



The Oral History of Jim Leach

July 30, 2020

Interview conducted by Tom Worthington
Mendota Heights, MN (by telephone)

Oral History Cover Sheet

Name: Jim Leach

Date of Interview: July 30, 2020

Location of Interview: Mendota Heights, MN

Interviewer: Tom Worthington

Approximate years worked for Fish and Wildlife Service:

29 years with FWS, 4 years Minnesota Department of Natural Resources

Offices and Field Stations Worked:

Tamarac NWR (MN)

Agassiz NWR (MN)

Ecological Services, Washington D.C.

Ecological Services, St. Paul Area Office (MN)

Partners for Fish and Wildlife, Region 3 Regional Office

Joint Venture Office, Region 3 Regional Office

Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (Loaned Executive), St. Paul, MNL

Refuge Area Supervisor, Region 3 Regional Office

Chief of Wildlife, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources

Most Important Projects:

Great Lakes Joint Venture, Prairie Pothole Joint Venture

Minnesota Legacy Grant Wetland Acquisition Program

WPA Thunderstorm Map Land Acquisition Tools

Northern Tallgrass Prairie NWR

Glacial Ridge NWR

Project Leader Supervision

Colleagues and Mentors:

Dr. A. Grewe, Joe Kotok, Nita Fuller, Rick Schultz, Bob Misso, Joe Duggan, Tom Landwehr

Brief Summary of Interview:

Jim was born and raised in St. Paul, Minnesota. He graduated from college from the St. Cloud State University (MN) with a degree in Biology. It was there that he met and was deeply influenced by Professor Al Grewe. Dr. Grewe introduced Jim to wildlife biology and set him on a course to become a wildlife professional. Jim went to graduate school at the University of South Dakota where he studied swans and prairie waterfowl. After graduating with a master's degree in Wildlife Biology, Jim worked at Tamarac NWR and Agassiz NWR before taking a position in Washington DC in the Ecological Services Program where he worked on endangered species issues. He returned to Minnesota where he worked at the Area Office in St. Paul before taking a position in the newly formed Partners program office in the Ft. Snelling Regional Office (R3). Jim moved to the newly formed Joint Venture program office where he started the Great Lakes Joint Venture. He took a year and half loaned executive position at the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency where he helped the State with wetland protection policies. Jim returned to the Regional Office as a Refuge Supervisor. In 2016 he retired from the US FWS and took the Wildlife Division Chief position at the Minnesota Department of Natural Resource. Jim retired from the State in 2020.

TRANSCRIPT

WORTHINGTON: Okay. I've started the recording. And this is Tom Worthington. I'm the interviewer. And with me today is Jim Leach.

Today is July 30th, 2020. I'm speaking from my home in Saint Louis Park, Minnesota. And Jim, you're in Mendota Heights, Minnesota right now.

LEACH: Mendota Heights in my home.

WORTHINGTON: All right. Well, thank you so much for willing to participate in the oral history project. I'll ask a series of questions. And at any time, if you want to just pause, I can put it on pause and we can take a break if you want, but we'll get started.

LEACH: Sounds good.

WORTHINGTON: So first off, Jim, where were you born and when?

LEACH: Saint Paul, Minnesota. 1953.

My mother was from Crookston. My dad was from Saint Paul. They met because they were both of Lebanese origin and they decided to live in the Twin Cities once they started dating and got married.

WORTHINGTON: Do you have brothers and sisters?

LEACH: Two sisters and a brother, all local? In fact, one sister, up until about a month ago, lived right around the block from me. My other sister lives maybe three miles away, and my brother and I are about two miles away. I see my brother almost every other day in the summer because we garden together.

WORTHINGTON: Did you spend time in the outdoors growing up or hunting and fishing? How did you get interested in hunting and fishing?

LEACH: I think it was initially. My dad took our family on fishing trips where we'd go camping and that got my inner juices going on the out-of-doors. And really it spawned from there. He was a real avid pheasant or upland bird hunter, and my brother and I would go. Our sisters never came hunting, but they went on the fishing trips. So, our whole family would camp and fish and that really gave me an idea of what the outdoors were like.

