



## **The Oral History of Geoff Haskett**

March 6, 2019

Interview conducted by John Cornely

Downtown Sheraton, Denver, Colorado



# Oral History Cover Sheet

**Name:** Geoff Haskett

**Date of Interview:** March 6, 2019

**Location of Interview:** Downtown Sheraton, Denver, Colorado

**Interviewer:** John Cornely

**Approximate years worked for Fish and Wildlife Service:** 1979 to 2016 (37 years).

**Offices and Field Stations Worked and Positions Held:** Realty Specialist for USFWS in Portland Oregon; District Realty Specialist, Bureau of Land Management, Burns, Oregon; Supervisory Realty Specialist, Division of Lands, National Park Service, Alaska; Deputy Chief and Realty Officer, USFWS, Division of Realty, Washington, DC; Realty Chief, USFWS, Division of Realty, Washington, DC; Assistant Regional Director, USFWS, Atlanta Regional Office, Atlanta, GA, Refuges and Wildlife; Deputy Regional Director, USFWS, Southwest Region, Albuquerque, NM; Assistant Director, Chief National Wildlife Refuge System, USFWS, National Wildlife Refuge System, Washington, DC; Regional Director, USFWS, Alaska Region, President, National Wildlife Refuge Association, Washington, DC.

**Most Important Projects:** Protecting land through acquisition for the FWS, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and National Park Service; facilitating a multi-agency and multi-region land exchange for the FWS in Arkansas; acquiring wetland habitat and managing the Migratory Bird Commission as Secretary; working with refuges nationwide to explain the impacts of low funding levels which resulted in very large funding increases for the national wildlife refuge system (NWRS); protecting the Arctic NWR from oil drilling and the Izembek NWR from road development through wilderness; representing the U.S. as the lead delegate on the Polar Bear Commission; and advocating for the NWRS as President of the National Wildlife Refuge Association.

**Colleagues and Mentors:** Dan Ashe, Mollie Beattie, Harold Benson, Columbus Brown, Jamie Clark, Noreen Clough, Garey Coatney, Larry Ditto, John Eadie, Boyd Evison, Brian Glaspell, Dale Hall, Sam Hamilton, Bill Hartwig, Sally Jewell, Nancy Kaufman, Steven Kohl, Jim Kurth, Joe Mazzoni, Dick Moore, Mamie Parker, Jim Pulliam, John Rogers, Lynn Scarlett, Paul Schmidt, Greg Siekaniec, Rob Shallenberger, Richard Stenmark, Rhea Suh, Steve Thompson, Robyn Thorson, Steve Williams and Tom Melius.

**Brief Summary of Interview:** Geoff grew up in San Mateo, CA where he was initially inspired by Rachel Carson's book, *Silent Spring* in young adulthood and the first Earth Day. He attended school at San Francisco State University and received his undergraduate degree in sociology and his master's degree from Portland State University in public administration. In 1979, he started up with the Fish and Wildlife Service as a career conditional employee in the regional office in Portland, Oregon. Because of a Reduction in Force, Geoff moved to the Bureau of Land Management and then the National Park Service,

working on land exchanges and native allotments in his early career. Geoff describes his return to the FWS' Realty Office where he served as the Secretary to the Migratory Bird Commission. Geoff describes how his career advanced through the FWS with increasing management responsibility and authority serving in three regional offices and back in Washington. He was the lead delegate from the US on the Polar Bear Commission, the first one appointed under President Bush (but mostly under President Obama) working with the Russians. After retiring from the FWS in 2016, Geoff moved back to Washington, DC and became the President of the National Wildlife Refuge Association, where at the time of this interview, he lived with his wife, Nikki. His work - advocating for and trying to protect national wildlife refuges - allowed him to continue networking and maintaining relationships with people he had worked with over the years.

## THE INTERVIEW

JOHN CORNELLY: This is John Cornely with the US Fish and Wildlife Service Heritage Committee. It's March 6th, 2019, and I have the pleasure today of visiting with Geoff Haskett, doing his oral history interview. We're at the downtown Sheraton in Denver, Colorado, attending the North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference. And with that introduction, Geoff, I'll just ask you to get started and tell us about your life and career.

GEOFF HASKETT: Okay. Thank you. So, I'm Geoff Haskett. I retired from the Fish and Wildlife Service 3 years ago this April 1<sup>st</sup>, so almost three years. And I retired as a regional director for the Fish and Wildlife Service in Alaska. And John's asking me to talk about my early life a little bit, what led to my coming to work for the Fish and Wildlife Service, experiences that brought me to where I am today, and I can start.

JOHN: Okay, just tell us your birth date, when you were born and where.

GEOFF: I was born on April 15th, 1954, in San Mateo, California, and I grew up in what's kind of a lower middle-class neighborhood close to what's now a lot of the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge.

But unlike a lot of the people I worked with over the last 40 years, I did not grow up in a family that camped or hiked or fished or hunted or any of the things that most of us take very seriously and a big part of our lives, never went camping in my life till I was in my mid-teens. It just wasn't something my dad did. My dad's name was Laurance Haskett, World War II vet. He died last year at the age of 98 years old. Had a great life. My mother's name was Frances Haskett. She died 30 some years ago from cancer.

