to have a conversation with Bill Eldridge today, fairly recently retired from the Fish and Wildlife Service; still actively involved in bird conservation efforts. And Bill's just going to have a conversation with me today a little bit about his growing up and where he grew up and his schooling and give us a tour of his career with the Fish and Wildlife Service.

BILL: Well I was born in northwest Iowa in 1949 in a little town called Hampton, Iowa. And both of my parents were from farm families, my grandparents were, both sets, were alive but neither of my parents were farmers; they met actually at Iowa State University before the war, they got married and my dad disappeared into the Navy for three for four years. And then he got a job with the Extension Service in northwest Iowa, where I was born, and later he went on for a master's degree at Michigan and we moved up there for a few years, and then for a PhD back at Iowa State, which I think I was about seven or eight there and that's where I went to high school at Ames, Iowa. And during those formative years, I guess dad was an avid hunter and fisherman, and of course we spent a lot of time on the farms and starting, I think, in 7th grade I started working in the farm fields and did so through high school. And they would drag us up to the northern Minnesota and Canada even, the whole family when we were young, there were four of us; I always admired both of them for having the stamina for taking toddlers up on camping trips. But I think, as a lot of us in that generation, we got into the wildlife work from that kind of hunting, fishing, rural background, which I think is a little less common now but certainly was the norm back then. And I grew up as an avid pheasant hunter and duck hunter and quail hunter in high school. And in college, my first year I just left for college, I just had to get away from home a little bit, went to the University of Iowa and those were, of course that was '67. And it was prime time Vietnam years and I had a university deferment but they dropped those and the next year it was lottery and I got a high number so I didn't have to worry about it anymore. But by then, Iowa State was the school if you couldn't afford to go out of state, which I couldn't at the time; we pretty much worked our way through college then. So I went back to Iowa State and got into, actually it was the forestry program with a wildlife minor and then I think I finished with three courses short of a wildlife degree, Milton Weller of course the famous waterfowl researcher was head of the department. And I talked to him and went on for a master's degree under Milt Weller at Iowa State. And Doc was a great guy; he was probably the most influential guy in your career. And he had actually started an Alaska program with Bob Bergman and a few other folks at that time, but Alaska really wasn't in my mind but there was a seed planted, I think there, through Doc back then even. And we worked in northwest Iowa, which was kind of coincidental within a few miles of the family farm. My granddad, I like to tell this story because it makes the history so tight, but he was taken there to northwest Iowa near Ruthland, which is Doc Weller's research area and I was within five miles of where we worked. But anyway, my granddad was bought there in a covered

wagon when he was six months old and that was six months after Custer was killed, so that's the kind of area we're talking about. And he was a real interesting guy, he told me stories about that area where he'd farm, you could just farm the hilltops, it was on marshes and the first two years that he owned the farm, which is still the family farm, he was cleaned out by waterfowl; they cleaned out his crops in the fall. And it's still, even though they've drained most of the marshes, it's still an attractive area for geese in the fall. But anyway, there was a real history there, so I worked in the summers with Doc's crew up there first as an undergrad and he had a lot of projects going on in marshes. And he wanted me to be a coot specialist, which now wouldn't be so bad, and I worked three summers on a nesting project on coots, but I really didn't want to be known as a coot man back then; it was just not the thing that you wanted to hang on your name, at least I didn't. So I actually got a hunting related project over on the Mississippi River, which ended being my master's degree, vegetation changes related to hunting take and different things. So I ended up taking three years and seven field seasons to get a master's degree, but by then, I decided I needed to see the world a little bit. So I graduated finally with a master's in 1974, I think it was on June 1, I defended a thesis on June; no I take that back. I got married on June 1, defended a thesis on June 8, and then I joined the Peace Corps on June 10. And the reason that happened is a fellow came back, a fellow teaching assistant, Kurt Friese who eventually went and joined the Service in International Affairs but he told me about the Smithsonian Peace Corps Environmental Program where you could work as a biologist but as a Peace Corps volunteer and the program was sponsored by the Smithsonian. And at that time, it was eventually ended, but I think Nixon or somebody thought they were too technical, but at the time there were a lot of possibilities. I looked at Africa, which was always in interest of mine, but they really didn't offer conservation positions there. But they did in South America, Kurt had been to South America and I check around, he was in Ecuador or somewhere. I learned that Chile had a good program; Dr. Tabor out of University of Washington sponsored many PhD and master's students through there. So I decided on Chile and got involved there, we just got married and left, which is not a good idea I should say. And that was 1974, early 1974, and I stayed until 1977 and it was interesting. My main interest of going to where I went was to look at the torrent duck, which had never been really studied. And I talked to Doc Weller about it, of course I didn't mention, but back at the university days, Dave Trauger was there, he was my ornithology lab teaching assistant and Dave Ankney was there before he decided to skip the Vietnam War and go to Canada, and Dirk Dirksen was there, who's now over here at the head of the science lab, or bird science lab at USGS. Anyway, I ended up putting myself in prime time torrent duck habitat; I talked to all those guys about it and thinking I'd do that on the side. But I was converted into a deer biologist in Chile, this was 9 months after Allende, the country was in complete shambles. And they had a concern because that area was settled by Germans, I thought they were all Nazi's; it was a real eye opener. It was probably the best thing I did I my life, but they were really third and fourth generation

