



The Oral History of Robin West
October 17, 2017

Interview conducted by John Cornely
Shepherdstown, WV



Oral History Cover Sheet

Name: Robin West

Date of Interview: October 17, 2017

Location of Interview: Shepherdstown, WV

Interviewer: John Cornely

Approximate years worked for Fish and Wildlife Service: 35 (30 years in Alaska) as a biologist and refuge manager.

Offices and Field Stations Worked, Positions Held: YACC and temporary positions - Alaska Area and Regional Offices; Biological Technician - Hillside NWR (Yazoo City, MS); Fish and Wildlife Biologist - Ecological Services, Fisheries Biologist – Fisheries Assistance, and Assistant Refuge Manager – Yukon Flats NWR (Fairbanks, AK); Refuge Manager – Izembek NWR (Cold Bay, AK); Migratory Bird Coordinator – Migratory Birds (Anchorage, AK); Refuge Manager – Kenai NWR (Soldotna, AK); Supervisory Wildlife Refuge Specialist (Refuge Supervisor) and Fish and Wildlife Administrator (Assistant Regional Director) – Region 1 Refuges (Portland, OR).

Most Important Projects: Oil and Gas Development Studies and Mitigation; Migratory Bird Treaty Amendments; Refuge Compatibility Policy and Regulations.

Colleagues and Mentors (mentioned): Jim Kurth, Gary Hickman, Bob Jones, Jerry Stroebele, Mike Smith, Howard Metsker, Glenn Elison, Rosa Meehan, Paul Schmidt, John R. Rogers, Carolyn Bohan, George Chandler, Dave Allen, Forest Cameron, Ken Edwards, Andy Loranger, John Morton.

Brief Summary of Interview: Received his Bachelor of Science in 1978 from Oregon State University in wildlife management. Worked in three Regions and four programs for Fish and Wildlife Service between 1978 and 2014.

INTERVIEW

John Cornely: This is John Cornely with the US Fish and Wildlife Service Heritage Committee in continuation of our oral history project. I have the pleasure today to be talking with **Robin West** who I had the pleasure of working with for a number of years. We're at the National Conservation Training Center in West Virginia on October the 17th, 2017. With that, **Robin**, I'll just ask you to talk about your life and especially your career with the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Robin West: All right. Thanks, John. Well, my name is Robin Lester West. I was born on January 4th, 1957, in Grants Pass, Oregon to **Wayne** and **Anne West**. I had a sister already a year old at the time, **Jean**. I graduated from Grants Pass High School in 1975 and went to Eastern Oregon State College from there, majoring in biology. That was about 500 miles away from home in a little town called La Grande, a very nice community. From there I transferred to Oregon State University and majored in wildlife science. My goal was to get it done quickly. I spent two more years and got my bachelor's degree.

Robin: Three years total. One year at Eastern Oregon State, two years at Oregon State University.

John: Okay, so you were quick.

Robin: I was quick. I was taking 20 plus hours a quarter. My goal was to get employed. In the summer after I graduated from Oregon State University, in 1978, I worked on a National Science Foundation project in Warner Valley - southcentral Oregon all summer. I was doing the wildlife and herpetology components for a joint study of riparian areas. We had ornithologists and botanists and entomologists working. I was basically estimating the species abundance and diversity for small mammals and reptiles and amphibians from the riparian areas in Warner Valley.

I enjoyed that a lot. One of the letters I got in the mail at Plush, Oregon that summer was from **Lenora Bond**, who was at Oregon State University at the time and helped in administration. She was not a professor; her husband, **Carl Bond** was. He taught there. You knew Carl?

John: I knew Carl.

Robin: Yeah. She was always trying to find jobs for people. There was an opportunity to go to Alaska in what was then the YACC program - Young Adult Conservation Corps - as a staff writer/photographer for what was then the Habitat Preservation Program. It was kind of a forerunner to Ecological Services.

I find it interesting that was during the Carter administration. When Ronald Reagan was elected in 1980, a couple years later, we changed the program name, not "we," I had nothing to do with

it, but the name was changed to “Fish and Wildlife Enhancement”. “Habitat Preservation” became “Fish and Wildlife Enhancement”.

When I moved up from Oregon in October of 1978 to Anchorage, the Fish and Wildlife Service office had just moved from downtown to Tudor Road, where they still are today. They were still an area office. They were managed out of Portland and “**Gordy**” **Watson** was just retiring. He was the area director.

John: Alaska was part of region 1 at that time, correct?

Robin: It was, yeah. Of course, Region 1, just prior to that, it had Montana and some of the mountain states too, but lost those and then lost Alaska, and later California and Nevada. As I finished my career, I ended up in region 1. We still had a lot to do! I'll end up there.

As a young person, 21 years of age, moving to Alaska, the YACC Program was “non-status”. There were no benefits in terms of retirement or health.

I worked for a man named **Gary Hickman**, who was the ARD for Habitat Preservation and his program included OBS (Office of Biological Services); Special Studies, which was unique to Alaska working mostly on coastal ecosystems and migratory birds, offshore oil, and gas development – collecting baseline information; and environmental contaminants evaluation, the (ECE) program.

There were also Ecological Services stations in Fairbanks, Anchorage and Juneau and then some substations in southeast Alaska as well. It was a large program and what was really nice about being a staff writer/photographer was I got to visit all these stations. I also visited Refuges and worked with other programs. I wrote articles, took photos, and prepared presentations. I was basically instructed to try and produce 3 to 5 news articles a week.

Somewhere in my archives I have a whole notebook ‘cuz at the time we didn't have a clipping service, but we'd go down to the University of Alaska Library, my coworkers and I, a couple of times a month and look and see what had been published. We'd look through the papers and magazines: the Kodiak Mirror, Fairbanks Daily News Minor, Alaska Magazine, Dispatch News – whatever we could find and see what we had published. We got a lot published. What really benefited me from it though was traveling throughout Alaska and meeting the different researchers and managers and learning about their programs.

They also got to look at me a little bit as it turned out and it was good for my career.

John: As a YACC enrollee I guess you would say, did they provide housing and things like that?

Robin: No. No, you had a base salary. That was it.

John: Then you're on your own.

Robin: You were on your own. The salary wasn't great. I was always living in someone's extra bedroom or something or trailer or housesitting for that year. It was a one-year appointment. I took a break in summer and fished for halibut. I did a longline. I made a bunch of money doing that. It's very hard work. I think it's the hardest work I ever did. It before there was a quota system. There was a set season, but anyone could fish.

John: Did you work for somebody?

Robin: I did. A man named **Gerald Potter**. He had a 40 some foot longlining boat out of the Chugiak-Eagle River area. We fished out of Seward, in the Ragged Islands. I was a deckhand and made 15% of whatever the take was. Actually, I was surprised 'cuz we got a second check later. We'd made a deal at the dock based on whatever the price ended at. If it was higher at the end of the season, they would write a second check.

John: This was commercial halibut fishing, not guiding sport fishing?

Robin: Commercial halibut fishing - it was basically 20- hours a day longline fishery. You'd run a mile of skate gear, which was basically a lead core cable with a 6-foot ganglion on it with a big circle hook. We left the harbor with herring for bait. Then as we went on...

John: How many hooks would you use?

Robin: Well, each set was a mile long, and there was 1 hook every 6 feet. There was a lot of hooks! Basically, what you were doing was running from 1 set to the next. There were floats at each end You'd pick the float, work the line, and they lay it back out as you motored to the next one. You're rebaiting and setting and cleaning fish near constantly. It was light almost all night as it was a June. You were working hard.

It was interesting that we never went back in to get more bait (frozen herring); we just cut up other things that we caught along the way - and when we ran out of ice, we'd pull into a glacier and get out and chop ice and fill the fish hold.

John: I remember the first time I ever went halibut fishing out of Cordova. I was handed silver salmon to cut up. I said, "Are these silver salmon?" "Yes", he says, "I got two freezers full of 'em. Cut it up".

Robin: Well, that's not legal. Other things we caught and used were mostly black cod, but sculpin and that kind of thing, were also used. It was a good experience, but I'm glad I'm not still doing it for sure.

When I finished the one year with the YACC, then I guess the program that I connected the most with was ECE - Environmental Contaminants Evaluation program. There was a man named **Howard Metsker** there that worked for **Gary Hickman**, and he hired me as a biotech, Fish and Wildlife Technician GS-5. I worked for him doing contaminant sampling and writing reports. We did work on Yukon River asbestos, looked at pulp mill pollutants down in southeast Alaska at Sitka and a variety of things like that.

Then in the middle of that appointment, the Marine Mammal Protection Act was being reauthorized. It passed in the early '70s. It was being reauthorized and the state of Alaska was not happy with the provisions. They threw it back to the federal government – the work they had been doing on monitoring and management. The Service scrambled and put people out in villages in Alaska to do monitoring of walrus hunting. I went to Savoonga and spent I think six weeks out there.

