



# The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Retiree History of Ron Popowski



June 12, 2024

# Oral History Cover Sheet

**Name:** Ron Popowski

**Date of Interview:** June 12, 2024

**Location of Interview:** Microsoft Teams Video Call

**Interviewer:** Peggy Hobbs, with assistance of ASL Interpreter Brianne Hersey

**Approximate years worked for Fish and Wildlife Service:** 23 years

**Offices and Field Stations Worked, Positions Held:** Resource assistant, biotech, animal caretaker, wildlife technician, botanist, fish and wildlife biologist, supervisory fish and wildlife biologist.

**Most Important Projects:** Restoration Project in the Everglades, Supervisor for the Conservation Planning Assistance (CPA)

**Colleagues and Mentors and other names mentioned:** Bruce Babbitt, Molly Beatty, Joe Biden, Ray Bransfield, George Bush, Leanne Carranza, Jamie Clark, Bill Clinton, Carl Couret, Eric Davis, Jr., Clifford Day, Sharon Fauver, Deb Haaland, Parks Hillard, Dr. Todd Hopkins, Dirk Kempthorne, Dr. Paul Krausman, Catherine McCalvin, Diane Noda, Gail Norton, Barak Obama, Dr. Bart Phillips Ronald Reagan, Art Roybal, Jay Slack, Eric Schrading, John Staples, Donald Trump, Martha Williams

**Brief Summary of Interview:** Ron tells about the journey in his career, including challenges he encountered due to his hearing impairment. Despite that, he demonstrates the enjoyment and fulfillment he got from his work. Ron's story is told through interpretation.

## Interview:

### **Peggy Hobbs**

Good morning. This is Peggy Hobbs and today is June 12, 2024. I'm here with American Sign Language interpreter Brianne Hersey to interview Fish and Wildlife Service retiree, Ron Popowski.

Okay, Ron, where and when were you born and where did you grow up?

### **Ron Popowski**

Good morning, everyone. Thank you for inviting me to be interviewed today, I really appreciate it.

I was born in Jersey City, New Jersey, in 1964. I was raised in Hudson and Bergen counties, which is in the Meadowlands area. Back then, in the 1970s and the 1980s, people would often call that area the “land of pollution diversity”. And as you all know, it is the most densely populated state, with about 1,300 people per square mile. And with very limited natural resource areas and only a very few city parks and county parks. There wasn't a lot of exposure to natural resources in those areas, but I do take a lot of pride in being a New Jerseyan.

### **Peggy Hobbs**

And what did your parents do for a living?

### **Ron Popowski**

My dad - his name is Charles - he spent his entire career as an international typographical union printer for several daily newspapers. He started right after high school and he retired at 68, so that was his entire career.

My mom started as a stay-at-home mom; she took care of me and my two siblings. I have two brothers, and when the three of us were grown, my mom started working as a factory laborer. About ten years before she retired, she was employed by Coach as a clerk.

### **Peggy Hobbs**

What influenced you the most as far as hobbies, books, people, early jobs, etc.?

**Ron Popowski**

I always like that question. During my childhood, I always liked watching Marlin Perkins on the *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom*. I also spent many of my summers visiting my grandparents, who lived in the Poconos. That was a great time to get exposed to natural resources and state parks, since I didn't have that near my home. Also, I went to North Carolina Outward Bound, and that gave me a lot of exposure to being outside, being outdoors, learning leadership skills, self-awareness, and being ready for the real world, which of course makes a lasting impact.

**Peggy Hobbs**

Did you hunt, fish, or have other outdoor interests?

**Ron Popowski**

I would say by far a full day of hiking is my absolute favorite thing to do. I can spend all day hiking and taking pictures. I don't hunt; I fish a little bit, mostly offshore fishing with friends from time to time, but that's not anything I do on a regular basis. Hiking is what gave me my exposure to being in the outdoors, and I enjoy visiting National Parks, state parks, refuges, preserves. I value seeing how endangered species are being protected in sensitive habitats.

**Peggy Hobbs**

What high school did you attend and when did you graduate high school?

**Ron Popowski**

I grew up at the New Jersey School for the Deaf in West Trenton. From kindergarten through 12th grade, I lived at school during the week and I only went home on the weekends. All of the teachers there use American Sign Language. I had full access to my education there.