Germans that settled southern Chile and they were the land owners and they wanted to introduce red deer and Fallow deer and everything else just like they'd done other places in the world, and it was a *Nothofagus* forest, beech forest, which is very similar to New Zealand actually and we all know the problems there. So I got involved, in not so much, well it was; it was an important issue, but it was, I still can't believe we did it given the economic circumstances down there. But it was basically to find out what would happen if these deer were turned lose as the Germans were trying to do, I mean the German Chileans, excuse me. And through that I got involved, part of the competition study, was with a little endangered deer, smallest deer in the world; Pudú, and nobody studied that either, it was a real secretive forest area. So we got a World Wildlife Fund grant, which was one of the first down there, and telemetry work, and did all that kind of basic life history work on endangered deer as well as the introduced deer. But the main thing that I learned back then was, I mean there was no money, we lived out at the base of the Andes on a beautiful oligotrophic lake and went into town with an old bus about once every three to four weeks, no electricity or water or any of that and with really poor people, I mean desperately poor after the Allende situation. But I learned a lot about how to work in that situation and a lot about a Latin culture; these are really great people that would give you the shirt off their back even though they only have one shirt, and it was a real eye opener. And one, just a quick story but had a real impact on me, I learned that one of these rich German Chileans owned an island out of this lake where he had introduced deer; it was a beautiful place, he had his little lodge out there. And he, of course, had the poor Campesino [peasant farmers] Chilean helpers that would help and they were harvesting red deer; he was bringing in some hunters, he was selling it to restaurants. So these guys operated at a whole different level, and the social classes were really distinct, almost slaves really, you could say of the Campesino at the time, which I could cross as an American coming from outside; I could have friends at the professional level of their, basically, Forest Department it was. But the Campesinos, as well as the rich men, which if you were born within the country, you couldn't. But I also realized that the people were really capable, the poor people, but they weren't given the opportunity for education. And one young fellow was out there; his job was strictly to cut invasive raspberry plants out of the pasture, because they were taking over. And I, in my bumbling, limited Spanish, which I had a three month course to learn and then was turned out into the country, and they speak completely different than what you were taught anyway, but you had to learn, you had no choice really. But I realized that this was an extremely intelligent young man, he was about my age; I was 24 at the time. And he just wasn't given the opportunity, he was the oldest of six or seven kids, and basically was helping take care of the family. But he knew all the common names of vegetation, and all the birds, and everything, and he was real sharp on tracking because they were working with hunters on tracking animals; they were really just so close to the land, I realized that I could learn a lot from this guy if he was on my side. But it was a real battle to get the Forest Agency to hire him just because of the

social thing, they wanted to give me a university student but they basically didn't want to get their hands dirty, so it was quite a fight; it caused quite a stir but I eventually got this fellow on, hired with the forest, and we worked side by side. And by the time I left, he had learned the scientific names of some 300 plants there and he was doing the telemetry work on his own and carried on after I left. And he just got a 35 year award with the National Parks as a top park guard down there. So those experiences are the ones that really carry on. And another part, well as part of that, his father worked there and I guess I got sidetracked here. But one of the stories was we were sitting around having lunch out on the island or somewhere. And I'd known these guys for several months by then and I said, and it was common to refer to people a little older, even same age if it required as Don, like Don Bill or Don Manuel, Don Niko was the young guy and we called each other by first name. And I said to Don Manuel, which I still call him now, I said, "You know in the U.S., after you know each other for a while, we just call each other by our first names; that's how we interact when you feel like you're becoming friends." And Don Manuel smiled at me and he said, "Well, Don Bill, we're not in the U.S., we're in Chile and you're going to call me Don Manuel." And he was really friendly, but the point made was that you don't, this ugly American picture we have, so many places of trying to bring the U.S. culture and force it onto somebody else; the point was, you do as they do in the country. And it was very subtle and very nicely said, but it really made a point and I really opened my eyes and okay we're going to operate with Chilean customs, not U.S. customs down here. And luckily that happened early on and I think it was key in helping me learn how to work with the people down there, and it's applied elsewhere and ever since whether you're in Africa, anyway in Latin America. But at the same time, we hooked up with the university and at the time the university really didn't have a wildlife program and we got students coming out to do, well be like a master's like degrees or undergraduate thesis or master's thesis. And one young student really got interested in it and he's now a major professor at the university. So I just kind of stumbled onto it, you get the government approval; they didn't have any money but they give you the staff, get the right people, hook up with the university in these developing countries and then a relationship can develop; it's gone on 30 years in that case. So those keys were real important to me and influenced a lot how I worked later in Mexico and Africa.