My grandparents were George and Belinda Haskett. My grandfather I never met; he died in the depression. So, my dad grew up on his own a lot. My grandmother, Belinda, I knew a little bit when I was little, but she died when I was very young, so really didn't know grandparents.

So, in California, where I grew up, I played outside all that time, and we were close to San Francisco Bay. And like I said, I would play in the area that became part of the refuge but just wasn't really paying a lot of attention to wildlife and habitat and those kinds of things. Just having fun out there.

And it really wasn't until I was in high school, I think I was probably 15 years old, where I had a teacher that assigned the book *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson, which really, really hit me hard. It made a lot of sense that was the actually the year that we had the first Earth Day. I joined, I don't remember what it was called, but it was kind of a "be aware of the world" kind of club in my high school. And my friends and I did things like pull tires out of San Francisco Bay, started doing things like camping. Still not really much of a hunter fishing kind of person. Did a little bit but got outside a whole lot more and paid a lot of attention to the environment and became very active in those kinds of things.

Took a field biology class, took a marine biology class, graduated from San Mateo High School in 1972. And I went to San Francisco State University, where I graduated five years later. I had to work full time the whole time I was in college there. I didn't have any money from anybody else to go through college and actually graduated with a degree in sociology. I wasn't sure what I was going to do next.

JOHN: Okay, so, five years of that. What year did you graduate?

GEOFF: 1977.

JOHN: Okay.

GEOFF: So, when I graduated from San Francisco State, I wasn't sure what I was going to do. So, I joined VISTA, which is Volunteers in Service to America, and it was the domestic version of the Peace Corps. It's still around now, but it's not exactly the same organization. I moved up to Portland, Oregon, actually up in Forest Grove, Oregon, where me and another person set up a kind of an elderly outreach thing in nursing homes in the area. I still wasn't really quite sure what I was going to do after I was done with VISTA, but during that time, my supervisor, Donna Selle, was good friends with a guy named Richard "Dick" Moore. He was the branch chief for the realty operation in Region 1 of the Fish and Wildlife Service in Portland, Oregon. He'd met me 3 or 4 different times and thought I might be a good negotiator for acquiring habitat for wildlife refuges. I had not even heard of the Fish and Wildlife Service, hadn't paid attention to what they were doing. I went in and interviewed with Dick and in January of 1979, started up with the Fish and Wildlife Service as a career conditional employee.

JOHN: And this was in the regional office?

GEOFF: The regional office.

JOHN: Okay.

GEOFF: Portland, Oregon and loved it. I was pretty good at it. I think I moved forward fairly fast. I went from a GS-5 to a GS-9 in 2 years and I had [great] projects. My first projects were at the Hart Mountain National Wildlife Refuge buying inholdings there, which were like \$30 an acre. Mostly talking to people who did not live in the state and had never seen the parcels that they owned. So, it was really interesting. Did a lot of title work in Idaho on different projects.

Mostly my work was in Idaho, some in Oregon, a little bit in California. Did some of the first work on what was called relocation at San Francisco Bay Refuge. Went back to where I'd grown up, where we were acquiring habitat and there was a big area, Alviso, California where we had relocation for people that we bought out. And so, I did a lot of that for 2 years. Went back to California quite a bit on areas I bought for the refuge.

JOHN: So, talk a little bit about that relocation process because that's kind of an unusual, unique sort of realty.

GEOFF: Yeah. I don't remember all that much about it now. Its Public Law 91-646. And essentially what you would do is offer people a place that was decent, safe and sanitary. You had to kind of replace...if you were kicking them out of the place where they live, there were certain payments they would get. And it was an interesting group of people. There's lots of hippies. Actually, lots of drug use, lots of strange people there too, but very, very interesting I did a lot of work there for a couple of years doing that.

So, when I started, it was under [President] Carter. When Ronald Reagan became president, he brought in James Watt as the Secretary. And James Watt did not believe in land acquisition because he believed that the Second Coming was right around the corner. And there wasn't a whole lot of reasons for acquiring habitat and setting it aside.

So, I was part of a RIF, which is a reduction in force. And I never actually lost my job because I started looking around for different places I might end up. And it boiled down to 2 different jobs. The Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) was hiring people for essentially doing utility lines and then a job in Burns, Oregon with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to be one of their lands people there. I picked the Bureau of Land Management one, because I didn't have to move from Portland on the one with BPA. But all they did was they go talk to one person one time and the people would say, *well, maybe*. You go talk to them the second time, if they said no, then you condemned them. That did not sound real interesting or very fun to me. So moved to Burns, Oregon. Actually, lived in Hines, Oregon.

I got married right before I moved out there to my first wife, Robin Gee, and she had a little girl, Darci, who was a year and a half old at that time who I adopted. So, we moved to Hines, Oregon. Had 2 of my daughters there in Hines Hospital. That's Nicole and Rachel Haskett. Spent 4 years in Burns and spent a lot of time...

JOHN: So, what year did you move to BLM?

GEOFF: So, it was '80 or '81.

JOHN: Okay.