**Peggy Hobbs**

In what year did you finish there?

**Ron Popowski**

1984.

**Peggy Hobbs**

And what college or colleges did you attend? When did you graduate, and what degrees did you earn and in what majors?

**Ron Popowski**

I loved college! I went to five different colleges. In the beginning of my college career, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, what I wanted to be. I went to Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT). I was hoping to major in Chemistry, but that didn't work out so I transferred to California State University at Northridge (CSUN), and I majored in Urban Studies. But that didn't work out either. I then decided to go to Gallaudet University and majored in Biology. Before I went to Gallaudet, which is in Washington, DC, I worked for two different National Parks as a volunteer, and that helped me to make a decision as to what I wanted to study. I graduated with my BA in Biology and I graduated in 1991. After graduating from Gallaudet, I worked for Coconino National Forest in Flagstaff, Arizona. I also went to Northern Arizona University to take some graduate courses to prepare for Graduate School. After five years with U.S. Forest Service, I went back to school and completed my master's in wildlife sciences at University of Arizona in 1999.

**Peggy Hobbs**

Very nice, okay. Who or what influenced your education and career track?

**Ron Popowski**

The volunteer experience that I first had was at the Everglades National Park. That was during the summer of 1986. It was under the Student Conservation Association (SCA). I continued into the fall of 1986. From September through December, I volunteered at Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming, and I have to say it was the best place to be in the country. I'm so blessed that I had that experience. My third volunteer experience was at Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado. It was with SCA, as a trail crew supervisor working with six high school students, building trails.

**Peggy Hobbs**

Okay. Did you serve in the military?

**Ron Popowski**

Obviously not due to the fact that I'm deaf.

**Peggy Hobbs**

And were you ever married?

**Ron Popowski**

I was divorced after 14 years of marriage. I have three children - my oldest daughter is 22 and then I have a 21-year-old and a 20-year-old. So my oldest is Sima, then Trista, and my youngest is Trent.

**Peggy Hobbs**

Did any of your children follow a career path in conservation?

**Ron Popowski**

No, no, they did not. My oldest daughter, Sima, she majored in speech language pathology; now she's in Graduate School at Gallaudet. She just finished her first year there and will be graduating next year. My second daughter, Trista - she majored in culinary arts, and she graduated from Community College. She has been cooking her entire life and specifically loves baking. That's what her passion is. And then my son, Trent, didn't want to go to college - he wanted to take a gap year; currently he's working at a grocery store.

**Peggy Hobbs**

All right. Now, what attracted you to the Fish and Wildlife Service?

**Ron Popowski**

I began my career with the U.S. Forest Service in Flagstaff, AZ. After six years, I was looking for a new opportunity. I was always interested in the Endangered Species program, and I felt like the Fish and Wildlife Service would be a good place for me to work.

**Peggy Hobbs**

And when did you start working for the Service, what was your job title, and where was that?

**Ron Popowski**

I started working for the Fish and Wildlife Service in 1999, after six years with the U.S. Forest Service. I started out in the Ventura Field Office, California, as a fish and wildlife biologist, and I was doing a lot of project review and a lot of consultation for endangered species.

**Peggy Hobbs**

And what kind of positions did you hold during your career?

**Ron Popowski**

I'm going to include some of my volunteer experience: I was a resource assistant, I was a biotech, I was an animal caretaker, wildlife technician, botanist, fish and wildlife biologist, and I retired as a supervisory fish and wildlife biologist.

**Peggy Hobbs**

How long did you work for the Service and when did you retire?

**Ron Popowski**

I worked for the Fish and Wildlife Service for 23 years, but I was with federal service for 30 years and I retired in December of 2022.

**Peggy Hobbs**

Okay. Prior to retiring, what were your day-to-day duties as a supervisory fish and wildlife biologist?

**Ron Popowski**

Mostly it was project review and Section 7 consultation, and I did a lot of recovery actions, a lot of listing, and doing five-year reviews. I also was a supervisor for the Conservation Planning Assistance (CPA) - not the fun type of CPA for finances, but for federal projects that are carried out and funded by the federal government, including trust resources.