JOHN: What was the name of the university?

BILL: University of Valdivia, in Valdivia, Chile. But anyway, there's a ton of interesting stories in Chile, but I won't go on with that now. But it was real formative years and probably one of the best moves I made in my life as far as opening your eyes to how things can be done and what people have to deal with in most of the world that we're so lucky to have in the U.S. So I came back and I have to say after that nearly three years in Chile, the Midwest wasn't looking real exciting at the time, after spending most of my life there. And Dirk Dirksen, who was getting his PhD at Iowa State when I left for Chile, was now in Alaska as part of that whole Iowa State funneling up here. Tom Rothe, by

the way, was also at Iowa State when I was there and he had come up. The Peace Corps gave you the one year of non-competitive eligibility after you got out of the Peace Corps, you know you got $75 a month while you worked there, but that was probably the most beneficial thing because you didn't have to compete on the register then and if you; I just got inundated with job offers with people that didn't want to deal with the register because of all the veteran, well you know, the register could be difficult. So if you find somebody that you were interested in, you had one year to do that in. So I contacted Dirk and there was a position for the North Slope open and so I got back from Chile, was back at Iowa for a few months and then headed on up to the North Slope and with the Fish and Wildlife Service. It was a Branch of Ecological Services that they don't have anymore, it was a research branch and Dirk was in charge of it. And we were sent up to the work on the NPRA, which now 30 years later, is becoming a contagious point on saving the moulting resort, which is the area we worked on but our charge was to get baseline information on the moulting birds and bird nesting in the NPRA for just the scenario that's developing now that there would someday be pressure to develop it. And I drove up, well drove up to Seattle, took the ferry up and drove rest of the way, and was in Anchorage a few days and hauled up to the North Slope and it was early June so mostly snow cover and dumped off in camp by Rod King, who was an apprentice; he'd flown for the U.S. Forest Service out of Cordova, AK for a year or so but it was his first summer as a Fish and Wildlife Service pilot, that was '77 and that's where I met Rod and that is still a good relationship and a lot of stories there but I won't tell too many of those. We did things quite a bit differently then, basically no training survival thing, and we got dumped off in camp and it was a little 8 x 10 Quonset hut shaped weather port, you know the nylon plastic on a plywood floor, Coleman stoves, and boxes of canned food or whatever and then they picked you up at the end of the summer, maybe you'd a resupply in the summer. And three of us lived in this little tent, one of my campmates was Rothe that summer. And so we did our research up there and were picked when the snow started to fly in August and back down. And then we were working on Prince William Sound baseline information was well, anticipating a spill, which happened, and that was through the winter for the wintering projects. And again things were quite a bit different you could go out on an open whaler, and I'd go out alone in the winter and camp out and do the bird surveys and you'd never get to do that now, but it was sure nice back then. And I spent another summer on the slope, but I wasn't totally enamored with the North Slope; some people are, I just wasn't one of them. And I switched to spending another summer in Prince William Sound working on waterfowl and seabird work on Prince William Sound and then worked on the Kenai Peninsula; a lot of these, again, were predevelopment, baseline information, wetland studies, that kind of a thing.

JOHN: This is all still part of that same Ecological Services Research Group?

BILL: Yeah.

JOHN: Was Alaska part of Region 1?

BILL: I'd have to check back and see; yeah we were at that time I think, yeah that's right.

JOHN: And the office where Dirk was, was in Anchorage?