GEOFF: I moved to the BLM and mostly did land exchanges for them. I did a big giant land exchange for the state that been in the works for a while. I also got a whole bunch of - BLM had this thing called Bureau of Motion where they just did not finish things, and it was just kind of amazing that they didn't. And so, I got all these land exchanges and took some appraisal courses, ended up doing some kind of low value appraisals there. Did a bunch of acquisitions in the Steens Mountain, which later on became a

monument. I was very, very successful there. Really good job there, became the district realty specialist. Moved forward pretty quickly and went up to a GS-11 in my time there in Burns, Oregon.

JOHN: Well, this is very interesting to me because, as you know, I was in that same area a little bit before you got there and left to the west side about the time you got there. We worked with the BLM, Burns District people all the time, especially the biologists and the range cons. I had no idea that they were actively acquiring land and doing exchanges, most of the time I was there.

GEOFF: Yeah. The other thing that happened while I was there, Harney and Malheur Lakes flooded, and there were a lot of people that we were doing land exchanges because their ranches got flooded.

JOHN: Right.

GEOFF: We were acquiring that habitat and coming up with areas that they could go live on and do their ranching instead. So, a lot of that.

I met John, I can remember meeting you then, but I think you left fairly early after I got there, but Larry Ditto was there. Joe Mazzoni was the refuge manager. I knew Joe really well before that. So, I spent a little bit of time with Joe. Steve Thompson, who passed away this last year, and his wife, Renee - their daughter Jena and my oldest daughter, Darci who I adopted, went to kindergarten/first grade together in Hines. Like I said, my daughter Nicole and Rachel were both born in the Hines Hospital there.

So, I made a good 4 years there. I wasn't necessarily even thinking, I liked the BLM, wasn't looking to go anywhere else. But a guy named Garey Coatney, who I'd worked with as he was a senior realty person in the Portland Regional Office when I worked there, he had moved up to Alaska with the Park Service. And he called me and said, "Are you interested in coming up and setting up a lands program here in Alaska?" And I said, "Sure." And also, I was just finishing up - the BLM had a thing called the Oregon-Washington Management Program, which I'd just gotten through. Six of us went through that.

I felt a little bit bad about leaving BLM. It was such a great opportunity to go up to Alaska that I took that. So, spent 4 years in Anchorage working in the regional office there. Boyd Evison was the regional director. He was great. He died in the last couple of years. Richard Stenmark was the deputy regional director who'd been really involved in all of the land stuff for ANILCA, the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, so it was great learning from him just how the different lands had been set aside and that kind of thing.

It was kind of a bad time to be working for the Park Service in Anchorage in the mid-80s, because it was right after ANILCA had passed and most people in Alaska hated anybody having anything to do with the federal government having set these lands aside, especially going to show up at public meeting, talking about acquiring lands for the Park Service. I mean, you practically get run out of town. In fact, there were times where I was actually worried about serious harm from some of these public meetings I worked on.

I also did a lot of work on native allotments. Native allotments were some that came from the 1906 Act that allowed native people in Alaska to essentially go acquire 160-acre parcels of land. The Park Service before I got there had a law enforcement group that had gone after a lot of these native allotments. And even though I believe they should be acquired; it hadn't really been done correctly. People had been recorded without knowing they were being recorded. And it just was a bad process they went through.

And when I took it over, I had like 160 cases and had thrown out about 80 of them, saying that just the Park Services had made mistakes. Actually, the law enforcement guys there in the Park Service were pretty unhappy with me and had gone to the regional director to get me fired over that. But Boyd Evison actually said "No, I looked at the cases and Haskett has done a very professional, thorough scrutiny of these cases, and I agree with what he's doing." So, the cases where they were bad, we got them thrown out and were successful. The cases that people have actually proved up on them that we did not go after those. So, I spent almost 4 years in Alaska with the Park Service.

JOHN: So, let me ask just a quick question here. So, this is a lot like the Homestead Act sort of thing. So, you had to prove up on it. So, the ones that they could successfully go after had not basically done what was required by the law.

GEOFF: Right. They had to prove up by the law.

JOHN: Okay.

GEOFF: Now, it's actually important again now because under the new Lands Act that just passed, which was a great Lands Act, because it reauthorized Land and Water Conservation Act and a whole series of great things. It also allowed for a new allotment thing that allowed veterans that are native to go do the same kind of thing. We tried to get refuge lands excluded and were unable to do that. So, it's going to be a major problem. People like the conservation, what is left from groups. And TNC (The Nature Conservancy) had been buying up these allotments for years. It's problematic and it's just going to get worse.

JOHN: And some day somebody will probably be having to clean it up.

GEOFF: They will. We're not done with the old ones.

JOHN: Yeah.

GEOFF: It's too bad it's happening again.

JOHN: Okay.

GEOFF: So left Alaska. Wasn't thinking about moving. Got a call from Dick Moore, who had moved back to Washington, DC. I never thought I was going to move to DC. It just totally surprised me. He called me and said, "What do you think about coming back to Fish and Wildlife Service again? I've got a branch chief of operations job here. You could apply for." And he was working with a guy named Bill Hartwig, who I had never met at that point. So, I applied for the job, got it, came out. And I can remember the first time I met Bill Hartwig, I remember the look on his face. I looked really, really young for a lot of years, and I was taking over for a group that had been there for probably 30 years. And he was trying to clean it up and do different things. And I know he could tell just from looking at me it was going to be a problem. And maybe I wasn't the guy he should have hired. I worked for Bill Hartwig for most of 7 years I spent in Washington, DC. One of the best bosses I ever worked for. We have a great relationship to this day; someone I would call for advice still. Loved working for Dick Moore. He didn't spend the whole time [there.] He actually left after I was there for 4 years. And I went from being the branch chief of operations to being the deputy chief of realty, to being the chief of realty for the Service before I left. So, for 3 or 4 years, I was chief of realty for the system.