Savoonga is on Saint Lawrence Island which is in the Bering Straits. It's halfway really between Nome and Russia -very remote, very traditional Yupik Eskimo village. There was only one other white person in the village at the time if I remember right, an Episcopalian priest.

When we landed - when I was dropped off (now I'm a GS-5 okay) - I don't have a lot of contacts, money, or equipment. I was supposed to have radio contact every day with Anchorage. We had a Motorola radio, a 12-volt battery, a generator to charge it, and a big fiberglass hot stick antenna. I also had big drums that I put formaldehyde in to subsample walrus stomach contents and preserve. I also had all my food for the duration. I had a planeload of stuff. I got dropped off in the middle of a spring snowstorm in very wintery conditions (the ocean was still frozen) by an OAS pilot and a little twin-engine airplane, and he wanted out of there. He dropped me off. We're a mile from the village, okay? It's snowing. I don't know anybody. I don't know where to go.

John: You could say the pilot is," I'm outta here?"

Robin: Pretty much. He's gone after he offloads my stuff.

I'm supposed to connect with a guy named **Alexander Akeya**, who is an elder in the village and that's the only name I have. He's supposed to provide housing for me. That's the arrangement. Pretty soon a snow machine comes out through the snow and appears there. The guy goes, "What're ya doing here" kind of a thing. I told him who I was, and I said, I'm looking for **Alexander Akeya**. He said, he's whale hunting on the other side of the island, won't be back for a week, or something like that and then took off. I was on my own.

I ended up making arrangements with a man about 30 years old. His name was **Warren Toolie**. He was the eldest son of another elder in the community. At the time the Bureau of Indian Affairs had built newer houses on the airport side of the town. The older houses were being transferred to their kids and that kind of thing. The eldest son had one of those older houses and

he put me up. I said, well, we'll make it right and ultimately the contractual arrangements were waived and that's where I stayed.

I just mentioned that 'cuz I had brought all my food, but the culture was such that whatever you have - everybody has, kind of thing. Nobody knocks on the doors or anything, just come in and go. It's very laid-back environment - at least it was at the time. Basically, all the food that I brought was eaten within a few days. I then ate what everybody else ate which was raw whale meat and seal and walrus and seabirds (mostly murre). I survived.

John: Besides just survival, I mean, how was it?

Robin: It was a unique experience. I would say Savoonga at the time was a village in transition where you would go into one home and people were watching TV and maybe eating Banquet Fried Chicken that they had shipped in or something. You'd go into another home and people were sitting on a dirt floor eating raw seal meat.

John: Just like in the traditional lifestyle.

Robin: Yeah. Really a place in transition. There was a central village well, but no running water anywhere. No flush toilets - no showers. I went a month and a half without a shower.

The honey bucket - the toilet facilities – were basically just a bucket, and there was no privacy. It was a bit humbling. Overall, it was good for me, coming from a fairly limited environment in terms of diversity and cultures, to be exposed to that, being a minority and seeing what it was like. I got a great appreciation for Eskimo culture just living with 'em for that time.

They're a very giving people. Over the years, when you think about how severe a climate they live in and how they'd survive with no trees and only a couple of months of fall-like weather each year, and then winter, and particularly before European contact (without matches or firearms or sewing machines or anything like that) - very adaptable, but also have to really get along with others. If you're gonna share a sod hut with 6 or so other people for ten months out of the year, you have to be pretty patient and nice.

John: How long were you there?

Robin: I was there 6 weeks and then I went back to the contaminants position and finished up with that. We had to take a break in service. I don't know if you ever worked as a temporary.

John: Was this like one of the WAE type things where you had to furlough a couple of weeks?

Robin: Yes. Well, it wasn't career seasonal. It wasn't a permanent temporary. Yeah, it was temporary, but you could only have like two of those positions in a row and then you had to take off for a couple of weeks.

The in-between job that I got actually was working for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. I moved down to Yakutat and worked for the Sport Fish Division on the Situk River. There's quite a sports fishery there. The Coho run was on - silver salmon. I was monitoring the run and angling effort and success. I would fly and count salmon moving up the Situk River and I would check fishermen's...I had law enforcement authority, but I don't think I wrote but one ticket all summer.

After that, I moved back to Anchorage, after my break in service, and I still was at temporary, but my next position was a GS-7. This was 1980 now.

I worked for the Gas Pipeline office (a limited duration office within Ecological Service). It's kind of funny, but they're still talking about building a gas pipeline now (and we were working on environmental planning for the project nearly 40 years ago). When the Prudhoe Bay Oil Field was developed in the early years, one of the provisions was they had to inject the gas back into the formation. At the time, developers proposed to flare it off like in the Gulf of Mexico. Ultimately, it worked out well for industry because it increased pressure for enhanced recovery of oil. At the time they just wanted to flare it off, but they weren't able to. With a worldclass supply of natural gas accompanying North Slope oil, there were soon discussions of building a second pipeline.

A big focus in Alaska in those days was to work on pipeline-related things. The pipeline that carried the crude oil 800 miles to the ice-free port of Valdez had to be insulated and kept warm, and if it ever broke and the oil cooled and congealed, then basically it was gonna freeze up and not flow ever again. Well, gas lines have to be chilled to move gas, so you need to build a separate line. What was being discussed at the time was whether they'd use the same route or a different one. another option was moving the gas through Canada, rather than down to Valdez and putting it on tankers like they were doing with the crude oil. My job was working with a team to determine the best route that would cause the least environmental damage.

My coworkers and I came up with a **gilding** system where we basically just put values on critters and figured out habitat quality and what would be the least damaging - obviously wetlands or endangered species habitat were gonna get high marks and that kind of thing. I was working on that through the November election - Jimmy Carter was leaving office and Ronald Reagan was coming in. Before the inauguration, folks were scrambling.

I was one of 'em because he (Reagan) was committed to putting a hiring freeze on federal employment. I was not married yet. I was a happy, GS-7 (one-year appointment) wildlife biologist but I was also on 30 plus registers across the country for various jobs, both state and federal. I knew I had best take the first one I got, in terms of a permanent job offer, and that came from region 4. I was offered a GS-5 biological technician job at Hillside National Wildlife Refuge in Yazoo City, Mississippi.

I bought a one-way ticket from Anchorage to Jackson, Mississippi and flew down there and bought a car and showed up on a Monday morning at the shop at Hillside Refuge and didn't know anybody - didn't know where I was. All of a sudden, I was in country where there were alligators.

John: And people talk funny.

Robin: People talk funny and all of that. I made it clear when I met with the manager..., a man named **George Chandler**, who was a great manager for the Service. He just had come over working from the state. When he was at Hillside, it was his first federal job - a great guy....

John: Worked for the state of Mississippi.

Robin: Yeah. I told **George** when I got there, I said, I left my stuff in Alaska. I still was doing my banking in Alaska. I intend to move back to Alaska as soon as I can. Since the government didn't move me down here (to Mississippi), as soon as the job shows up - I could be here a month, I could be here a year, I could be here ten years. I'll do you a good job, but my heart is in Alaska, and so is my backpack and my rifle and everything else. He said fine, fine, but maybe he didn't realize that 6 months later I would move back to Alaska.

I enjoyed the work there at Hillside and it was part of a refuge complex: Mathews Brake, Morgan Brake, Panther Swamp, and Hillside were all managed together then. Now I think they're part of Yazoo or Theodore Roosevelt National Wildlife Refuge Complex. I enjoyed my time at Hillside. It was good exposure to different management challenges and strategies.

I applied for a job at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge as a wildlife biologist which I did not get. Shortly thereafter I applied for a GS-7/9/11 contaminants biologist in Fairbanks for Ecological Services for the Northern Alaska Ecological Services office, which I did get.

It was almost certainly because of **Howard Metsker**, who I'd worked for as a seasonal employee previously. **Howard** was in Anchorage; however, I was to be in Fairbanks, - a 7-hour drive away. I reported in May 1981 to the federal building, to start working with other Ecological Services folks.

There was still a Gas Pipeline office, and they had employees there too, as well as three Refuge offices: Arctic and Yukon Flats and Kanuti. We had quite a Fish and Wildlife contingent in Fairbanks. There was also a Migratory Bird and Law Enforcement office located separately. We stayed in Fairbanks eight years.

I say, "we" because I got married right after I left Mississippi and came to Fairbanks and I married my wife, **Shannon**. We'd met at Oregon State. We had dated on and off over the years. She actually worked for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. Her dad, **Allan Kelly**, was a commissioner for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife for ten years, and then helped

found the Oregon Wildlife Heritage Foundation. Shannon and I had a strong connection with wildlife conservation and would form much of our life around that shared connection.

I flew down from Fairbanks and got married in Portland. We put Shannon's Subaru on the Alaska State Ferry in Seattle and finished driving to Fairbanks from Haines in December 1981. We survived blizzards and forty below temperatures on the drive but made it in good order and settled into a small cabin about 15 miles out of town.

I give a lot of credit to her, leaving her family and her job and moving to Alaska. That's where we started our life together, but we had quite a community in Fairbanks in those days with Fish and Wildlife folks being like family. It was a busy, busy summer season. We worked pretty much non-stop then; our field season was essentially Memorial Day to Labor Day. I was gone a lot.