BILL: Yeah, we were based out of Anchorage. And then after a few years of that, the Chilean experience, it really peaked my interest I should say in other cultures and a more subsistence lifestyle. And I actually switched for a few times to concentrate on the subsistence issues here in Alaska under Bob Leedy, who is recently retired. But still I was involved in migratory birds survey work, banding work, that kind of thing. And we got into the whole issue of western goose populations and the problems with Brant, Pacific white fronts, Cackling Canada Geese, and so I was involved in a lot of the native meetings and that kind of thing in the early 80's. And also at that time, as part of that whole thing, there was a lot of finger pointing between California hunters and Alaska natives on who was causing the problem and they both decided to blame Mexico, and Mexico wasn't represented. Gary Kramer had done his Masters research as a master's down there, and in the mid-80's I guess, he and I did a couple year project on harvest in Mexico, Brant harvest in Baja California and also on the west coast of the mainland. We worked with some Mexican government young folks as well as students, and again that same process that I learned in Chile worked well and one of the young Mexican guys was Rodrigo, who was really capable, and I was able to hook him up with Guy Baldassarre at Auburn at the time, I think he's Syracuse now. And Rodrigo went on for a master's and a PhD and is still active in the environmental field down there. So in all this process, you could see that if you could give people that didn't really have the opportunity exposed to some of this international work, that it would open some doors, and so we tried to do that as much as we can. I was able to fly; Jim Voelzer, who was flying the west coast survey with Bruce Conant normally on Brant, I think his father died that year, and I flew it with Bruce plus we drove the whole coastline. So that was my initial tie into Mexico and we kept that project going for a while, and then I helped Dirk and Dave Ward get set up in San Quentin Bay in Baja California for their Brant study, which is still going on. So I was able to keep some tie in with Mexico and I was also doing some other work with Latin American, separately, a little bit with the Office of International Affairs. But anyway, as well as the Alaska work, I was able to keep the international tie and I worked with, as part of the Yukon Delta issue, when the goose populations really crashed, Bill Butler was charged with developing an intensive goose survey of the Yukon Delta area. And he brought Malecki up, Rich Malecki, because Malecki was sort of a goose survey expert at the time. And we talked a lot and I flew the backseat with, those two guys were on the front seat for the first year of that survey, and we got that survey started, and that would have been '85 I guess. And then Bill eventually left about six or seven years later, and I took over the main responsibility for that survey. At the same time you were having problems with the, well the dusky situation was a big issue, so we started the dusky spring survey up here. And it took quite a battle to convince the flyway folks, but those were good surveys and we were able to base your regulation process on those;

it's only been recently after 15 years, largely because the wintering counts kind of fall apart, but at least people accepted those surveys and there now used as a population estimate for those species, so it's been fun to see that happen. And then, well let's see, part of it was goose related, Emperor goose related. But a Russia situation developed and that was a little later, we tried actually in the late 80's, early 90's to get over into Russia. And I'm not sure why, I guess because of the Yukon Delta goose surveys, I was in charge of it at that time I think, yeah Bill had left. Anyway, Leedy had asked me to set up a program with Russia, and this was all new country, I mean a new arena for me. And the first thing I learned a long time ago, whether it's another country or ours, I guess, is to make myself look good, you get people better than you working with you. So I got Jack Hodges on board from Juneau right away and Malecki I had the experience with the Yukon Delta and we got along great. So I called Rich and said, "Let's put together a Russia program," and oh man that was; we didn't get over in 1990, I guess that's when we official set it up; it didn't work out. In '91 we went over for the first time and the idea was to fly with the Russian helicopters; this was about two months before the Soviet Union disintegrated in that fall and things were already going bad. So we got out there and it was pretty amazing; we knew we were in trouble when the Russian guy that came to meet us in [unintelligible], which is over here in Siberia. He had to walk and swim 60 miles to get to us; they don't even have Eskimo communities out there because the communist had removed them off of the coast line and concentrated them. And this guy had no way to come to meet us and so he basically walked and swam 60 miles, swam the river miles and walked; I mean this is tough country. And they also had brought in a bunch of Japanese to pay, to help pay for their program. And these were Japanese, I mean they don't have real biologist, these were private citizens who were interested in ornithology and they had absolutely no equipment. And we were given the notice that Russians had a new camp, which we were picturing new camps or even cabins and I had borrowed my girlfriend's, I just borrowed her three man little REI dome tent, I said, "This is a new camp, but we're going to take this along as an emergency tent." Well we got out there, they actually had a military chopper, one of those huge twin ones to take us all out there. And this new camp was an old World War II, no screen wall tent, no floor, some little tiny trailer, about a two man trailer with the roof caved in and that was it. And there were about nine or ten Japanese and us three guys and the Russians, and no food, I mean minimum food, basically they lived by shooting their study animals and catching fish. And I held onto this little tent that Jack, Malecki, and I had to sleep in and we got stranded out there for three weeks. And the poor Japanese, I mean their tent collapsed on them the first night, the mosquitos were horrendous; well they had come with umbrellas, that's where those guys were. And had a little hand crank radio to try to call in, we'd thought we be flying surveys every day and we never saw another, it was almost three weeks before a chopper finally showed up. And we got a day and a half survey out of the whole month long stint there, and rest of it was just survival. Reindeer herders came along, and really interesting people, and they felt sorry for