Also, under that, I served as secretary to the Migratory Bird Commission. Migratory Bird Commission is a group that essentially authorizes the expenditure of duck stamp monies/dollars brought in for sale of duck stamp and some other monies that come in from it as well. But it has two congressmen. At that time, it was Congressman Dingell who just died.

JOHN: Right.

GEOFF: Congressman Silvio Conte, two senators, I remember Senator Concord from Arkansas [correction: Senator Cochran from Mississippi.] I can't remember who the other Senator was now, but then they had the head of EPA under different organizations that were a part of that as well. So, I did that for 3 or 4 years.

JOHN: Well, just tell a little bit about some of the things you were involved with as chief of operations and some of the other positions as you moved on.

GEOFF: So, there's some huge land exchanges we did on the Cache and White Rivers in Arkansas. There's like this gigantic land exchange we did. They tried to get done for years and years and years and years and had not been able to do it. It was with the Potlatch Corporation. There were Forest Service lands involved, and there were BLM lands involved in Idaho. Because of my BLM experience, I was able to go to Idaho and identify lands we used for the exchange. The Federal Land Policy Management Act had section 203 where BLM has to identify isolated and hard to manage tracts. We'd found those in Idaho and used that as part of the exchange.

JOHN: So, between Arkansas and...

GEOFF: There was Idaho, there was Forest Service land, it was super complicated. Potlatch had never been able to get it worked out. We used different appraisers in Arkansas than we did in Idaho, and the guys that were involved for Potlatch in Arkansas did not really want to see it go through. So, we fixed that by getting the same appraisers doing both sides.

BLM was really unhappy with me when they figured out why I was in there going through the records and land exchanges. I had at least one district manager told me it's never going to happen. And it did. It was a great, successful land exchange. And it's actually some of the lands that we acquired where they thought they had the ivory-billed woodpecker here a number of years ago. They never found it again, but they thought it was on those lands. So that was kind of a big deal for us.

We also started lots of programs bringing people in from the regions where there had not been that great kind of a communication between the Washington office and the regional offices in a lot of years. So, we had lots of people come in on active details and we had appraisal classes we set up. But we had just - for that 7 years working for Hartwig - we did a whole lot to actually just make the realty program stronger, better, more vibrant. I think probably better than it's ever been before that time and certainly since. It's a much smaller program since that time.

So, also during my time in DC, my first wife, Robin, decided she did not like living in DC. I took my kids to Portland on a trip on a vacation and she filed for divorce. So, it worked out that I only had my kids for summers for the rest of my career after that. Mostly Nicole and Rachel were the two that came every summer whether it's Washington, DC, other places or whatnot, that kind of thing. So that [was a] fairly major, big thing happened in my life.

JOHN: Yeah.

GEOFF: I think in 1994, Mollie Beattie was the director of the Fish and Wildlife Service. Mollie Beattie unfortunately ended up dying during her time as director, but one of the things she wanted to do was make changes in the Fish and Wildlife Service and just put people in positions maybe they normally wouldn't be. So, she and Dick Smith, through her deputy, called me in and wanted to move me to Atlanta, Georgia from DC and move me out of the realty program, essentially making me the chief of refuges in the southeast, which was a huge, huge change for me. I followed a guy named Harold Benson, who was also a realty guy actually originally that went in and became the chief of refuges in the southeast, but very, very highly respected. Some of our people had known him forever. And again, I'm kind of the young guy coming in. Jim Pulliam was the regional director at the time; he retired right when I got there.

Noreen Clough came in as the regional director, and Sam Hamilton, who later became director of the Service, was the assistant regional director for ES (Ecological Services.) We worked really closely together during that time and got to know each other really well. I had lots of refuges in the southeast; I went to

every single one of them, probably 3 or 4 times during my time as the chief and got to know everybody really well.

It was also during the time when we went through a big reorganization in the Fish and Wildlife Service, where Mollie Beattie, who was super smart - this wasn't probably the smartest thing ever in terms of organizational moves she made - but she reorganized the Service and created what were called PARs and GARDs [programmatic assistant regional directors and geographic assistant regional directors.]

And essentially what I became was I retained all the responsibility for the programmatic stuff for the refuge system in the Southeast, but then became a geographic manager of all the programs, whether it was endangered species, climate service stuff, fisheries, whatever, for the southeast PAR of the region. So, I had Caribbean and Puerto Rico and Georgia and Florida - geographic areas responsible for as well, which really was very difficult.

JOHN: Yeah. And you didn't have...the program ARDs had control of the dollars.

GEOFF: Right. So, I had control over the refuge dollars in the region. But the other, like Sam Hamilton, had control over the ES dollars for the ES programs I had. And Columbus Brown was the guy who had the control over the fisheries dollars. So, it was just very unwieldy.