As the contaminant's biologist, I know I was the first contaminants biologist hired in Alaska. I was working on placer mining, hard-rock mining, military contaminant issues, agriculture and oil and gas primarily. I guess, I did that for three years and my supervisor later in the game was **Jerry Stroebele**. We had a review from the Washington office, and they said, hey, your boss is 300 plus miles away and you've got an Ecological Services supervisor one door down. Why don't you report to him? **Jerry Stroebele** was just a great supervisor - a Vietnam vet who really took care of his people.

I know it came out of the blue somewhere at his retirement, I said, "Here's a man, I would risk my life for." Why? Because I knew he would do the same for me and that's what I would say about **Jerry**. He just was such a giving person. He certainly would risk his life to save anybody. And it was risky work in those days too.

John: As the first contaminants biologist up there, you talked about the different mining and oil and gas things. Were you doing work widespread over the state or were you concentrated more up in the Fairbanks and that general area?

Robin: It was northern Alaska, so basically everything north of the Alaska range. I did some early work on routing for a road for the Red Dog mine out in northwest Alaska. Most of the work was oil and gas related. Prudhoe Bay and the Kuparuk field adjacent Prudhoe Bay were coming on in those days and that was where we did a lot of work, most of the which was advisory. EPA did not have much of a presence in the state. The Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation (ADEC), the state agency, was fledgling, really, and was just kind of finding its way.

The truth of the matter is too that oil and gas pays the way in Alaska. All of the state coffers are filled by oil royalties. They didn't always look at maybe as hard as some of the issues as they should have. The other part of it is I think both maybe the culture and knowledge base were just coming of age. I'd say that in terms of contaminants because when you look at the history of

what was regulated, things like drill muds, mercury, hexavalent chromium - some of those things, they really weren't considered all that bad until a certain point in time that happened about then. PCBs, another example were not regulated until the '80s. They just didn't know they were a problem. They didn't know.

One of the things I guess I'm most proud of in working in that job is related to a program going on in the oil fields at Prudhoe Bay. We had BP and SOHIO as the two companies that worked in the field then. Their drill muds and cuttings were being pumped out onto the tundra.

What happened is they had reserve pits on gravel pads where the drilling was going on and they'd often lubricate the drills with diesel and various recipes of drill muds that included a lot of heavy metals. When they gurgled back up, they were held in the reserve pits. In the winter, because this is the Arctic, they'd plow the roads and pads, pushing some of the snow into the reserve pits. In the spring, when it thawed, the pits would, and the overflow included lots of contaminants.

They actually had permits from the State of Alaska to pump the pits and put the effluent on the roads, in the guise of dust control, but a lot of times when I was out there, it'd be raining, and they'd be out there pumping the stuff on the road anyway. They had to put it somewhere.

The particular study that I did was looking at the effects of the contamination on macro-invertebrates - looking at reserve pits, looking at adjacent wetlands and ponds, and distant wetlands and ponds, as well as controls (out of the oil field - north of the Kuparuk area). The results demonstrated a super strong direct correlation between the level of contaminants and the abundance and diversity of invertebrates.

Of course, the invertebrates were the primary food source for migratory birds, whether it was chironomids used by nesting shorebirds or other species utilized by waterfowl migrating through the area. We published the information through the Fish and Wildlife Service's publications program at the time. The industry challenged it only briefly and then totally backed off and changed their whole way of doing business.

They started grinding and injecting the drill muds and cuttings back into the formation. It costs them millions of dollars a year but was a significant step in positive change for conservation on the North Slope.

From there, I went to work for the Fisheries program, also in Fairbanks. I worked in contaminants three years: '81, '82, '83 and then in Fisheries '84, '85, and '86.

There was a program then that was mandated by Congress to evaluate natural resources on the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the 1002 Area. This was a provision of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) and was a precursor for Congress to decide the future of the area related to potential oil and gas development.

Just to step back a little bit 'cuz this was such a big issue in Alaska, was and still is, is that late in the Carter Administration, the Lands Act added tens of millions of acres to the Refuge system. Alaska became a region on its own soon after. **Keith Schreiner** was first regional director - came up out of the DC office. It was kind of a new day for Alaska. A lot of the change was based on ANILCA, which became law in December 1980. It was kind of the end of a three-part Alaska Lands Plan if you will.

After the U.S. acquired Alaska back in the 1800s from Russia, it was a territory until statehood in 1959. Phase 1 saw 100 million plus acres go to the new state. Then in the early '70s, phase 2, about the same amount, 103 million acres, if I remember right, went to Native interests. That was part of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA).

The impetus for that (ANCSA) was at least in part to land status so the (trans Alaska oil) pipeline could be built. They had to build it from Prudhoe Bay to Valdez 800 miles across the state. There were a lot of native claims issues that were not adjudicated and ANCSA largely settled that. Well, phase 3 looked at what's left in the federal domain in Alaska that had special significance and resulted in new and expanded national parks, national wildlife refuges, wilderness areas, wild and scenic rivers, and other special management designations.

ANILCA significantly increased the size of the refuge system, now 77 million acres of refuges just in Alaska. When making decisions, the coastal plain section of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, they couldn't really agree - "they" being Congress and the Administration - whether it would be preserved as wilderness, whether it would just be pure refuge, or other, because it obviously had potential for oil and gas. So, they made a study area.

John: So that's the 1002.

Robin: The 1002 area, yeah. It was designated a study area and mandated that we would look at everything in there, "we" being the Fish Wildlife Service.

I was doing the fisheries work in the 1002 area in those years and spent a lot of time out helicoptering into remote areas and seining and sampling - seeing what kind of fish were there. One of the big issues for us was water and fish wintering areas. In the Arctic, most of the streams freeze all the way to the bottom. There are a few spring areas that actually will overwinter fish.

John: And are Refuges for fish basically?

Robin: Yeah. Finding those was important. A part of the oil and gas development equation is building ice roads. Because of the permafrost, you need to do most of the work in the winter when things are frozen, going out doing your exploration, drilling and so forth. You need water to do that. You can't use salt water because if you pump that in when it melts, it kills the vegetation. They're looking for those spring areas and that's where the fish are.

We did a lot of early telemetry work on primarily char and grayling to try and find where they'd move. We found some neat things. One of the papers that we published was on Movements of Arctic Grayling. It was really kind of a two-part study because nobody had really done any surgical implants of a small enough transmitter in a fish to get that kind of result. We were trying multiple transmitters, Telonics and AVM and Wildlife Materials to see what would work for battery size and longevity and that kind of thing.

John: And transmitters were not near as miniaturized in those days.

Robin: No. No, they were still pretty chunky for a fish that's 400 mm long. I would say the transmitters then were perfected for use as esophageal implants, but not surgical implants. They were effective but large – used in fish that weren't feeding, like salmon that were going to spawn and then die. You would stick 'em down through the mouth and set 'em in the gut. They weren't feeding so no problem, but you couldn't do that with non-anadromous fish.

John: What would happen with those transmitters later on, I mean, at some point they've got a. Or are they done feeding?

Robin: Well, in terms of salmon and so forth they spawn and die. We tracked 'em to spawning areas and they were done. The project with grayling, however, required smaller transmitters and something that wouldn't interfere with their feeding.

John: So that worked out fine. Different story.

Robin: Yeah, exactly.

We were tracking grayling that we had surgically implanted with transmitters in the first winter trying to see where they would go in the Arctic Refuge. The pilot of the plane was my boss at the time, **Mike Smith**. He was the supervisor then for the Fisheries office in Fairbanks. He resigned a couple of years later and went on to be a veterinarian in Montana to follow his dream.

It's also kind of interesting at the time as everybody had planes in Alaska. Fisheries had planes, Ecological Services had planes, Law Enforcement had planes, Refuges had planes, Migratory Birds, everybody.

We're tracking fish and we're not finding anything. The receiver is silent as we're flying over this river system. We don't know whether the batteries are dead, the fish all died from our bad surgery 'cuz we were anesthetizing and sewing 'em up. We really weren't all that experienced. We thought maybe they died and floated out into the Beaufort Sea. We're about to give up and I said how much fuel do we have? **Mike** said, oh, we gotta lot of fuel. I said, well, let's go over and check the Hulahula River where we knew there were some spring areas.

Sure enough, we'd gone over and flown up there and we started getting hits on our receiver. We found out what type of transmitter worked; we also found out the Arctic Grayling left their natal streams, where they were raised and grew up, and moved into different ones to feed, and move back and forth through saltwater. These are freshwater fish but would move through the estuaries and go back into overwintering areas to survive.

The winters were long. The fish wintering areas had so much ice over them, 6 to 8 ft sometimes, when you'd put an oxygen meter down there, it wouldn't even detect any oxygen. The grayling were all but dormant down there - amazingly adapted to the Arctic.