It wasn't until my sophomore year in college that I thought of going into the wildlife field.

WORTHINGTON: Did you go to high school in Saint Paul, South Saint Paul?

LEACH: I did. It was a parochial school in West Saint Paul, it is now closed. It's another private school now. I went to high school in West Saint Paul and then college undergraduate school at Saint Cloud State University in Minnesota. And my graduate degree was from the University of South Dakota.

WORTHINGTON: What year did you graduate from high school?

LEACH: 1971.

WORTHINGTON: Oh, same year as me. And did you know you wanted to go to Saint Cloud State right off the bat, or were there other schools in mind?

LEACH: You know, coming out of high school, I was what I'll call a dumb jock.

I played three sports. I was recruited for football and baseball. I went to Saint Cloud because I was recruited for baseball, played two years of baseball at Saint Cloud, and decided, you know, I liked the sport, but I'm not good enough to make the pros, so I better start using my brain rather than my body.

And there was a professor at Saint Cloud State University that really got me involved with wildlife and got me hooked.

WORTHINGTON: So, tell me about that encounter. Who was it and what class did you have him with?

LEACH: Dr. Grewe. You've heard the name before. He has a number of students that are former Fish and Wildlife employees.... Jay Johnson, Ralph Morganwick. Uh, Jim. Oh, I forget Jim's last name. He worked for us.

WORTHINGTON: Jim Mattsson?

LEACH: Mattsson? Yep. All were Grewe students. He got me involved. I had him with a lot of the advanced biology classes, but then he selected a group of six of us to go on field trips with him, and he would take us to really cool places to see lots of birds. We went to Sand Lake Refuge. We went to the Platte River to see the cranes during migration, we banded bald eagles in northern Minnesota.

We went to the shores of Lake Traverse and banded pelicans. Those were the things that really, really got me hooked on wanting to be a wildlife professional.

WORTHINGTON: Did Saint Cloud State have a wildlife degree as an undergraduate?

LEACH: No, it was a biology degree with a wildlife emphasis.

WORTHINGTON: And you chose a major as a sophomore then? Or as a junior?

LEACH: As a as a junior.

WORTHINGTON: And it sounds like the encounters with Dr. Grewe were pretty key to your career path.

LEACH: It really was. Like I said, up until that time, I was pretty much a dumb jock. I didn't know what I wanted to do, but they all really got me hooked on wildlife from those encounters. And from that point on, I applied myself academically and it all turned out for the good. The career with the Service was fabulous.

WORTHINGTON: When you were a senior then at Saint Cloud State, did you decide you were going to go on to graduate school or how did you make that decision?

LEACH: Yeah, I had worked part time during the summer. I shouldn't say worked. I volunteered for the state of Minnesota. DNR at Carlos Avery, one of their state wildlife management areas in Minnesota. And I knew I could get a job with the state, but it was also intriguing, well, Grewe introduced me to some Fish and Wildlife people that were his former graduate students.

And we had talked about Fish and Wildlife Service. And that kind of got me intrigued that, you know, I like the idea of diversity of travel, diversity of species, different locations of work. So, I decided to go for my master's, and I applied at the University of Minnesota and University of South Dakota, and I was accepted in both programs. At the U of Minnesota, I would have studied bald eagles under Dr. Frenzel and at South Dakota they gave me a research project on trumpeter swans. I wanted to work on some prairie wildlife, and that was really my decision to go to South Dakota.

It was a three-year program, but I finished in two years. I went straight through for two years and finished up and had a job offer from Fish and Wildlife Service before I graduated.

WORTHINGTON: Now, how did that happen? Was it through the student training program that you got the offer? What kind of offer was it?

LEACH: You know it was, it was a YACC [Young Adult Conservation Corps] position. Remember those? It wasn't a permanent. It was an I don't know what the terminology from a personnel standpoint was, but I wasn't a career employee. I was a career employee, but it was a part time assignment.