I loved that job. I wasn't looking at going anywhere. Mollie Beattie died, and Jamie Clark became the director of the Fish and Wildlife Service and John Rogers became her deputy. And they called me in and said, "Well, you're doing a great job here in the southeast. We want to move you to Albuquerque as the deputy regional director." Nancy Kaufman was the regional director there. She'd run into some problems, mostly dealing with the refuge folks in her region. Just communications things. She'd had problems. And super smart person, but they wanted to send me out there to be her deputy and work for her and kind of help her along. And I ended up becoming very good friends with Nancy. I did help her a lot on the refuge side of things. I ended up being the deputy regional director in Albuquerque for 9 years.

JOHN: Okay.

GEOFF: Midway through that, she left, and Dale Hall came in as the regional director. I had worked for Dale briefly in Atlanta, because the last 6 months before I left, he became the deputy regional director there. So, I'd known Dale before, and I knew him a little bit from Portland when he was over in Ecological Services doing some spotted owl stuff there. But anyway, Dale Hall became my boss. Nancy Kaufman was moved. That was all based upon a presidential transition. It went from Clinton to Bush. So, there's lots of moves.

JOHN: So, you mentioned, Jim Pulliam, who I go fishing with - w Well, he can't go this year - but I go fishing in Ontario with him every year for quite a few years now. And I know when he retired, as you

mentioned, why that was one of those - bunch of directed moves. And he said, a lot of them said, they weren't going and retired instead of this kind of regional director musical chairs kind of thing.

GEOFF: Well, then John Eadie was the deputy regional director, and he also left. So, Pulliam and Eadie both left at the same time. Eadie left because he had wanted to be the regional director in Atlanta, and they went with Noreen instead. And they offered him Alaska, and he didn't want to go. So, he left kind of mad. And so, I'm actually friends with John Eadie now. We've talked about it, but since then. He couldn't for family reasons. I mean, he thought Alaska was a great place, but this was not something where he was going to go.

JOHN: When I was in western Oregon, I was asked if I wanted to go to Arctic, partly because I have both mammal and bird training. And I said, "Oh, I'd love to, but I've got a wife and two kids, and if I took this job, I'd have to come up by myself."

GEOFF: Yep, I know. So actually, when I was in Atlanta, I moved to Albuquerque, I got married again to Elizabeth. And Elizabeth came out to Albuquerque with me.

JOHN: So, you met her in...

GEOFF: Actually, in DC.

JOHN: DC.

GEOFF: But she had come to Atlanta. Anyway, we went to Albuquerque. We got married; so, married for a second time.

I loved the job in Albuquerque. And one thing happened during the first part of that was I mentioned that reorganization happened when Jamie Clark was the director. Actually, Dale Hall is the person who headed up a group of us deputies that went around the country and kind of interviewed people and said, *what works and what doesn't work*. And she made a change to the PARD/GARD thing where you just end up instead of having like the job where you did both the programmatic and the supervision PARD of the country, she actually added a whole bunch of ARDs, which wasn't like the perfect thing either. But at least it was better because you had programmatic ARDs, and you had geographic ARDs.

So that's...

JOHN: You didn't have quite...each one didn't have quite the duties. But I recall from my perspective at that time as migratory bird chief, why a lot of people lost money to pay for new positions.

GEOFF: It did make their jobs easier because it just wasn't - one person really could not do the job they had before. But it was too many ARDs. And ultimately that went away too. That was a short-term fix for what had happened. Actually, that's the part that when the deputies, when we went around, we actually got rid of that part too where we reduced the amount of ARDs and recommendations to the Washington office.

JOHN: I remember those of us kind of on the fringe of that were amazed that something that wasn't working that well, and you guys went around and talked to people and actually fixed it.

GEOFF: Yeah.

JOHN: Because most of the time it made it better. Most of the time though it got worse instead of better.

GEOFF: So, organizationally we did that. So, 9 years in Albuquerque, I think 40 some refuges there. I spent a lot of time on refuges. But obviously the whole gamut of programs involved with as the deputy. Towards the end of my time there, Dale left the region to go become director of the Fish and Wildlife Service. And I was brought back to act as the chief of refuges. Bill Hartwig had become chief of refuges after Dan Ashe. And I went, I think I was acting there for like 6 months and ultimately was put in the job where I was the chief of the refuge system for 3 years back in DC.

JOHN: Tell us again what year that was when you started.

GEOFF: So that would have been about 2005.

JOHN: Okay.

GEOFF: So, I came back to DC.

JOHN: This was before the chief of refuges was equivalent to an AD.

GEOFF: No, no.

JOHN: This was after.

GEOFF: Yeah, okay. AD. Okay. So, I became an AD I think back...So, when I was in DC, Rob Shallenberger was the chief of refuges. He was the division chief; I was the division chief for really. Law enforcement was part of that. There was like 7 or 8 different programs. Migratory Birds was part of it. And along the way, Migratory Birds became its own program, law enforcement became its own program. Chief of refuges became an AD, assistant director; they had a chief that reported to the position, at first.

So, when I came back, Jim Kurth had been the chief of refugees at some point, but he was my deputy. Jim Kurth now, of course has been the acting director at one point, and he's the primary deputy for the Service. So, I mean, part of my career, Jim Kurth worked for me and part of my career, I worked for Jim Kurth.