We mapped fish wintering areas. We also looked at potential port sites and did some baseline studies on contaminants and histopathological studies on fish. We published some of that information. That was quite an adventure working in the Arctic on fish for a few years.

From there, I had kind of an instinct to move to Refuges. Right next door in the federal building was the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge. **Jim Clark** had just left the position as assistant manager, so the position was vacant.

It was an 8.63-million-acre refuge, the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge - great canvasback area - great waterfowl producing area overall. While Assistant Manager, I went to the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center (FLETC) in Georgia and was an honor graduate of class 9PT 802, getting my law enforcement credentials in 1988.

I worked on quite a few projects at "The Flats". One I remember most was when Exxon wanted to do some exploration on village lands. They wanted to cross the refuge with cat trains to do it. They were also interested in exploring some refuge lands where the native villages had subsurface rights. It was kind of an unexplored opportunity if you will on how to manage that.

They wanted to go in with cat trains – large dozers pulling huge sleds of exploration equipment and temporary housing – that would destroy vegetation and leave seismic trails all across the refuge. We felt we had to give 'em a permit to explore in some way, but we negotiated areas of concern and ended up permitting the Poulter technique, which was "air-shot" process. They would put 5-pound charges on stakes above ground, rather than burying seismic charges. When they were done, there was nothing left out there. No scars – no trails. It was kind of a nice achievement, and a new standard to consider.

John: They were detecting seismic waves?

Robin: Yeah. The Poulter technique was not as good as burying the charges they tell me, but it was acceptable.

John: Less invasive.

Robin: Very. Yeah. It was very environmentally friendly.

John: Were you in manager series?

Robin: I was the assistant manager. I was the one who was doing the permits and doing the compatibility review and all that. I felt good about accomplishing that while I was there.

John: This terrain that they wanted to explore is a tundra, what kind of timber?

Robin: Kind of a muskeg/black spruce. There were a lot of birch forests along the river system too. The Yukon Flats is basically on both sides of the Yukon River where it meanders through central Alaska and has lots and lots of lakes and ponds. There are also seven villages in that nearly 9 million acres.

John: That's to me, one of the many unique things about Alaska and it reminds me of time I spent on exchanges in China where they've got villages in major reserves. Alaska is the only place where we have villages on National Wildlife Refuges and possibly Parks and BLM land as well. I'm not sure, but I know about Refuges. I'm not so sure about those other places, but unique to the system.

Robin: Yeah - unique in the challenges and working with different people and cultures - very interesting and challenging at times. That's true.

John: What kind of people lived in these villages on the Yukon Flats?

Robin: The Yukon Flats people are Athabaskan people. If you look at the history, the dialect spoken is very similar to Apache. I don't know the connection of how people migrated and all that.

John: I think virtually as far as people know all Native Americans came across the Bering Land Bridge.

Robin: Some kept going.

John: Some kept going quite aways.

Robin: Yeah, yeah, indeed. At this point in our life, we'd been in Fairbanks, my wife and I, 8 years. We lived in a cabin without running water. We had a dog team and I'd haul water every day from somewhere because we had to water the dogs. It was an interesting life. We were young.

John: You didn't have your own well or anything and you had to get it somewhere else?

Robin: Yeah, we'd haul water. We burned mostly coal. It'd cost me about \$50 for a year's supply of coal from the Healy Coal Mine. It burned relatively clean. I had to remove ash every day and that kind of thing. Our lifestyle was interesting.

I trapped and made a little money in the winter with my friend **Mike Smith**. He also had his own plane, a Cessna 170B with wood skis. We'd fly about an hour out of Fairbanks and spend our weekends in the winter in a tiny cabin. We trapped mostly marten. I would average about six of 'em a week, and they were worth about \$40-45 apiece - made a little money and got me out and about. I was in my 20s. I don't know, you feel like you're bulletproof at that age.

One time I fell through the ice, and it was 40 degrees below 0. Just got up and rolled in the snow and was totally stiff but survived that. Another time, **Mike** and I were flying back on Super Bowl Sunday from our little cabin out in the Kantishna area near Mount McKinley. It was 42 below that day I remember. We super-cooled the engine coming down into Chena Marina. The main airport runway was closed. The ski strip was closed due to ice fog. We were on a smaller strip and came down steep and the engine quit -landed with dead stick in ice fog and 42 below 0. We survived it. Lots of adventures.

We were pregnant with our first child and were ready for a change. The manager position at Izembek National Wildlife Refuge came open out in Cold Bay. I applied for that and got it. We moved out there in the fall of 1988.

Cold Bay was a community of about 60 to 80 people then. Its main physical feature was a huge runway – large enough to be an alternate for the space shuttle. It was built during World War II to support Aleutian campaign aircraft at Fort Randall, which was located there then. It's located where it is only about ten miles across the end of the Alaska Peninsula, where the Aleutian Islands start, from the Pacific side to the Bering Seaside. That's where Cold Bay is. The weather is changing constantly. There are no trees. It's windy. The average wind speed is 30 some knots. I think we had 8 to 11 clear days a year out there, but it's an amazing place for wildlife.

You look around here at NCTC, you can see some of the memorabilia from **Bob "Sea Otter" Jones**. The wooden sea dory was used by **Bob Jones**. He actually was my supervisor when I was in Savoonga. He had moved into Anchorage to the area office, then the regional office from Cold Bay. He had been out there 20 some years. Then when we had this emergency marine mammal monitoring effort, he was the supervisor of those field camps and was quite the gentleman on the radio. An interesting guy.

He was the first manager; **John Sarvis** was his deputy for a while. **John** was then the manager (and was out there 16 years. I was the third manager at Izembek and there's been a number of 'em since. We had our first child there and then we had two more children while we were there. We had three children in three years: Alexandra, Remington, and Hannah.

John: Is there a hospital there?

Robin: There was not. That's primarily the reason we left. It's 650 miles from there to Anchorage and no roads that go anywhere. When we first moved there, there was a physician's assistant, but he left. We were really without medical. It's so stormy that frequently you couldn't even get out on a plane. I remember one time there was eight days in a row where you could not get a plane out of Cold Bay even with the long airstrip out.

The weather is such where the snow blows sideways and drifts. I can tell you stories about helping each other get into their house - where one person would clear the edges of snow so the other could close their door, because if one person tried to do it, they couldn't do it quickly enough to get the door closed. One time I spent nearly two hours digging my car out from inside the garage, just from snow drifting under the little crack in the garage and piling up all the way to the driver's window – while parked in the closed garage.

The weather was very difficult, windy, windy, windy, dark, dreary but amazing wildlife: caribou migrated through there, brown bears looking through the windows, pushing their noses up against the glass while looking in, waterfowl, salmon, emperor geese, black brant - amazing place! One of the things I got to do while I was working there was go to Wrangel Island and Russia off the coast of Siberia. I spent a month there in 1990.

We were putting transmitters on Brant on the Wrangel Island colony and then tracking them to Baja to their wintering areas. Brant, as you know are amazing birds. They primarily nest on the Yukon Delta but also on North Slope of Alaska, a little in Canada, a little in Russia. Then they all come and winter and fatten up on eelgrass at Izembek before they migrate down the coast. A few spend the winter there now and a few end up in Oregon, California, or Washington, but most of 'em go down to Mexico, to Baja, and they do it all in one big run. They'll lose up to a third of their body weight. If they don't have enough fat reserves, they just fall out of the air. The eelgrass beds at Izembek are really, really important for migratory birds, especially Brant.

John: When I flew the winter surveys on the estuaries on the Oregon coast, I had Brant and they were using eelgrass like at Coos Bay and there wasn't a lot of it, but that's what they were using during migration some. There would be a few there all winter. I'd see just a few dozen or something like that, but they were hanging out. Neat birds.

Robin: I saw one in Hawaii once, so they do wander.

John: Storms catch up with some of 'em too.

Robin: Yeah. One of my favorite birds - I like Brant a lot. I like to hear their chuckling.

Other things we did in Cold Bay, it was during the Exxon Valdez oil spill when we were stationed there. We got quite involved with doing monitoring. Anytime a whale, for example,

usually a gray whale would wash up somewhere, the Coast Guard would come and pick us up and we'd go sample it to see if there was hydrocarbon contamination or anything.

John: You didn't get much direct contamination from the spill?

Robin: We monitored the local beaches and found a number of tar balls, but I don't think any of 'em fingerprinted back to that (Exxon Valdez oil). I don't think we were hit at all that far out (Cold Bay) from that spill.

John: Some of the resources, some of the whales and so on may have come through contaminated areas to get up there.

Robin: Yeah, definitely. I mean Prince William Sound itself was hit hard, areas of Kodiak, a little bit of Cook Inlet; the Kenai Peninsula got some damage. Some of the species impacted, sea otters locally, Harlequin ducks, things that were a little more regional. There were some severe impacts without straying too much though. I mean, it was a devastating wakeup call for folks but in the long run of it, we not only got much better regulations with double hull standards and other things, but we also had a fund set up, a trustee's group that bought tons of wildlife habitat and paid for lots of research. I'm not arguing for another oil spill, but there was a lot of good ultimately that came out of it. Later on, in my career at Kenai, we benefited from some significant habitat acquisition from that fund and used it well.