WORTHINGTON: That was probably the Young Adult Conservation Corps and probably a youth group leader position?

LEACH: Yes, that's exactly what it was. And that was my first job. Well, my first job was at LaCreek Refuge while I was a student. They hired me as a temporary laborer. And then the first career position was Tamarac Refuge as a YACC group leader.

WORTHINGTON: Okay. And so, as a group leader, what were some of your duties?

LEACH: Well, it was really funny at that time. The manager at that time at Tamarac was Omer Swenson, and Omer didn't have a deputy at that time. So, with my degrees Omer relied on me to do some of the traditional things that I think of an assistant manager would do. I did water level manipulation. I was involved with a lot of the wildlife surveys, and I ran a YACC crew doing maintenance activities.

So that was really the bulk of my job at Tamarac.

WORTHINGTON: What year was that Jim, that you started at Tamarac.

LEACH: 1977 or 78. Okay. I think it was 77.

WORTHINGTON: And do you remember where the kids that you worked with, they were in their early 20s, late teens, I presume?

LEACH: Yeah, they were high school and early college age kids, so I wasn't much older than them at the time, but it was really a positive experience.

WORTHINGTON: How long did that position last and what happened next?

LEACH: Two years. And then I got a similar position up at Agassiz Refuge (Minnesota). Up there I was the group leader and worked at Agassiz for two more years and did virtually all maintenance type projects. I was the group leader for the crew. So, at Agassi under Joe Kotok, I did traditional supervision of the crew's daily work assignments, and it was really my first exposure to supervision.

And Joe really gave me the reins, told me the projects that he wanted and just gave me the reins to get them done. And Joe was very special in my life. He was almost like a second father to me at the time. You know, being I was I'm still very close with my family and being a time away for school for, for six years undergraduate graduate and going immediately from graduate school to Tamarac and then to Agassiz, I, I really wasn't connected with my family as much as I have been during my upbringing.

So, Joe kind of filled a void that was really a critical part. And to this day, Joe is a good friend, and we keep in contact. He came, his whole family came to my retirement party. So, he is a special guy in my mind.

WORTHINGTON: Did you live on the refuge up at Agassiz?

LEACH: I did not. I lived in Thief River Falls. They offered me refuge housing. But what I did is I played softball in Thief River and in Detroit Lakes, and I knew it was easier for me to commute than to live on refuge.

WORTHINGTON: Who else was on staff at Agassiz when you were there with Joe.

LEACH: Ron Bell, you know Ron.

Jay Johnson followed as the assistant, or he followed Ron Bell as the assistant manager. Let me think. There was a woman. And I forget her name. I'm thinking maybe. The clerk at that time was a guy by the name of Paul Lieber. I don't know if you remember that name. Paul was the clerk.

But then Judy something. That's what her name was. Judy and Paul got married and transferred to Alaska. Judy was in the assistant manager series at the time. But I know Paul is still in Alaska, and I've heard that Judy and Paul have since divorced, so I don't know what happened to her.

WORTHINGTON: What would you describe as the highlights of your work up at Agassiz?

LEACH: Joe got me involved with the wildlife surveys and the diversity of wildlife was unbelievable. I mean, it was like I opened Pandora's box, and everything just connected for me there at Agassiz. Joe was instrumental in making those connections, but the wildlife surveys from moose and wolves to waterfowl just was fabulous.

Great grey owls, really. It's a birders paradise and it is a wildlife paradise. I was just thrown back at the diversity of habitats and wildlife.

WORTHINGTON: What were the relations like with the surrounding community up there?

LEACH: Ha, funny you should mention that...it was pretty adversarial, Joe was a kind of a guy ... he was like Jim Gritman. He drew a line in the sand, and you dare not cross him.