It was pretty interesting 3 years, because it was when we did a pretty strong effort to get all the regions, working with all the regional chiefs and all the different regions across the country to identify refugees that we had to close and complex, do that kind of thing to get Congress's attention. And actually, we over the 3 years I was there, by the end, it's the biggest increase of money that the refugee system has ever seen because we stayed kind of cohesive. And it was difficult because the department would always say, *you can't ask for more money than what's in the budget request*. And we'd say, *we're not asking for more money. We're talking about what we can't get done with the money we have*. And if Congress asked us those questions, we have to do it. And so, it was pretty interesting 3 years.

Ultimately, at the end of that 3 years, I was offered the opportunity to go to Alaska as the regional director, where I spent 8 years, the last 8 years my career was there.

JOHN: Okay. What year did you start there as the regional director?

GEOFF: That would have been in 2008, I think.

Now...So, my wife lived...she's another ex-wife. When I went back to DC from Albuquerque, she did not come with me. She stayed in Albuquerque, and she came for maybe the last 6 months I was in DC and then Alaska came up and she came to Alaska for a year or 2 and just hated it. I mean, some people just can't handle it. Moved back to Albuquerque. So, most time I was in Alaska, my ex-wife Elizabeth was not there. So that led to a divorce as well.

So, in Alaska, I was also the polar bear commissioner of the United States, the first one appointed under President Bush. But most of my time was under Obama. And what the polar bear commissioner did was work with the Russians. There would be a Russian version of myself and we both had a native person from Russia and from the United States that served in that role. And this had been worked on to get treaties for like 30 years. It just culminated about the time I came in. And the idea between those groups was to allow for subsistence use by Russian natives because it's completely illegal there and identify numbers that ought to be allowed for taking polar bears by the Alaska natives in the United States.

JOHN: So, was it just the US and Russia involved.

GEOFF: For that.

JOHN: For that.

GEOFF: But it also involved the range states, which is the 5 countries that have polar bears.

JOHN: Okay.

GEOFF: So that's Russia, Norway, Greenland, the United States and Canada. So, I would get together with those groups like once every 2 years. And that's looking at the 20,000 polar bears across the Arctic.

JOHN: So, did they have commissioners too?

GEOFF: No, the lead delegates to the United States. So, there's only been 2 commissioners, myself and then Greg Siekaniec after me when he became regional director. And I'm actually the Honorable Geoff Haskett from having had that position, which is kind of funny to be able to say.

Russia was really interesting. We actually got along with the Russians better than in these range states meetings with some of the other countries. Greenland and Canada would not always be in the same place that we were. Usually, Norway would be. I had a great working relationship with the Russians.

So, I should say that the Fish Wildlife Service has had a great relationship with the Russian people and their wildlife biologists for like 40 years, all through the Cold War, when all the rest of United States wasn't having these kind of conversations and communications. The Fish and Wildlife Service had great work with the Russians.

JOHN: Some of my interviews have covered some of the cooperative survey work on Wrangel Island and different things. I went to Siberia; The Service adopted my trip but was actually paid by the International Crane Foundation. We worked with a Russian biologist doing crane surveys and looking at crop depredations and stuff in extreme southern Siberia. And the people are great. It's one of those things that seems like the governments can't get along, but person to person [there are] some really good people.

GEOFF: Yeah, I loved my trips to Russia. We would take turns. I mean, they would come to the United States every other year and we'd go to Russia every other year. So, we had Steven Kohl. I don't know if you've interviewed him or not. I know he's retired.

JOHN: Well, he's on our list and he's agreed to do it, but we haven't gotten to him.

GEOFF: Well, that'll be an awesome, amazing, fascinating interview for you all. Because he is just an amazing person. He speaks 4 different languages. Russia being one, Chinese is one. For the Fish and Wildlife Service, he was the person that brought lots of delegations to China and to Russia. And he was always my interpreter for my work with the polar bear stuff.

JOHN: I've been to China twice on those protocol exchange trips.

GEOFF: Amazing. Sam Hamilton became the director when I first went to Alaska. Sam Hamilton also died, just like Mollie Beattie did during his time as director. I think he would have done great, great, wonderful things. Sam was a wonderful human being. Super smart. I was incredibly sad when Sam passed on, a good friend and a great leader.

Dan Ashe became director of the Fish and Wildlife Service for the rest of my time in Alaska before the last transition occurred over to Trump as president of United States.

So, 8 years in Alaska; lots of international work A fair amount of fights, a fair amount of disagreements with the state of Alaska during my time period. Things like, I mean, Alaska just had much more of a wish to get rid of predators. Where the way we managed refuge lands in Alaska based upon the mandates of ANILCA and the Refuge System Act and why these refuges were set up. I mean, we were doing more of a landscape, don't kill all the predators kind of thing. More like Aldo Leopold's type of management.

And I had lots of litigation I had to deal with. A couple of different heads of the Fish and Game during that time, litigated over a number of different things, and I was litigated like 9 or 10 different times. We won every single time.

JOHN: Yeah.

GEOFF: So, we were on pretty strong ground on what we were doing. Things like they wanted to kill wolves in wilderness from helicopters. And we said *no*, and they said, *we're going to do it anyway*. And we had a court case, and they lost. We also had things on the Arctic Refuge where we got the CCP done for the Arctic. The comprehensive conservation plan rules and guides how the refuge is managed.