John: In earlier years when things, obviously there wasn't as huge of an issue as that, but we didn't get anything out of some of the containment issues. Small, say a shipwreck that released a lot of fuel oil or whatever like something happened on the Oregon coast, we just weren't getting settlements in earlier days.

Robin: They did later. I think the New Carissa and some of those we benefited from when I worked down there later. Yeah, it's definitely an evolution of thought and practice but Cold Bay was a great adventure for us - worked there 3 years.

I got pretty involved in doing waterfowl surveys there, helping the biologists and migratory bird staff and so forth.

The migratory bird coordinator job in Anchorage came open at the regional office. I applied for that and moved there in 1990 and did that for 5 years. That's where we worked together, on the Regulations Committee and Flyway Study Committee and lots of things. I mean, Alaska is a nursery if you will for lots of bird species moving to all four flyways. You get to be involved with a lot of other states and interests in looking at research and management plans and so forth.

The primary thing I worked on, and you probably remember for those 5 years, was on treaty amendments. The Migratory Bird Treaty Act in 1916 and the Treaty came in 18.... Am I getting it right?

John: I think the Treaty was in '16 and the Act was implemented was in '18.

Robin: That's right. You have to have the treaty before you can implement it!

The 1916 convention was signed by Great Britain, on behalf of Canada - It really was a Treaty with the United States and Canada. New treaties and amendments came later with Russia, Japan, and Mexico but a primary concern arose with the treaty with Canada as there was no provision for spring hunting, yet it had been going on for thousands of years in Alaska and in Canada, by the indigenous people, and pretty much had been ignored on and off and the Service largely looked the other way.

There had been a couple of big issues where there were enforcement actions. There was something in the '60s early in after statehood where Alaska folks - Fish and Wildlife troopers had made some arrests over people shooting eiders in the spring, Inupiat people at Barrow. They had the famous "Duck-In", where a lot of villagers reacted by also publicly showing up with ducks taken out of season. It was a big issue, but really nothing was done with it until there were conservation concerns.

Four species of Arctic geese that were shared with the Pacific Flyway were "tanking". Of course, the Emperor Goose didn't really migrate down the flyway, but the Brant and Pacific White-Fronts and then the Cackling - small Canada goose - did. All four species were all hunted on the Yukon Delta in the spring for subsistence. Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge is about 20 million acres and has about 50 villages within its boundaries and people living there have hunted birds in the spring as they would say, "since time immemorial".

When those populations were declining, people got concerned, at both ends of the flyway and eventually most said, hey, we need to recognize this take and manage it.

We worked with a variety of folks on potential solutions while at the same time employing conservation measures to protect the populations of concern. I worked for Dr. **John R. Rogers**. There was **John G. Rogers** also in FWS leadership then, but **John R. Rogers** came out of Migratory Birds in Washington and was the assistant regional director in Alaska for Refuges and Migratory Birds at the time (both activities were managed in the same program until a few years later). I worked directly for Dr. Rogers and spent an awful lot of time working with the flyways, the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies headquartered in DC, the Canadian Embassy and State Department, as well as State of Alaska and Native leadership.

There were times I would fly from Anchorage to DC 2 or 3 times a month and was gone an awful lot. We worked with the Washington office, Migratory Birds. **Paul Schmidt** became the chief and had previously worked for Dr. Rogers in Alaska so was well versed on the challenges and was influential in moving forward after years of nothing much being accomplished. **Keith Morehouse** was the staff person in Headquarters that worked with me. We developed a protocol

to amend the treaty with Canada that would allow and regulate spring subsistence hunting of migratory birds that eventually was ratified. Honestly, it could have failed just because of the cultural inertia against it.

A number of organizations and political interest simply didn't like the thought of spring hunting. From a standpoint of conservation, shooting 1 hen mallard in the spring is like taking ten in the fall - reproduction-wise, at least that is what they espoused.

John: Give me a year again about this time.

Robin: I worked on this basically 1990 to 1995.

John: Okay. The reason I asked is that was after I moved to Denver, when I was in Oregon and started going to Pacific Flyway meetings, we had native Alaskans come down to meetings and there was quite a bit of as you know better than I do even a lot of give and take and angst between the states that were managing hunting of these same birds and the natives who were doing subsistence.

Robin: Yeah. I think that was really important. There was a lot of education. Early on, like the California Waterfowl Association was a really big player. Of course, the California hunters were the primary users of the Pacific White-Fronts and Cackling Canada Goose resource. They benefited from it. They were taking a lot. They were taking a lot on the south end. The Yupik people were taking a lot on the north end. It took a while for people to see other viewpoints and some of that was facilitated by site visits, north and south... You're right there were exchanges.

Initially in those days, and this goes back to the '80s where it's like, why don't we just send chicken up north - if they just need meat in the spring. Well, they didn't understand that this was a cultural thing. You hunt at certain times of the year; you fish certain times of the year. You're not doing anything else. You're not going to work at the mill or make pizza. This is your life. It's as much a spiritual thing as a nutritional thing. You kind of have to see it to get that.

John: The folks from the south actually went up and visited the villages and vice versa.

Robin: An earlier attempt at a partial solution, before I started working on a protocol to amend the treaty, was called the Hooper Bay Agreement. It was named after one of the villages on the Yukon Delta, Hooper Bay. Well, it was struck down in court. The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals found it illegal as it allowed the take in the spring of certain species and not others. The authors were trying to conserve rare species but saying go ahead and take these others. Basically, the Courts told us you can't do that. The Migratory Bird Treaty Act says that the season is closed in the spring, and you have to honor it. However, they allowed that the Service could use discretionary law enforcement policies if desired. In essence, it can't be deemed legal, but you don't have to enforce all violations if you have higher priorities. That's kind of the way Service policies formed until the treaty and its implementation were amended - we identified high

priorities to include conserving endangered birds and rare birds that were struggling. We said that we were not gonna spend a lot of time looking at people that were shooting mallards and abundant birds.

The next plan that was developed then with the Native community was the Yukon Kuskokwim Goose Management Plan. It started with the 4 species of geese and then Spectacled and Steller's eiders were added to it later as they were listed under the Endangered Species Act in the '90s.

We were working in the villages with the Waterfowl Conservation Committee and the Association of Village Council President's - primarily meeting in Bethel - and working towards legalizing the take, and regulating it, once legal. With reasonable regulations, we hoped we could accurately monitor harvest too, where people would hopefully report their harvest rather than run and hide from visiting staff – more co-management and working together. That was the goal.

The goal also was to recognize the harvest that had been going on, not to increase it. We're not trying to create some new opportunity; we were trying to understand and manage and work with folks, and if certain critters were in trouble, to have 'em lay off of 'em, and that kind of thing. That was the goal.

I think I'd mentioned, I wasn't sure we would get the amendments done as some people were taking pot shots from the sides politically, until it was made pretty clear with Canada that there was a potential they would abrogate the treaty.

They were working with us as partners trying to get the amendments, but their indigenous people, the First Nations in Canada, actually have a constitutional right to hunt. We, in the U.S., have freedom of speech and freedom of religion and that kind of thing, but hunting is still a privilege and can be managed and regulated. In Canada, it can't be taken away under the Constitution (for Native peoples). They're basically saying, United States, either you work with us and get this figured out or we're gonna have to start over.

When that message got out kind of behind the scenes, the opposition started looking at the relatively recent Pacific Salmon Treaty where a 50/50 share started negotiations for allocation of shared resources. Waterfowl hunting and harvest traditionally have mostly occurred in the lower 48 states, just because of migration timing and that kind of thing. The idea that Canada would somehow control 50% of the harvestable surplus, whether that ever would have happened or not, it got some of these outside groups and interests that were fighting the amendments to back off.

We finished the work. The protocol was ratified by the Senate. Although at that point in time, I moved on in my career, implementation of the migratory bird subsistence hunting program just moved forward from there and became institutionalized.

In 1995, I applied for a couple of jobs. We were in the PARD/GARD phase of the Fish and Wildlife Service management organization experiment, and just for explanation of history, that

was an attempt to make geographical regions have one administrator regardless of the program. They would have direct supervision of all programs within their geographic area. If you had a fish hatchery and a refuge and an ES field station nearby, they all reported to one supervisor, without programmatic identity. The goal was to do more sharing and that kind of thing.

We also had programmatic managers who were looking at policy and budgets in the regional office specifically for hatcheries or ES or Refuges and so forth. In '95, when we were in the PARD/GARD organization, there were two positions I applied for, one of 'em was the Deputy Assistant Regional Director for Refuges and Wildlife working for **Glenn Ellison**. He was the ARD then in Anchorage. The other was the Refuge manager for Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, formerly the Kenai Moose Range south of Anchorage. I applied for both, and I was selected for both.

John: That probably hasn't happened very often.