us and killed a reindeer for us because they didn't think we had enough food. But it was a real eye opener and wondered why we were so worried about Russia all the years. But we did decide then that we couldn't rely on Russia, obviously, if we wanted to do surveys so we started a process of trying to get our Turbine Beaver over there. And we left in August and in September or October the Soviet Union basically dissolved and so things are really politically really confused, but that turned out to be to our benefit because I don't think before or now even you could probably get an U.S. airplane in with permission to fly the entire coastline of Siberia at low level. And as a Russian navigator later told us, "Do you think the U.S. would let us come over and do that on the Alaska coast?" "No, I don't think so." But anyway, we went over; Jack was the pilot in '92, and we went for a molting goose study looking for Emperors again and it was more of a test run to see if we could make it work. We had a Russian navigator who was great, he would just raise hell and argue and swear at any of the; and we had to pay for everything. We had to pay to land, we had to pay to take off, pay to park, pay for weather, I mean, and by then they were wanting dollars so we realized, not Russian rubles. And there was no food, we learned that; we had to bring our own food. One year we landed in a little Russian port and they had, they traded with some ship that had come by, but the one little restaurant there offered us French wine and, a bottle of French wine and snickers candy bar; that was dinner, if you wanted dinner. We were taken to police stations; it was a real interesting thing because these people had never seen a plane like this or foreigners in these little port villages since World War II. But we learned a lot and in '93 we went over, and by then the interest had switched to speckled eiders and stellar eiders to endangered or threatened status. And so that became our focus, but we went back over in '92 and started a coastal survey and that was interesting because we expanded past the previous two years' area where we had some experience with and we were going into pretty much uncharted territory. And again this is really remote Siberia, even then the villages were either becoming abandoned or they were really, really hurting for any kind of commodities. And we got started along the North Slope of Russia in '93, just a good start, but we made a start and so we really felt like we were really do it the next time around and we maintained this Russian navigator who really saved our bacon. We'd be flying along the coast and he'd say, "Jack you want to, you may want to," Captain Jack, he called him, "Captain Jack, move over here because there's some hidden Russian missiles in there, we don't want to fly right over those." And there'd be times when we'd come to, well an [unintelligible] one time, they weren't going to let us land; it was too strong of a cross wind, we couldn't land and there's military on one side and the Aeroflot civilian on the other, all of the fighter jets; this is just a few hours flight from Nome across here. And there was one runway, there was not a crosswind runway and it was too strong of a crosswind for us to land but we needed to land but we could land on a taxi way. And Jack had plenty of room to land the Beaver there, but they hadn't seen anything like this or didn't; so our navigator was arguing and swearing with the Aeroflot control guy and finally he came back with basically okay, they're going to let you do it at your own risk.

But the military, of course, was monitoring this whole conservation and they pulled out with their trucks to block the taxi way so that we couldn't land because they weren't going to allow that. But Jack decided to, he called their bluff, he said, "I don't think they're going to sit there and let me land on top of them." And so he kept the descent down, and sure enough they pulled out of the way just the last minute. And of course we had a lot of talking and explaining to do, but after that Jack became kind of famous and then a few of them, the airport manager wanted to go for a ride in the Beaver, which he did and one of the military guys, so it worked out well, but it was kind of dicey at times. But money was becoming more and more of an issue by then, I mean Russia basically now was really in sorry shape. And we could not do anything without paying, and paying in dollars and how do you get; we were also warned about the Russian mafia and if they learned that we were carrying a lot of money, which there was a lot of corruption with the custom guys and military guards that we or the plane would be robbed. And I probably don't know if I should say this on record, but we basically had to get, we got about $10,000 cash advance for the trip and took the paddles off the inside of the Beaver and stuffed it like you were stuffing drugs in it and declared about $1,000 to get into Russia because we would have been in trouble otherwise, and so that's one of the tricks we learned. And they didn't check, but when we landed there one time, you know you come out with maybe ten, twelve Russian military guys to go through the plane and look through your stuff when you get out on the other side. And one of the trips that we landed at, we knew we had to bring our own food so and we kept it in the float compartment of the amphib. And I told, we started in with the Russian guys escorting us into the airport and I said, "Ah Jack, we forgot our food for the night." So I went back and opened the compartment on the floats and took the food out. Well these guys, the Russian guys, had never seen an amphib or a float plane before; they had no idea that these compartments were accessible. Aw the yelling and the guns came out and they came running back and we had to open all the float compartments and go through that, so theoretically we could have been carrying anything and never had a problem, but they just didn't know you could access; there's a lot of stories like that, it was fun. So the next year, 1994, was the big year. We were going to make the run; we had it all set up, everything. We learned the ropes, we knew what we had to do and this was going to be our year. But there was a diplomatic incident in Moscow related to airplanes and word came down a couple weeks before the flight that there'd be no official U.S. flight into Russia; they were dealing with diplomats from Washington to Moscow but we were an official U.S. aircraft so it applied us, this decree. I don't even remember the details, but unless Russia did something, we were not going to; there would be no more diplomatic. I had to do with, I don't know, something with, I don't remember. But anyway, that was a ruling from the State Department and it applied to us, so our whole effort was on hold. Well meanwhile Steve Cole, who was the International Affairs Russian Coordinator, they were working franticly to get an exemption for us. And so we went ahead and planned and we flew to Nome, we fueled up, and this is one of those stories you're always glad you did