**Peggy Hobbs**

Were there challenges associated with your hearing impairment during your career and what were they?

**Ron Popowski**

Yes, since our field offices in the Fish and Wildlife Service and other natural resource agencies are often based in rural areas or away from bigger cities, or away from deaf communities that usually are in bigger cities, it was a challenge for me to find good interpretive services in the areas where I worked. I'd have to find interpreters that lived two or three hours away to be willing to travel. Oftentimes I would have different interpreters for every meeting, and there were a lot of interpreters that I worked with that didn't have any background in any kind of wildlife or any of the wildlife policies and regulations. It was a challenge for the interpreters who weren't familiar with the topics or with the content to be able to interpret them. Brianne, who we have today, is very familiar with the work itself. She worked with me for several years - I think maybe eight years or so - so it's great working with an interpreter who is more familiar with our agency and the functions and operations of our agency.

Also, you know, back in the day there was perception from people towards minority groups, which includes those with disabilities and other races. That's always a challenge, and it's great to see the change over time to progression amongst people. They're more aware and they're more willing to work with everyone. It's much easier, but when I first started out, I would say the first ten years of my career, that kind of perception was difficult to deal with.

**Peggy Hobbs**

Well, that leads to my next question. Did any of those challenges you talk about lessen or get resolved over time, and was the Service supportive in helping to find solutions to these challenges?

**Ron Popowski**

Yes, yes, very much so. It's slow, of course, but they're learning - trying to figure out how to resolve different issues involving the cost of paying for services that are necessary or providing equipment to meet the needs of individuals. There are certain devices that can help me do my job and the Fish and Wildlife Service was very supportive with providing me the devices I needed. The Fish and Wildlife Service did the best that they could to help me, and in one situation where I was in southern Florida Field Office in Naples, there was a year that we couldn't find an interpreter. It was more than two years. We could not find any interpreters for any of my meetings, so I was very separated from my team.

I had to work more independently. I was in a silo and there were so many meetings that we needed to have, and I couldn't participate. I did not like that feeling that I was isolated due to lack of services. That was a hardship and I transferred to New Jersey Field Office. The Fish and Wildlife Service helped me with looking for an opportunity that would be a better fit and a better location for me.

**Peggy Hobbs**

Well, that's good to hear. Are there any major projects, issues, or stories you would like to share, and how were any issues resolved?

**Ron Popowski**

So related to my disability or just in general?

**Peggy Hobbs**

In your career, just in general.

**Ron Popowski**

Well, I would say I have several, but I don't think you want me to talk about all of them. I would say my most rewarding experience was in the Everglades. That restoration project done there - it was one of the largest restoration projects done in the world, and it was a great opportunity for me to meet hundreds of biologists from different states and from different cities all over the place. There was a lot of interaction with different experts related to the Everglades restoration project, and my focus was on the southwest portion of the Everglades and that is in the Naples region.



I learned so much because I didn't have the background prior to that and we had such a great team; it was a large team as well. When I transferred from the Ventura Field Office in California to the Southern Florida Field Office, I believe they hired 64 new biologists at that time during that year and so in that one year 64 biologists were hired. They must have had a lot of funding to do that, you know, federal funding, state funding...to be able to hire these individuals in preparedness for the feasibility study that needed to be done and to be prepared for identifying and selecting and prioritizing projects all over the Everglades. That was my most rewarding experience. I mean, I have other amazing experiences in different areas, but that was my most rewarding.

**Peggy Hobbs**

So that year that they hired all those biologists, what year would that have been roughly?

**Ron Popowski**

2001.

There were over 100 staff members at the Vero Beach Field Office, but I was based in a sub-office in Naples and there were only three of us in that sub-office. I would go monthly to the meetings in Vero Beach.

**Peggy Hobbs**

Compare the science, processes, and work climate when you began your career to the time period when you retired.

**Ron Popowski**

I saw a lot of changes. We all were learning how to manage priorities, how to set new policies and new regulations. I also remember when I started in my career, it was more single-species focused. But then later there was a shift to more of ecosystem management and then to multi-species management, including at-risk species, instead of just focusing on single species to change the big picture. With this said, that becomes more of a challenge to manage a bigger picture because there are more complicated processes, policies, and regulations; and dealing with multi properties.