Robin: No usually you don't get what you want, but I got both of them. Then **Glenn** called me in. He was my boss when migratory bird coordinator, after Dr. Rogers retired, and he goes, well, what job would you like? I said, well, I applied for both of 'em, so I'm interested in both of 'em and I'd do either one of 'em and do them happily, but if push comes to shove, and I get a choice, I'd rather go to Kenai. He goes, well, I'd kind of like you to be my assistant. I said, well, great. *(Laughter)*.

Then a couple of weeks later, the regional director, **Dave Allen**, at the time, calls me into his office and said, well, I understand you've been selected for two positions. I said, yeah and he goes, well, which one would you like? I said, well, I'd take either one as I applied for both of 'em, but if push comes to shove, I'd prefer to go to Kenai. He said, well, then you're going to Kenai. There you go.

In 1995, fairly late in the year, I moved down to Kenai to 2 million acres and about 1.3 million acres of wilderness area, but a lot of the rest of it developed with roads and campgrounds, including two oil and gas fields. In fact, the very development that was the impetus to statehood for Alaska was the Swanson River Field that was discovered in 1957. It was still producing oil and gas on the refuge. The Beaver Creek Field operational since 1967, was also still producing oil and gas. On one hand, I was managing wilderness. On the other hand, I was managing industry and everything in between.

We had over 100 guides and outfitters that were being permitted to making a living, primarily as fishing guides, over a million visitors each year, and a huge fire program. At our peak, we had 130 to 140 employees with seasonals and all of that. It was a big program and very challenging.

The first few years was just a steep learning curve. I think the very first thing I dealt with when I got there, was it was starting to snow and there's always a roving date when the refuge opens to snow machine use, based on snowfall. It was later than usual, but there hadn't been any snow.

I got a few calls and then I start getting the media calling and then I start getting threats from congressional folks and all that. It was kind of a wakeup call. It wasn't that way at Yukon Flats. It wasn't that way at Izembek. Kenai was that way nearly every day. There was always something that was in the news, or you were being challenged. I had a great staff and people really would buffer me there. I was there 14 years and was on tons of...

John: Was that the longest of any job that you had?

Robin: Yes, it was the longest. That's where we raised our three kids. I have two daughters and a son. They went to school and graduated in Soldotna. We had a nice home. **Shannon** went back to school and got a teaching degree and was teaching middle school and very involved in the community. I was on three Chamber of Commerce's and the College Council and the Kenai Convention and Visitors Bureau and Advisory Group to the Governor on Kenai River issues and very, very busy and engaged in the community.

Over time it really paid off. I think we were really accepted. There's a lot of anti-federal sediment in Alaska and the Kenai is certainly no exception to that. People just kind of don't like that the federal government owns 60% of the state. People in Washington are deciding how we manage our resources and that kind of thing. That was one of my real goals while I was at Kenai - to get more involved with the community. I did both personally and then with our staff too.

We had a lot of open houses. We did a weekly column for the newspaper. We participated in the local parades. By being involved in the community, it's a little harder for the mayor to call you a dirty rat when you're having lunch with 'em once a week at chamber meetings.

It paid off for us in that regard, but lots of challenges and experiences there. I think I'll share maybe one or two.

The first thing I'll say is because I had such a good staff and I was there long enough, I was able to also do a lot of other things and travel. I spent a lot of time back here at NCTC helping teach classes. I taught a partnerships section for Impact Training. You remember the Impact Training? I taught time management for managers too, but the main thing I worked on was Refuge compatibility, and I'm probably proudest of that.

When the Refuge Improvement Act passed, which basically was the Refuge Systems Organic Act, it amended the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966. It did a variety of things for the National Wildlife Refuge System, including defining what compatibility is, - basically what you can and can't do on a national wildlife refuge. I felt there wasn't really anything more important for Refuges to figure out than that, so I volunteered early to help implement the compatibility components of the law.

In the old days, prior to the Improvement Act, compatibility was whatever the refuge manager said it was. Of course, their decision could be overturned by anybody in the political chain too.

We even had one example where the Assistant Secretary of Interior had made the decision for a hydroelectric dam at Kodiak Refuge. It was very political. We also “we” being the refuge system, took mitigation to reach compatibility to some that could be bought. In one instance the Service allowed a powerline to be constructed across KOFA National Wildlife Refuge in Arizona in exchange for some paid bighorn sheep surveys. These were political decisions.

The Improvement Act allowed for wildlife first decisions, and empowered refuge managers, but also gave the Service two years to develop compatibility regulations and policy as a congressional mandate. I went back to D.C. frequently and spent a lot of time with other compatibility team members, facilitated by **Ken Edwards** as the headquarters staff person helping move a mountain of paperwork forward for crafting policy, regulations, and eventually, training for managers.

We delivered the training to all the regions and then taught the refuge compatibility course back here at NCTC for years to follow.

I was also able, as we were writing the regulations, to deal with some specific issues directly affecting Alaska. “22 (g)” is a section of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act that had unresolved compatibility issues. Back in the early ‘70s when people were trying to settle the land claims, there were a variety of federal lands within the state and they're trying to decide what the Native interests could select from. After a lot of debate and back and forth, national park lands were taken off the table and military lands were also removed, but BLM and Forest Service lands were left available for selection, and Fish and Wildlife Service refuge lands remained available also but would be subject to ANCSA Section 22 (g) covenants that basically said for the 6 existing (pre-statehood/pre-ANILCA refuges) if you take from them, the lands have to be managed like the refuges. Approximately one million acres were conveyed under ANCSA subject to Section 22 (g).

John: Basically, they can become native lands, but they still have to be managed?

Robin: Their uses had to be compatible with the refuge without ever defining what that meant. The few times that it really came up as an issue, our solicitors would tell us, well, there are no regulations. This is what the law says, but there's no regulations. We don't know how to interpret it. Basically, anything goes. The Improvement Act was our opportunity, I felt, to define that. We really had to if we wanted any oversight of uses of the lands removed and the congressional mandate regarding compatibility, gave us the opportunity. The long and short of it is, if you look in CFR, there's sections there now that talk about compatibility on 22 (g) lands. A manager still has to approve uses but the compatibility decision only applies to the effects of any spillover impacts to the “mother refuge” if you will. In other words, if a person is working on Native lands that are inholdings in refuges and the impacts of their proposal create effects on the

adjacent refuge that are not compatible, the use can be regulated or denied, but if the impacts are only on the conveyed lands, the use must be permitted. This was a compromise, but it did allow for protection of refuges from timber harvest right on the border, open pit mines that might drain contaminated water into the refuge, and some of the more draconian kinds of things that might happen.

I was able to spend a lot of time on compatibility, but also fire management. We had a very aggressive fire program and about every other year we would have a Type 1 or Type 2 fire, a significant event where you'd have 300 to 600 people working on a fire. Gaining some experience there, I was able to work with the National Fire Program for Refuges and help with training and policy too.

John: When you were there quite a while, were you still chopping up trees with the big equipment and stuff like that or was that all over with?

Robin: No. What you're referring to is the crushers. We had 2 but they were long gone. I think they were made somewhere in Scandinavia. The Kenai National Wildlife Refuge was created right after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. I don't know how FDR had time to sign the order. At the time it was the Kenai National Moose Refuge, and it was for moose. It was a wildlife range. They basically were interested in protecting and managing moose - like killing wolves, in which they were very successful. They were extirpated but were reestablished later. Early managers also tried setting back succession (with the mechanical crushers) ...

John: That's part of what the crushers were about.

Robin: Knocking trees down and creating forage for moose. That effort transitioned more to prescribed fire.

John: Okay, that's what I thought 'cuz I remember reading about and seeing pictures of those crushers and what things look like after they went through an area; it's really interesting.

One of my questions, this is a part of that is and you've covered this, it started out specifically as the Kenai Moose Range. By the time you were there, I think the mission was really, it's a National Wildlife Refuge now, mission was much more diverse and management, I assume, was much more diverse as well. Of course, I know about having dealt with trumpeter swans my whole career, that's an important trumpeter breeding area, but just a huge, most people don't have any clue about the size of these Alaskan refuges, but a huge area, but a wonderful diverse...

Robin: Very much so. The term diverse I think is appropriate, **John** because yeah, the previous purpose -on which you determine compatibility- was based on what was good or not good for moose. Then in 1980, with ANILCA, Kenai boundaries changed a little, and it changed its purposes. Like all the Alaska refuges, the ANILCA purposes include managing and conserving all of fish and wildlife in its natural diversity. Everything is equal, whether it's a red-backed vole

or a snowshoe hare or a moose, you're supposed to preserve it all in its natural diversity. Frankly that makes sense on a national wildlife refuge, particularly in Alaska, where you are managing whole ecosystems.

It's been very hard for the state of Alaska to recognize that change. **Andy Loranger**, you may know was in DC and he replaced me at Kenai and he's still there. This 9 years later and he's had some real difficulties with the state of Alaska on management. Without going into any detail, they've come in and focused on reducing predators because it's all about habitat. The big fires we had on the Kenai in '47 and 1969, those areas, tens and tens of thousands of acres have all grown up to where they're not providing much moose forage anymore.