We recommended the entire refuge be wilderness, which ended up being signed off by Sally Jewell when she was Secretary. It went to the president of the United States. President Obama actually recommended to the Congress that they act on that. Of course, we didn't expect they would. They didn't. We also got a predator rule done when I was there that said state of Alaska, about all these regulations instead of being sued every single year, we got kind of a cohesive overall rule that covered all the different refuges and got that done.

Since leaving the Fish and Wildlife Service, the predator rule got deleted from existence by the Congressional Review Act. That was one of the first things that happened under the new [Trump] administration. The CCP is not overturned, but certainly last year when Senator Murkowski got it as part of the Budget Act - opening the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge - they overturned what we did in the CCP. Lots of people obviously playing that still and hoping that doesn't happen and lots of legal interest in that. Actually, I'm very involved in that in my new job.

So, pretty contentious relationship with the state of Alaska. Although towards the end, they actually did have a new governor come in and replaced some of the people we had a bunch of fights with and had a much better working relationship than last year or 2. Lots of disagreements still, but just better.

JOHN: Yeah.

GEOFF: I ended up resigning, retiring from the Fish and Wildlife Service because my now wife, Nikki, worked at the BLM in DC, and we spent a lot of years me being in Alaska and her being in DC. And so, I retired to go marry Nikki. So, married for a third time. Finally got it perfectly. I love being married to Nikki. She's like a perfect person. She's actually very high up in the Bureau of Land Management. She's the acting SES person in charge of all the wilderness and monuments and conservation that the BLM has. That brought me to DC.

When I came back to DC after retiring, I went to work for the National Wildlife Refuge Association, which is a non-profit that supports wildlife refuges, and I'd actually worked with their different boards and presidents and their chairs for 20 some years. In fact, I can remember working with you when you were on the board and just a long list of people. So, end up being the president of the Refuge Association for the last 2 years and fighting for a lot of things that had been overturned with Trump becoming president of the United States and Secretary Zinke and now Acting Secretary Bernhardt, who you and I just had the opportunity to listen and talk to at the North American that we're at. A lot of things that I thought we'd accomplished when I was regional director of Alaska have been overturned. And my organization is one of many that are fighting a lot of those things and trying to keep the Arctic Refuge from being open to oil and gas operations, trying to keep the Izembek Road from crossing [wilderness] - which is another thing they did when I was the regional director.

JOHN: Right. I was going to ask you about that because you and the rest of us successfully fought that off many times.

GEOFF: 30 years of arguments on this thing. And then Murkowski actually had requested Fish and Wildlife Service do a legislative EIS on it, which took us 4 years to do. We did the first part of it under Secretary Salazar and finished it under Secretary Jewell. And I don't think that Senator Murkowski expected our decision, but our decision was no, this road should not cross the wilderness. Dan Ashe, who was the director at that point, and I had the opportunity to go brief Senator Murkowski. She was not very happy with us, but a great, great decision.

And of course, that's being fought over again now too under Secretary Zinke; that's all been opened up. There's environmental work they're doing. There's going to be a lot of litigation on that as well.

So anyway, major things I was involved in, what I saw as great accomplishments and great victories when I was in Alaska that were overturned very quickly in the last couple of years of the current administration. And I'm very involved with a group now that's trying to reverse some of that.

JOHN: You have segued right into something that we generally ask people to talk about what they've been doing since they've retired. And I'd like you to talk a little bit more about some of the -obviously, you've already talked about several really important things that the [Refuge] Association is focused on. But talk a little bit about some of the other issues that are important to refuges that the association is working on.

GEOFF: Sure. So, the Refuge Association has been around for 45 years, established by retired refuge managers that thought that the refuge system kind of got lost in the Fish and Wildlife Service. So, we're kind of the voice of folks, staff, refuge managers all up and down the line, especially in times like this where maybe decisions are being made that they don't believe in. But they work for the administration unless they're asked to do something illegal, immoral, unethical, they're going to do what they're asked to do. So, we're a group that is [fighting for refuges.] The Arctic Refuge is a big issue for us, as is Izembek Road is a big issue for us.

Desert National Wildlife Refuge is a place where it's withdrawn land. We have shared jurisdiction with the Air Force. We never had a problem with the Air Force at all until a couple of years ago. And all of a sudden now they would like to go ahead and take away a lot of authority the Fish and Wildlife Service has for managing for wildlife and their habitats.

So that's a big deal for the Refuge Association. We're involved with the CARE group, have been since it got initiated, CARE groups, I think 18, 20 different organizations that go from Defenders of Wildlife to the National Rifle Association. All with very different political agendas that they're involved in but get together to agree to fight and to work with Congress and the administration and increase budgets for the refuge system. It's the one thing they can all agree on, all these different groups. So, we're essentially the leader for that. We work really closely with Congress trying to do lots of educational stuff in terms of budget stuff, working budgets all the time.

Oh, the border wall and Lower Rio Grande Refuge and Santa Ana Refuge in Texas, but other refuges as well in Arizona and New Mexico. We are consciously not taking a position on the entire border wall, although lots of us have our own ideas about whether it's good or bad. But refuges where the border wall is going to segment the refuge and wildlife from one side to the other - we are working Congress really hard to keep that from happening. And we're not going to be very successful with the current administration.