it, but you never know when you do it. We were supposed to maintain contact with Steve Cole, he was working through the weekend with diplomats, and we were up there actually on a Sunday, to get that final permission to let us go. Well he called my girlfriend at home on Sunday morning, while we were refueling in Nome to go across waiting for word, but I was not supposed to go, or we were not supposed to go until we got that word. And she called, I check in with her, she said, "Yes, he called. You did not get permission, you did not get an exception, you are not supposed to go." And so I'm sitting there, we had our Russian navigator waiting, we had the whole trip lined up and I'm the only one, I'm the only one that knows; I didn't talk to anybody officially about this refusal, it was really through my girlfriend. And I told Donna, I said, "Donna, you didn't talk to me, we didn't make contact, we didn't have this conversation." And I didn't tell Jack, the pilot, because I didn't want to implicit him, and I said, "We've been over there before, they know us let's see what happens." So I told Jack after we got into Russian airspace finally, and just before we were to land. And we did, and of course nothing happened, in Siberia they're not that clued into Moscow or the U.S. for sure. So we went on with the survey basically and did it without, and I later learned Steve said, "Well, I didn't call until Sunday morning for the last minute. I wasn't anxious for you guys to; I was hoping you wouldn't get the word actually."

JOHN: What was Jack's reaction when you told him after you were almost there?

BILL: Oh, he was surprised but you know Jack, he's a straight shooter, he's a common sense guy and he said, "Well I'm glad you didn't tell me before hand, but let's go, let's just do this." And it turned out to the best of all years, we flew over for five years, and that one we flew a hundred hours that year. We had the most incredible weather, it was a late year, so timing turned out perfect for us because we were a little late on the start as far as getting the nesting eiders, you have to have a male in territory, you don't get a survey. And we had weather, that they rarely see in Siberia, our them song was "Nothing but Blue Skies from Now On" and it was the equivalent of flying around the Earth at this latitude, that hundred hours at that speed if you straighten the line out. And we had some great experiences, we landed in places, again they had never seen; they don't have planes like that, they haven't seen Americans since World War II and we got stopped at one place where you needed a number from Moscow before the military would let you in. And they called to Moscow, luckily our navigator had it, we had to wait on the plane, they wouldn't let us off the plane, or plane, until they got that number; this is [unintelligible], little tiny village up in the middle of Siberia. And meanwhile, we talked to the people, we had the door open and we said we were ornithologists; must have been really strange to have the first Americans be ornithologists, but they understood that word. And one guy, this was halfway across Siberia, one guy went back and brought back a Brant leg with a band on it, turned out it was banded over here on the North Slope. But we got on the ground, and we realized then that the communists had quite a thing going for protected areas, they were really hunting

areas for the elite around there. And so they would have a guard out there to keep people from poaching, and they did some spring hunting, but it was relatively minor, but most of these areas are actually in worse shape now without the communists because there's no level of protection there. We flew halfway across the North Slope of Russia that year and it was a good survey and we got population estimates on eiders; this is before they found a wintering population of speckled eiders, and they kind of laughed at us at first, but it turned out that they fit right in with the wintering ones that we were able confirm that specs were basically doing alright in Russia. And then we went back again in '95, and I went back again in 2002 to help them to another goose, Emperor Goose related thing, so that's been a good thing. So I suppose I should, do you want me to talk a little bit about the Mexico stuff.

JOHN: Yeah, we have plenty of time.