The spruce forests may need 60-80 years minimum before there's enough fuel built up where they can have another fire hot enough and large enough to result in stand replacement and significant early successional growth of hardwoods (moose food). You've got this time-period where there's fewer moose. You still have wolves eating moose, but there's not moose to hunt very many by subsistence hunters or recreational hunters. The state has a program, by law, for intensive management for moose, caribou, and deer, that if their population numbers in certain game management units fall below set levels, they have to do intensive management, which generally means predator control. It can mean habitat improvement but that is rarely employed by the state. They've gone in and opened seasons on brown bear, for example, who are predators on moose calves, no doubt about it. They've changed the rules to where when I was there you would only shoot maybe 3 to 6 brown bear sows a year and season would close, and you could shoot 1 bear every 4 years per person, if the season was open. You couldn't hunt same day airborne. You couldn't shoot cubs, you couldn't shoot sows with cubs, you couldn't shoot over bait, you couldn't sell the parts. All those rules were taken off the table and they opened the season for a long period of time. Then they shot an estimated I think, I'm gonna guess it's like 16% of the population, in the first year. I just say that because if we're managing for natural diversity, and have necessary restrictions in place, we only hunt harvestable surplus – and we don't reduce the population of one species to benefit another so that we may increase the harvestable surplus. There were some real dilemmas with our management needs legally with the state - different legal mandates - not just philosophy, but we overall we got along fine. I'm not sure about how things are now, but things usually work out okay over time.

We had a great biological staff and I hired **John Morton**.

John: I know **John Morton**.

Robin: Dr. Morton was an adjunct professor with connections in Colorado and Alaska and brought in some great students. We found new species on the refuge, published lots of good information. Did some really great stuff on climate change there that I think is going to be pivotal in helping managers in the future. One of the purposes of Kenai, that's unique for Alaska refuges, was purpose for scientific research. We went out of our way to try and bring in good people to work on that.

John: One of the things and I've talked, **John Morton** is one of the people I've talked to 'cuz he and I have been working together on some trumpeter swan things or at least I've gotten him to come and present history of Kenai Trumpeters and some other things. Not only heard from him, but from other people that climate change issues are much more severe and obvious the farther north you go in Alaska. I know he and other people are very, very concerned about impacts on resources in Alaska. I don't know if you have any insight or comment that you would like to make.

Robin: I think that's true. I mean some of it's graphic, the glaciers receding. The villages that are already on cliffs, where the permafrost is melting and then they're just falling into the ocean. There are subtle things too when you really take a look them. There's lots of examples. We've had about half of the small lakes and shallow ponds on the Kenai dry up in the last 50 years.

John: Is that far enough north that they have permafrost or is that something different there?

Robin: It depends. I mean, there are zones, but it's not like in the Arctic, like the Beaufort Sea when I was working on fisheries. We would be awake at night with the noise of sea ice crushing and grumbling and that kind of thing, moving around. Well, now if you go up there, where I worked in the '80s, you don't even see the ice. You can put binoculars up and peer offshore and you're not going to see ice.

John: Open water.

Robin: It's dramatic. But many more subtle things, and one example from Kenai, with just a couple of degrees difference over years, is the change in bark beetle impacts. Spruce bark beetles have been around for thousands of years. Scientists have found their body parts in 10,000-year-old glacial ice. But just in the last couple of decades, it's warmed just enough that their life cycle has changed - they can become adults in one year rather than two. Before, it wasn't warm enough long enough so that they would have to overwinter as pupae or larvae in a dead tree or log. Then the next year they would complete their life cycle as adults. Well, now they can do it in one year and it's caused an epidemic of sorts and they have killed much of the spruce forests for hundreds and hundreds of thousands of acres. Many younger spruce survive the attack, but the older trees aren't able to create enough sap to curtail the beetles feeding and movement under the bark. The beetles have always been around, but the warming climate has benefitted them to the detriment of the forest. The changes affect our fire management too, and vegetation replacement after fire - what grows back after fires. There are landscape level changes caused by just a couple of degrees change, and unless you know what's going on, you don't know what's going on.

John: We've had some of that in Colorado with again native pine bark beetles and stuff that have been there forever. There were severe winters that knocked 'em way back. Now they're not so

many severe winters and there's a lot more damage to trees than we've experienced for a long time.

Robin: Yeah, I would agree **John**, in terms of what you can see and measure. The tree line is rising on the Kenai too. It's gotta affect alpine habitats for Dall sheep and things like that.

With trumpeter swans, I mean, there's things I don't know whether they're good or bad or just different. When habitats change there can be winners and losers among different species.

John: We don't know yet. They've been moving farther north to nest for quite a few years. I can't remember which refuge it is, but now there's nesting of tundras and trumpeters where there was some separation before, and we really don't know what that means yet. Like you say I mean trumpeters are in general still doing very well and they still haven't repopulated all their historic range and they're probably not at the numbers that they peaked out at one time. In our careers in our lifetime. they're doing fantastically compared to what they....

Robin: It's how you consider place and time. Maybe it's about values too. Obviously, the climate is changing, but we may pay more attention to what we value. Our values change too – perhaps from what we learn along the way. I think back to Ph.D. work that **Rosa Meehan** did in the Prudhoe Bay oil fields. Because of the roads and the dust, they were having earlier thaw, which meant for a lot earlier nesting starts for a whole variety of migratory birds. They were able to fledge in greater numbers and all that. On the surface, when you look at roads, is that a good thing? It's just kind of how you evaluate it, but definitely the changes are occurring. Some of its kind of like watching your kids grow though. If you're not paying attention, you don't notice it, but changes are happening and definitely we're seeing it in Alaska.

So much happened at Kenai. I'll tell you one bear story then I'll get off Kenai. All the years in Alaska, people talk about bears, and I've seen thousands of bears and I've had hundreds of bear encounters. I never had to shoot a bear in defense of life and property until my last year at Kenai when I was old and getting ready to move to Portland.

At Izembek, we would get calls regularly - bears showing up where they shouldn't and getting into trouble. We'd often grab a shotgun and some rubber bullets and go run 'em off. At Kenai, we had plenty of bears too - the population had been growing for quite a while after conservative management, but the State generally dealt with problem bears.

We got a call one August morning. **Doug Staller** was my deputy, and we were the first people in the office. The call was from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and reported that fishing near the Russian River, which was on the refuge, had shot a bear and hadn't killed it.

They were going up there 'cuz it was right in the middle of salmon season, lots of people around and all that, and they would like some backup. **Doug** and I kind of looked at each other's feet. It's like **Doug** goes, well, you've been doing this longer than I have or whatever. I said, okay, I'll go.

I grabbed a 12-gauge shotgun and some hip boots and some bug dope and a bottle of water and got in my truck and drove an hour up to the site. About the time I was arriving, **Larry Lewis**, who was a technician for Alaska Department of Fish and Game, great guy, about to retire right now, was just arriving too.

There's this guy standing in the parking lot kind of still shaking. He relays this story how he was fishing on the Kenai River in a spot right below the Russian River. He was charged by a sow brown bear. He said, he knows there were cubs he couldn't see. She charged him and he shot, but he didn't know how many times he shot. He had a 44-magnum revolver and he thought he'd emptied it. He knew he'd hit her and basically left quickly after firing, dropping his fishing rod, and running back to the parking area, and called on his cell phone to report the incident.

It had been an hour or so then and we walked down there and had him show us the spot. We pick up his fishing rod and walking back out to the parking lot after we'd seen the spot. We got his name and all that and then went back out there and yeah, there was blood on the grass and then some more blood on some trees. There were two different types of blood, red blood, a very bright red, and dark blood. I knew the bear had been hit at least a couple of times. I radioed for our law enforcement - I think we had 11 officers if I'm not mistaken at the time, but none of 'em were around right then. They were all out on patrol or something.

John: These were refuge officers?

Robin: Refuge officers. Yeah, we had quite a few.

Dustin Beyers (Dusty) was the first I was finally able to reach on the radio. I got him in to close off the parking area. Nobody could come into that area while we were tracking the wounded bear. We started tracking it and saw where it had spun around a bunch of times, finally got on its trail and we're following it but the blood just kind of petered out a little bit.

It was hard to follow after a while. It was very thick bottomland cottonwoods and at one point in time, a bull moose got up out of this bed right in front of us and I about had a heart attack. Then, after an hour or so, **Larry** and I were walking along, and we hear a growl. The bear is right in front of us. She's on the other side of this fallen tree and she charged. The first 1 or 2 times she comes up over the tree but doesn't come all the way and goes back down – bluff charges.

We're trying to ascertain how bad she's hurt and all of that. At that point in time, it's too late because she's come over to charge for real and she's right on us. I shoot once and hit her dead center in the chest from my spot. She goes back over the tree and **Larry** shoots too. We've hit her twice. She's already hit at least twice before as well. We sit down and we wait for 20 minutes. We go over and look at the area. It's all trampled down, tore up and there is blood everywhere, but no bear.