**Peggy Hobbs**

Did you witness any new Service inventions or innovations during your career?

**Ron Popowski**

Yes, there were a lot of changes. Like I said, single species to multi species but also the landscape - the landscape cooperative agreement, the strategic habitat conservation, the at-risk species - we didn't have that at the beginning of my career. So again, those bigger-picture efforts and strategies were a huge change from the beginning to the end of my career.

**Peggy Hobbs**

What support did you receive locally, regionally, and federally?

**Ron Popowski**

There was a variety of support. It would always depend on the type of project, so if you're talking about species specific, we would get a lot of support from federal and state agencies. If you're talking about land acquisition, we coordinated with getting support at all levels - conservation groups, local, county, state, federal level, or with specific individuals. If it's one species that became a species of concern, we would get support from researchers from different institutions, from academia, from the government, from a variety of people. It is critical to get their support, especially when it came to funding.

**Peggy Hobbs**

I think you may have already talked about this, but I want to make sure you cover the high point of your career. I don't know if it was the Everglades restoration project or if there's something else.

**Ron Popowski**

I have a list. I would say there are over 20 that I could come up with and I wish I could name them all, but I mean that would take a lot of time for today. I would say first I just am so appreciative of all the opportunities that I was able to be a part of - the volunteer experiences, the internships, the seasonal work I did, and then becoming a permanent employee. Everyone gave me these amazing opportunities. I remember when I first interviewed, they weren't sure how I would be able to work with wildlife as a deaf person, but the fact that they decided to hire me and we all learned together as it went along.

**Ron Popowski**

In addition to all the experiences that I gained from the different positions, including the volunteer work I've done and the intern seasonal work, I had some other opportunities to get involved with natural resource work.

I would say one of the best experiences of my career was doing field work. There were different types of field work in Northern Arizona when I was involved with the Mexican spotted owl - working out at night, searching and locating owls. Just an awesome experience;

and then transferring to the Fish and Wildlife Service in Ventura, California. I was involved with preparing listing for the Morro shoulderband snail. The listing experience and working on the critical habitat designation was challenging for me because it was the first time for me. We were able to successfully list that snail, and it would not have been possible without the support I received from my team. I was proud of that experience.

There is the one in the Everglades, the experience as mentioned earlier. While at the New Jersey Field Office, I was able to do a lot of Endangered Species projects and CPA projects before I became a supervisor. It was an experience being a supervisor; oftentimes prior to that, I always felt like I was the last to know about the newest things and last to hear the news. While in the supervisor capacity, I was one of the first few people to know what was happening so I would get that information before sharing it with staff. Being able to see it from both sides - at a staff level and at a supervisory level - I would say that those were all really rewarding experiences for me.

### **Peggy Hobbs**

Were there any low points in your career?

### **Ron Popowski**

I have several of those as well, but maybe I'll just keep it to two. The first one was with the Forest Service and I was involved with the Mexican spotted owl doing field work and then later on I was involved with studies in partnership with the Northern Arizona University. We were doing live trapping of the Mexican spotted owl prey base. We had a research plot established in the National Forest, and I went to a week-long training to learn about how the protocol worked, to learn how to handle the different rodents to identify them. It was a fun project. I started planning to live in a remote area of the forest for an entire month; I remember being so excited, packing everything up, all the equipment and tools I was going to need, my food, my clothes, just getting everything ready to live in this cabin and I drove all the way there. It was very far from the town and I got everything set up in the cabin. I was getting ready for field work the following day and the very same night that I moved into the cabin, someone drove by and I was like, "That's odd; I mean, I am in the most remote area. I didn't think anyone would be able to find me here", and it turned out to be personnel who came in with a Forest Service truck. They informed me that I needed to get out because I couldn't do the project because of a recent outbreak of the hantavirus. It was in 1994-1995 and we had the hantavirus outbreak and it came from rodent species. It was in dry, dusty areas and people were getting ill from it. I wasn't able to do this project that I had so looked forward to for such a long time! I'd gotten so excited and my first day getting told that I wasn't able to do it was very disappointing.