But we've had success in Santa Ana Refuge. Two years ago, we were very involved and working to get language in there that prohibited any monies from being spent for border wall on Santa Ana Refuge. So that was us and a couple other groups that were involved in that.

JOHN: We were just down there. I think you knew I was going to go down there and do some interviews around the 75th anniversary of Santa Ana. The complex manager gave us an up close and personal

border tour. And we spoke to some of the border patrol people. I'd been there a few years ago and was briefed about impact on ocelots and a lot of other wildlife and endangered species. We also went over and visited butterfly pavilion [at the National Butterfly Center.] They are supposed to build a wall right through the middle of their lands.

GEOFF: We're involved with them as well.

JOHN: Yeah.

GEOFF: So, the Refuge Association, it really is a voice for refuges when they can't speak for themselves, the people that work on them. We have a long history of being very successful and working with the Fish and Wildlife Service, but don't always agree. We've got some lawsuits against the Department [of Interior] right now in the Fish and Wildlife Service and that's part of our job to do that. And I'm very proud of the work we're doing. We're a pretty small organization. We're not big like NRDC (Natural Resources Defense Council) or Defenders of Wildlife, but we're very connected. We have a group of people that are very, very good.

So even though I miss Alaska, and I miss the Fish and Wildlife Service, I do love the job I'm in right now, and my life is very different. Like I said, I married Nikki a couple of years ago. My daughters are - one's in Portland with her family. I've got grandkids there. And in Albuquerque, there's Nicole and Rachel who are married, and I have 2 grandkids there. And I have 2 step-kids that are teenagers now. So, I'm dealing with teenagers again, which is very interesting. And luckily, I met them when they were much younger. Because I think it's better to meet them when they're 7 and 8 than when they're 15 and 17.

So, that's my life right now. I mean, I'm very happily married. I think I'm doing really important work. I'm still connected with lots of people in the Fish and Wildlife Service. I get to see people like you that I've known for years and years and years. We just saw Dale Hall at the meeting we're at. We saw Steve Williams that came over and said hello. Steve Williams heads up WMI (Wildlife Management Institute) and the North American. And of course, I worked for him when he was director.

And get to work with Jamie Clark, who is the head of Defenders of Wildlife and Rhea Suh, who was over in the Secretary's office, the head of policy, management and budget (PMB) who heads up NRDC now. Just lots and lots of connections. Lynn Scarlett, who was the deputy Secretary. She was on our board.

JOHN: I was on the board when she came on.

GEOFF: She's wonderful. She's awesome. Kameran Onley, who was in Assistant Secretary's office and also subsequent PMB is over at TNC, and we've worked with them. So just lots and lots of connections; people that I've been able to work with forever. Worked really closely with Cynthia Martinez, who's the chief of refuges to the Service. And Jim Kurth, who, like I said, I worked for him, and he worked for me. I've known him for years and years and years, ex-refuge manager for Arctic Refuge.

I go out to places like Jackson Hole at the Elk Refuge, where we're actually in the middle of suing the Service because of feeding stuff there. Brian Glaspell is the refuge manager there; he worked for me when he was the Arctic refuge manager.

So just I love having all the connections still and doing very important work and being able to support the Fish and Wildlife Service and the refuge system. And the refuge system is and there's just no other system of lands like that, 850 million acres set aside for conservation purposes for wildlife and habitat. It's just the premier organization in the world.

JOHN: The other best idea and you don't get credit like the Park Service.

GEOFF: Yeah. It's insane. And that's been part of what we exist for too, educate people and let them know. So.

JOHN: Right. Right.

GEOFF: Some of that is still being there, fighting for a few good things that the refuge system can do and does and can always be better. And we're trying to make that happen.

JOHN: Sure.

GEOFF: So that's my story.

JOHN: Okay. Well, I appreciate your taking the time to tell your story. One of the great things about this project is these things will be around for future generations of Service employees and others to read and someday listen to. I think we'll have the actual audio and video archived and so on. So, I'd like to thank you for doing this.

GEOFF: Let me add one more thing.

JOHN: Sure.

GEOFF: Because I mean, part of this is there's so many people I've had the opportunity to work with and just so many people I didn't even mention. And like the directorate when I left, Robyn Thorson and Paul Schmidt and just the list is long. Tom Melius.

JOHN: Yeah.

GEOFF: And all those folks are retiring now...Mamie [Parker.]

JOHN: Yeah.

GEOFF: It's just been such...so many great people I've been able to work with. And just because I didn't say their names doesn't mean that they weren't important to me. Because there's probably a thousand people, I should have mentioned that did important work with and are friends and colleagues. And it's just been a great honor to work for the Fish and Wildlife Service and just really, really good people.

JOHN: Well, I know you will agree, and I think, I worked with the Park Service and have done a number of things. But when you talk about extended family, I think the whole Fish and Wildlife Service, that's the way I look at it. We're all family. And I think most of us feel that way and treat each other that way. And it's just a great situation. I'm with you 100% on that.

GEOFF: Well, John, thanks for the opportunity in doing this, I appreciate it.

JOHN: It's my pleasure.

#### *End of Interview*

Key words: communication, conservation, endangered species, international conservation, law enforcement, management, polar, predators, realty, relocation, wildlife refuges