BILL: In the meanwhile, with the regular Alaska survey work and various projects, I kept an interest in Mexico and some working relationships. But Dan Nieman, it was '92, I think, he first went down to do the white front counts and neck collar reading and I was actually at a Central Flyway meeting when we talked about that in Texas, but I was also really wanting to get involved in Russia. So I got a little late start into Dan's program down there and that was because Jeff Haskins actually came up with a meeting out of his region to do some of that. And we were at one of these flyway tech meetings and got talking about it, Jeff and I, and that's when I met Dan. Dan was going down with his people out of Canada, and with a Mexican university professor and a student. And we took a little different approach, Dan was involved in this, in Jeff's effort, and that was to involve a Mexican crew of students that would be there year round either through a university or an NGO like DUMAC [Ducks Unlimited Mexico], and the first time was in '97, I think it was, about ten years ago. And that proved out, I give Jeff a lot of credit and Dan as well. And then we used a little bit more of the approach that I was familiar with of finding good students, the right people to work with, and getting a team going that would be functioning on their own down there. And it worked out really good to get some collar reading and that. We developed an exchange program for students, the universities would elect a student to come up to Alaska, and these are students some had never been out of Mexico, and we'd send them up to a remote village like Galena to work on like the white front issue where they nested up here. The first student, Fabiola Yepez, spoke very little English and she was dropped off in Galena, which is basically an Indian village in the Koyukuk Refuge. Mike Spindler was instrumental in getting her involved because she was quite concerned about that. And the refuge manager wasn't really crazy about the program. "Why are we bringing a Mexican student up here, an undergraduate?" But she did really, really well; she impressed people out there. The Indians actually would believe her more than they would us because of the long term conflicts with native cultures and the government. But they would open their arms to her, and she did radio interviews and she went out; and they do quite an intensive undergraduate five year program in Mexico and they have to do a senior

thesis and she did a two year project on white-fronted geese and the refuge manager actually bought some satellite photographs for her, which is really almost unheard of for an undergraduate. And she later went on to Syracuse under Guy Baldassarre for a master's degree on white-fronts down there. She is now teaching at an university down there in wildlife work and going on for a doctorate. And we brought up several more, and that's the kind of really fun thing to see because it really opens their eyes; they don't have the opportunity to, the money just isn't there. But when they see the international opportunities and ways to get money, they can cooperate with in Mexico it really gets them excited. Those are the offshoots of the actually data gathering that are really satisfying to see happen, so we tried to encourage that. I went down several winters after that with Dan and Jeff and it was a really good program and it's still being fruitful and I'm still working with, part-time work. We have an aerial survey workshop later this winter. I'll be down working on surf scoter study in Baja California, and so I'm still keeping involved with.

And the Mexico stuff is still ongoing and we've done a few other things with Latin American countries. And I guess kind of a side light to the career, as I think I mentioned in the beginning, I had the choice of going to South America or Africa in the early Peace Corps days. But Africa's always been interest and I remember seeing the early Ultralights flying over African savannahs with game, and that option just wasn't there with the Peace Corps thing, but it's been in the back of my mind since the old National Geographic shows from way back. About five years ago one of our gals here, Lynn Denlinger, she works part-time here and she's been involved in Africa a lot. And they had some telemetry problems, they were getting a lion study going in Zimbabwe and she wrote and asked if I could help, it was aerial telemetry work. And I just casually wrote and said, "Hey Lynn if you need some help down there, let me know." And she wrote back and said, well the guy running the project said, "Well, yeah, we could use some help." And I talked with Russ and Doug Alcorn was here and Leady and they were quite amendable to letting me go on an extended basis the first time. And so I went down, the first time to Africa, and helped on this project and I learned to fly an ultralight down there and was tracking lions, hyenas, wild dogs, but leaned a lot about the Africa situation in Zimbabwe is pretty bad shape. But a lot of those experiences in Latin America or with the native cultures here, applied just as well to Africa. I retired last year about his time, and I've spent seven months down there last year again and in some of these projects, and we plan to go back. But it's interesting because it's real similar to Alaska in the remote sense; the flying problems or just the logistics of working in Africa are quite similar. So the experience that we can bring down from working in Alaska really is quite applicable; I was surprised, but it really is down there. And these projects were funded mostly from outside, like Oxford University, and outside NGO's because there's virtually nothing down there. Africa's in pretty sorry shape and they need all the help they can get, so it's been interesting.

But you wanted me to mention a little bit the flying involvement here in Alaska. The one thing you realize, and I'm sure you do and anybody that comes

to Alaska, it's a huge area and it's a limited road system. And so you're really restricted both in time and areas of what you can do with a vehicle and that's why aviation is really a way of life here. Of course we do a lot of aerial surveys here, and I got involved early on, on some of those, some of the banding efforts with airplanes. And I held off for a while getting my own airplane, but I eventually got my own instead of like a four wheel drive truck you need in the lower 48 for some things that you use a plane for here. I was lucky to fly with some really; I think the Service pilots that do this kind of work have got to be some of the best around. I've flown with a lot of pilots elsewhere, a lot of commercial pilots but we have really top notch guys and I think the safety record that we have shows that. But guys like Rod King, Bill Butler, Bill Larned, some are still, Rod and Bill Larned are still flying. Jack Hodges, in Russia, we were in absolutely, totally foreign conditions, I mean literally and figuratively how to operate and you have to make good decisions. And I asked Jack one time, "What makes a good pilot? What do you think?" And he says, "Well, a lot of people can fly a plane, but a good pilot makes good decisions all the time." And that's basically it; we're in a lot of bad weather situations, mountainous situations and these guys are really good. And we're flying all of our work is hundred, hundred fifty feet, something like that so we don't have much time for thinking about things if things go wrong. But anyway, so I was interested; you had to do it out of necessity. I didn't grow up thinking I was going to be a pilot and I got my own plane, I had a chance to become a Service pilot but I'm not officially one because I realized that extra responsibility it takes to be responsible for lives of other people. I just really wasn't comfortable with it as some of these guys are, but I fly; I own my own plane, I own my own Cub and it's just a way of life that I think you have to have to be here in Alaska. But basically, the flying program; it's really, really impressive. I can't impress on people enough of how good of job they do up here. But there's some good stories I could tell you about flying; I don't know if I should.