The second is not work related, but losing my field guide for birds. I lost two of my field guides. They had wonderful notes that I had taken, and they were lost in the field and that was also very disappointing because I had a lot of good notes, and I had dates in there as well. I never saw them again.

**Peggy Hobbs**

Well, that's a bummer! Is there anything you wish you had done differently?

**Ron Popowski**

Oh, that is a good question. It's hard to go back, but I would say one thing that I wish for is I wish I had been a little bit more prepared for wildlife work when I was in college. When I went to Gallaudet University, there were no wildlife courses. It's just general biology, so I took general biology without the wildlife portion. I got a lot of wildlife training during my internships during my summer jobs, but I wish that I had taken more wildlife courses when I was getting my bachelor's degree. That's one of the reasons that I had to take some of the wildlife courses when I was getting my first job in the National Forest - they required me to take six classes to be able to be prepared for the job. I would say that's the only thing I would really wish for is to be better prepared. But you know, we all learn as we go during our lives and our careers, so it's just part of it.

**Peggy Hobbs**

Was there a major impediment to your job or career?

**Ron Popowski**

Again, it would be related to my disability. I remember in the early 1990s, people would often question me on how I could be a wildlife biologist if I wasn't able to hear, and I had to prove to them - double, triple times had to prove - that I was capable of doing this job, and I gained respect from people over time, but not from everyone. There were times that people would decide not to communicate directly with me because they seemed unsure how to do it. They would contact a coworker or contact a staff member to communicate through them, and I would often ask them to communicate directly with me as opposed to going through a third party. That required patience and education. While I might have felt frustrated in a professional setting, I would try my best to be patient with people. I know that it's more of limited awareness.

I do think I've seen a shift now. People are becoming more aware that those of us with different disabilities can do the job. There's more respect nowadays as opposed to 30 years ago.

**Peggy Hobbs**

Glad to hear that, too. Do you remember who any of your supervisors were - who these folks were?

**Ron Popowski**

Yes. For the field offices, I remember all of them because they were all great. My first experience at the Ventura Field Office, my supervisor was Diane Noda and I had Catherine McCalvin, Ray Bransfield, Leanne Carranza. I had different supervisors because I transferred from different programs while there was some reorganization happening and restructuring, so they moved me around a bit. In the South Florida Field Office, I had Jay Slack, Sharon Fauver, Carl Couret, Art Roybal, and Dr. Todd Hopkins; they were all my supervisors while I was working in the Everglades. We did a lot of reorganizing from 2001 to 2006 because we were just trying to figure out different strategies and who had the skill sets necessary to do different things. There was a lot of moving around of people during those seven years, and this is why I had different supervisors. When I came to the New Jersey Field Office, I had Clifford Day, John Staples, Eric Davis Jr., and Eric Schradling. They were all great supervisors to have.

**Peggy Hobbs**

Who are the individuals that helped shape your career?

**Ron Popowski**

First, with the National Forest: Parks Hillard and Dr. Bart Phillips. They gave me in-depth exposure to what I needed to do to really be prepared for the job that I had. They encouraged me to take different trainings to meet different ones, to go to different meetings, and to acquire more skills. While at the University of Arizona, I had Dr. Paul Krausman, who was a great professor. He was my graduate advisor, and he taught me a lot about research, about different aspects of research and wildlife management.

At the New Jersey Field office, Eric Davis, Jr. – he gave me a lot of opportunities. He pushed me to take on these different new challenges and it was a great professional growth experience for me.

**Peggy Hobbs**

Do any of the Presidents, Secretaries of the Interior, Directors of the Service - do any of them stand out that you recall while you worked for the Service?

**Ron Popowski**

I started as a volunteer and at that time that was with President Reagan. When I retired, that was President Biden's term. From President Reagan, George Bush, Bill Clinton, another Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden. It was a different experience with each one of them.

I believe it was from 1992 to 1999 I thought was the best time in my career. We had ample funding and we had support that was coming from the Department of the Interior.

I remember we had Bruce Babbitt as the Secretary of the Interior, and he was from Flagstaff, Arizona, so he was a local guy - someone that we knew on a day-to-day basis. We also had Gail Norton, Dirk Kempthorne, and recently Deb Haaland, who were all good.