About that time, we hear some skittering, and this is the sad part. She did have cubs. She had three male cubs, come to find out. They were little, little, teeny guys and they had come down the tree and they were following her, which was bad because, if a bear dies, the cubs will just lay on it, which is another sad reality.

Anyway, we've got this bear and at that point in time, the bear was moving away from the public fishing area paralleling the Sterling Highway - still close to the road but moving away from people. I called **Dusty** on the radio and said, okay, you can let people back into the lower parking area - this bear is moving towards the hillside, and please join us, we can use another hand. He was a veteran and also a former border patrol guy.

In those days, you could choose your long weapon for law enforcement, whether you wanted 223 or .30 caliber, and he had a .30 caliber that he was pretty good with. We were glad to have him. We followed the bear. I don't know how she survived because she was bleeding so badly. We followed her across the highway and up the hill and we'd been going quite a while. I stopped the guys and said, we're in thick brush, the bear knows we're following her, she's full of adrenaline, we're going uphill, and we've been doing this long enough. We're really not on top of our game.

I said, let's give it 1 hour and very, very slow walk together. We started slowly and we'd only got about half that time and she was lying in wait for us in the grass and came up with a ROAR that no lion could make - a few feet away, on full charge. We all just POW, POW, POW, POW and did her in right there at our feet. I was glad **Dusty** was there because his reflexes were a little better than ours.

John: It's amazing how much she took before that. Is there anything then you could do with the cubs?

Robin: No, unfortunately. Every year when you have orphaned cubs and also moose orphans (like from a mother moose that's killed on the road), there are calls out to zoos and animal parks and that kind of thing. We had sent 'em all across the country through the state (of Alaska – ADF&G), usually the Anchorage Zoo was involved, but at this point there wasn't interest - everybody was saturated, so no, they had to be euthanized. They wouldn't have made it on their own. We were in a place right then where I mentioned kind of a conflict with the state on bear management. The bears were becoming very numerous, and the state had been managing them very conservatively -, very conservatively, kind of looking at the Yellowstone model.

'Cuz the Kenai bears were kind of an isolated population, there wasn't a lot of gene flow and so forth. We had a lot of bear issues. One of the problems, and I'll mention this 'cuz my oldest daughter helped with a solution that, if it was implemented, involves fish carcasses - we're talking about hundreds of thousands of salmon caught on or near the Russian River, and people would fillet their sockeyes and leave the carcasses there, which became a magnet for the bears. It's an unnatural situation - that food source - and there were bears killed every year by officials as well as the public. Occasionally people were injured too. It was not a pretty situation.

While I was at Kenai, we only had two fatalities - where people were killed by bears. We had about 5 attacks a year though, where there were injuries. Anyway, I mentioned my daughter, Alex. When she went to the University of Alaska, after Shannon and I moved, Alex studying engineering and she patented a hydro-powered fish grinder for carcasses which didn't need electricity. It's just run by the river, where you could throw the carcasses in there and it grinds 'em up. The nutrients are still in the river.

John: But not the carcasses.

Robin: Yeah, It was kind of cool.

After 14 years at Kenai, the kids were in school - oldest daughter in engineering. My son started in biology, ended up in production technology and he's doing construction. My youngest daughter got a teaching degree and is teaching elementary school there.

The kids were grown, our house was paid off and we thought it was time to move. We both were from Oregon. One of the refuge supervisor jobs in Portland came up. This was 2009 and I applied for that and went to work for **Carolyn Bohan** for a year and a half in Portland managing or supervising refuges in Western Oregon and Washington - had a lot of fun with that.

Those were challenging budget times, however. There was also a steep learning curve, having 30 years in Alaska, to move out and work on other refuges. Then **Carolyn** retired and also the other refuge supervisor, **Forrest Cameron**; they left the same day for retirement. The refuge chief job was open, and I applied for that and got it. When I got started, the budget person had left too, so the refuge budget person, the senior refuge supervisor, and the ARD were all gone, and they didn't leave a lot of files.

I was scrambling in terms of trying to get the budget together and all that. I spent 3 and a half years there as the ARD. We had 70 some refuges - Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Hawaii, and the Pacific Islands - some great refuges out in the Pacific - places like Midway and Palmyra Atoll. Midway is 750 miles northwest of Honolulu, and Palmyra is a thousand miles south, with nothing in between. I got to visit some of those refuges, and we had some great projects, some great staff in the Pacific, a lot of challenges working mostly with seabirds, endangered species, and coordination with NOAA.

We did some great things for conservation, like at Palmyra, all the rats were removed. Amazing changes in the ecosystem when you remove rats. We were able to accomplish that through a large partnership. We also removed a shipwreck at Palmyra that was significantly impacting the coral reef. **Jim Kurth** helped significantly with that. We couldn't find the money. **Jim Kurth** was the chief then in DC and he started a program to where deferred maintenance dollars would be distributed similar to the way they had in the past, but with one additional pot of money that would go to a high priority project somewhere in the refuge system. It might go every year to region 4 or it might go 1 year there and never again. It depended on overall need and best

conservation bang for the buck. The Palmyra project rose to the top - the shipwreck was killing the reef from leaching iron.

John: Was it a fairly recent shipwreck or had it been there sometime?

Robin: I think it was a Taiwanese fishing vessel - a longliner if I remember right, and it had been there a while. There had been a number of shipwrecks there, and also at Kingman Reef - another part of the refuge system, but this one was having the most effect. I may be wrong on this; I think they may have actually run it aground purposely, trying to seek asylum, and then were deported.

Palmyra is an interesting place. If you do a little research on it, there' was a murder mystery there that was the topic of a book and movie: *And the Sea Will Tell*. Palmyra Atoll is one of the most intact and complete coral reef ecosystems left in the world. There's 50 some islands there. The main island has a coral airstrip left over from World War II and is managed in cooperation with the Nature Conservancy.

Midway Atoll is one of the best refuges in the refuge system and one of the most expensive to manage. You got a full staff out there and you're running/managing a runway and small community. The seawall is eroding, historical resources are being lost, and lead paint from old WWII buildings is killing birds - lots of problems trying to manage out there, financially speaking. We had to close the station at Tern Island, that's on the way to Midway from the Hawaiian Islands. Tern Island, part of French Frigate Shoals, had been staffed since at least the '70s, but it just wasn't possible to put people there anymore safely, mostly 'cuz of its deteriorating seawall and runway, and increasing intensity of storms. The Navy built up a lot of these atolls so that they could have them as stations for the war, and sometimes put seaplanes on 'em and sometimes they landed full size aircraft on them. Most were turned over to the refuge system after they were surplus to defense needs. They are great resources for sea turtles and seabirds and monk seals and that kind of thing, but we don't have the hundreds of millions of dollars it would take to repair and maintain seawalls and runways and that kind of thing in the refuge system.

There were a lot of struggles in those last few years with budget but had some great accomplishments too, like removing rats and shipwrecks and working on other invasives like spartina at Willapa - a great refuge.

Then I retired about 4 years ago, moved down to southwest Oregon with my wife and enjoying life.

John: Great. Well, that's a great story and fine career. Any other final thoughts you have before we close off the interview?

Robin: No, it was a great career, I'm very thankful. I know I was blessed to have it. I never really had an ambition to be any particular place at a particular time doing something in a particular position. I just took advantage of opportunities, and there were lots of them. Alaska was 30 years of the 35 years, but I kind of moved up there on a whim and I thought I'd only work there a few years. There's so much diversity and just different habitats and programs there that created lots of opportunities - working for Ecological Services and Contaminants and Fisheries and Migratory Birds and Refuge, and I did details along the way as well, in Administration, and Subsistence Management (which is a special program just in Alaska). I was exposed to some great people. When you're doing that, working in different places with different people - I think I was in 43 different states and 6 foreign countries during my career, even though I was based in Alaska most of the time - working on special projects, doing surveys, consulting, training. All combined, it just made the time seem to go fast.

I can't ever remember sitting in a chair waiting for the clock to turn to 5:00 in the afternoon or anything. It was great.

John: Well, I appreciate your time to share your experience with us. I feel very strongly that this is an interesting and important program that we do and preserve these experiences for future generations of Service people and others. Thanks.

Robin: Well, thank you for doing it. I did an interview years ago with **Norm Olson** just on ANILCA.

John: He's done a whole series of those. In fact, I talked to him today. Some of 'em we can't find. They were never transcribed.

Robin: Hopefully not mine.

I don't know, but I'm going to find that because I've got to find I know 1 that it's not yours. I'm gonna do my best to find it. I was talking to him about that today. With that, we'll end this one and thanks again.

Robin: You bet.

Image on Cover Sheet: Sockeye salmon at Bear Creek, Tustumena Lake, Kenai NWR (Photo by Gary Sonnevil (2008))



Laysan albatross at Midway Atoll NWR (Photo by Bob Peyton - 2013)



Infant son Remington, Izembek NWR (Photo by Shannon West – 1990)



DOI Secretary Sally Jewell - DOI award (2014)