JOHN: Tell a couple.

BILL: Well, one thing that Rod might shoot me for this.

JOHN: I'll give him an opportunity to reciprocate.

BILL: I don't know if you've heard of ivory fever?

JOHN: No.

BILL: If you see a dead walrus on a beach somewhere with his tusks still and you can legally collect the tusks, it's called ivory fever; it's really a prized item up here, not to sell but just to have. And Rod had a case of ivory fever when we were doing a fall survey out on the Yukon Delta. I will say it was about time for a pee break too, but we just happen to be flying the coast; we were starting a week long survey down the Alaska Peninsula and you start at the Yukon Delta to confirm that the geese have left before you go down the peninsula to count them. And so we went out for that afternoon, cursory run, and it was just supposed to be for a couple hours….

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BILL: ….we had for survival gear, just the basic old OES survival gear which a lot of it World War II era stuff, and food, sea rations, that kind of thing. Rod didn't even, he didn't even have his hip boots along; we had a survival suit. Anyway, we're out flying the survey and Rod looks out my window, no less, I'm off course doing, I tell him, "I was doing what I was supposed to be doing. I was looking for geese, not ivory." And he sees a washed up skeleton of a walrus, and it was about time for a break but we probably wouldn't have taken it right there if we hadn't seen the walrus. Anyway we land on this little strip, it's very flat off the coast of the Yukon Delta, there's a little strip of water, we land, taxi up to the little creek where it had washed up and nosed the plane. We take a lunch break and Rod goes grabs the tusks, and I said, "Well you saw them, they're yours, I'm not interested in them." We come back and we couldn't turn, one thing you do in a float plane; it's mostly all mud out there but occasionally you'll get in a little bit of sand. Well we got in a little bit of sand and we were kind of stuck right there, and then the wind came up and a storm came in, so we couldn't turn the plane but the storm and the winds have a capability on that flat surface to keep the tide out and it did. So we couldn't turn the plane around, we couldn't, and the wind came up, the tide wasn't coming back in. Rod didn't have his hip boots, so I had to give him mine because he had to hop back in the plane trying to power it to turn around. And I put on this orange survival suit, which I got named Gumby for by the refuge guys. The first night we stayed there, we called in and said, "Well we have a little problem, we're not getting in." So we took out this old tent and sea rations and stayed there. Well that storm blew for three days and we were digging a trench with the canoe paddles for the floats, and then we'd push on the tailfin, we'd push about a hundred times and move it maybe a foot to turn it a hundred and eighty degrees out. And we did that for two days, and then we dug a trench for the floats with the canoe paddles. In the meantime the refuge guys are coming out and they couldn't land anywhere close, there was no lake or anything. And the winds were blowing pretty hard, and they'd drop us a little food, take pictures and laugh at us. And finally we go to bed on the third night and the wind was howling but it switched directions and we'd been working all day on this trench, and the tide just came roaring in and we wouldn't need the trenches; if we would have just waited. So we pitch the tent, jump in the plane, and the storm was so bad we just could take off and Rod would land where we knew he wouldn't be stuck again, because we couldn't go anywhere, it was too bad a weather. And we slept in the plane, the wind howling all night long. The next day we try to take off at that little spot, he turns it around, he got one float up and the other one wouldn't lift off and we stuck it again up at the other end. I think it was day four, but we were close enough then that the refuge guys, the weather cleared, they came out and we come alongs and used logs to brace for the come along. And we actually pulled the plane off of the mud into an area where we could operate it, but the storm came back. Anyway a long story short, one week from the day that we were supposed to start the survey, we finally got back to Bethel to do this thing. But I will say, Rod is, without a doubt one, of the best bush pilots that I've ever flown with.

And that's a story I can't resist telling because ivory fever will get you in trouble up here.

End of tape.

Keywords: employee, biologist, biography, history, surveys, banding, aviation, planes, Russia, Mexico, Chile, Africa, Peace Corps, waterfowl, Wildlife Refuges, international work