Directors Molly Beatty, Jamie Clark, and recently Martha Williams. Again, we got a lot of support from all the Directors of the Fish and Wildlife Service, from the Department of the Interior, from the Administration. It's just different during each term because their priorities are different, the issues are different.

**Peggy Hobbs**

Well, that kind of leads to my next question - How did changes in the Administration affect your work?

**Ron Popowski**

A shift in priorities. Some terms I was able to focus more aggressively toward recovery efforts and actions for endangered species; some terms I had to be focused more on land acquisition; more recently, it was more about energy - solar energy and offshore wind energy. So we had to shift our priorities and what we were reviewing and what we were committing to.

**Peggy Hobbs**

What were some of the changes you observed in the Fish and Wildlife Service, and who were the individuals who shaped the Service?

**Ron Popowski**

For all of the changes, I think it just comes from feedback from the public and from different federal agencies. We're all trying to work together all the time. I don't think that I could identify one specific individual that made any kind of huge change in the decades that I have worked there. It's just ongoing shifting and shaping.

Now the way I see it, there's more a shift to at-risk species, and that's a very positive approach because we don't want to wait until it's too late to take care of these species. We need to take care of them before they are listed as endangered and that is the proactive approach.

With project review, we have better engagement project proponents and better project support.

**Peggy Hobbs**

Okay, what are your thoughts on the Service's future, and what advice would you offer new hires?

**Ron Popowski**

For new hires I would strongly encourage them to get involved with field work for some length of time before doing desk work; I see that a lot. At the beginning of my career, a lot of people started from the bottom, working out in the field, working late at night, searching for these different wildlife species, and then recently it seems like there is more of a shift where college graduates, they're just ready to do a desk job and very limited in the amount of time they're out doing field work. With field work, you gain so much knowledge of what's out there regardless of where you're working, whether it's the Northeast, the Southwest, the Midwest – field work is instrumental for anyone going into a wildlife career.

**Peggy Hobbs**

That's good advice. We're coming towards the close, but is there anything else you wanted to add, something you feel like we haven't covered?

**Ron Popowski**

I'm trying to limit my discussion today and focus on the Fish and Wildlife Service, but I do want to add some other topics just from my journey and might require a little bit more time now, but I do really love sharing my journey with people.

**Peggy Hobbs**

That's okay!

**Ron Popowski**

I think it's important for supervisors, or really anyone who's responsible, human resources, and the field offices - wherever it might be – to put some effort into recruiting deaf individuals. Perhaps develop partnerships with schools where they have deaf students to encourage them to study to become a biologist, as well as internship opportunities to prepare them for Fish and Wildlife Service employment. I think that's something that really would be nice to see happen.

**Peggy Hobbs**

Well, that's an important message, so thank you for mentioning it. Do you have any thoughts on other retirees you know of that we should interview? Does anybody come to mind? You can always let me know if you think of it later.

**Ron Popowski**

Yeah, I definitely will do that.

**Peggy Hobbs**

Unless you have anything to add, I think we will conclude the interview unless you have any last thoughts.

**Ron Popowski**

Yes, after this I'll be able to share some of my work in document form, which I can send via email. I'll include some pictures of my field work and maybe a PowerPoint. Just to kind of give a brief summary of my career, just some career in pictures with a few words and locations and the different species. It's a cool PowerPoint and I'll share that with you when we're done here.

**Peggy Hobbs**

Excellent - we'd love to see that! Well, thank you so much to both of you for your time. This was a great interview, and we'll talk more about what happens next, so thank you very much.

**Ron Popowski**

Again, many thanks for inviting me to do this and I want to thank Brianne <the ASL Interpreter> for doing this as well.



**Keywords:**

At-Risk species  
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Everglades National Park  
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Flagstaff, AZ  
Forest Service  
Gallaudet University  
Hantavirus  
Internship  
Listing  
Mexican spotted owl  
Morro shoulderband snail  
National Park Service  
New Jersey Field Office  
Northern Arizona University  
Recovery  
Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT)  
Rocky Mountain NP  
Solar energy  
Student Conservation Association (SCA)  
Supervisory Fish and Wildlife Biologist  
Ventura Field Office  
Volunteer  
Wind energy  
Yellowstone NP