Joe tried to work with neighbors, but from past experience, he'd compromised on certain things, but then on other things, he wouldn't compromise. And there were running battles with neighbors. And I think some of those names still live on, whoever's up there. Now, I know Craig left the guy that I hired. I don't know who's up there now.

WORTHINGTON: So, if the relationships with the community were sometimes tense, I think. And what did you learn from Joe about how to, to deal with controversies?

LEACH: There was only one way to deal with it, with what I learned from Joe. And that was head on. You never, never avoid them. You're not going to like the outcome on many of them. But unfortunately, they're voting constituents and they're going to go to their legislators. And your decision might get overturned. But Joe tried to hold a hard line and protect the resources of the refuge. And I think in the most part he did.

I know he butted heads with Dick Toltzman [Refuge Supervisor] quite a bit, but he, I think the regional director at that time was Jim Gritman; and Jim liked Joe, I mean, they were cut out of the same mold, and I think that's why Jim liked Joe.

WORTHINGTON: What year did you work up at Agassiz then? Do you remember when you, what years you were there?

LEACH: I think it was 1980. Well, from Agassiz, I did get my first full time appointment with the Service, and I transferred to Washington DC. And boy, was that a cultural shock going from Thief River Falls and Agassiz.

WORTHINGTON: Had you met Patti by this point?

LEACH: I did not. Patty entered my life after I moved back to the Twin Cities from Washington, DC.

WORTHINGTON: Let's back up then. How did you get the Washington office position and how did all that transpire?

LEACH: Well, Joe was looking for jobs for me. And, you know, there were some part-time jobs that that I could have had at the refuge. But Joe said what I needed was career status. And he said, you're probably going to have to move. And he encouraged me to go to DC to get the Washington office experience under my belt early in my career.

And it was a job with Ecological Services at that time working in the Endangered Species Program in DC. And I think the Endangered Species Act was passed in 1973. So, it was a relatively new act even in the early 80s to be implemented. So that office I went there and worked on Endangered Species for two years and it was an enjoyable experience.

It was, like I said, a culture shock going from Thief River to Washington, DC. But you know, you're young, single. There were lots of things to do. It was a lot of fun. As a single guy - I never want to raise a family there- but as a single guy it was a lot of fun.

WORTHINGTON: Was the office at that point that you worked in? Was it at Main Interior?

LEACH: No, it was in Arlington. It was called the Blue Goose Building. I don't know if you've ever been there.

That's where the office was.

WORTHINGTON: Who was your supervisor?

LEACH: Dave Wesley. And I think he's since, well, last I heard, wasn't he the deputy regional director in Portland?

WORTHINGTON: I don't know. Did you live in Arlington then?

LEACH: Yeah, it was really interesting. I lived with two other guys. One was he worked for a National Geographic, and the other guy was the sportswriter for the Baltimore paper. I got to go to some behind the scenes activities for National Geographic, downtown DC. And any time I wanted to go to a baseball game, the Baltimore Orioles. We'd go to go with the baseball writer, and he'd get us in free and we'd get up to the press boxes. It was kind of fun.

WORTHINGTON: So, the work that you did for Ecological Services and the Endangered Species Program, were they working on listing packages or what do you remember what the types of jobs you had there?

LEACH: It was not much listing. It was mostly Section Seven consultation and research projects on T & E species. What they, you know, where we wanted to spend money to gain additional insights into these critters. Some section seven consultations I worked on.

That was the bulk of it.

WORTHINGTON: Do you remember which species that you did the consultations work on?

LEACH: You know, I remember some work on the snail darter. There was some timber wolf consultation so that I knew coming from Agassiz in Minnesota, but it was all over the board. There was no one species that I remember as a standout.

WORTHINGTON: What were some of the main things you learned in that career path there in headquarters? What were some of the takeaway lessons that you brought with you forward?

LEACH: Well, the political interest in wildlife conservation and in the Endangered Species program, it was pretty evident that Congressional members were going to get involved with your day-to-day work assignments. And I got to go over to the Hill, tag along and watch some of the debates and some of some of the meetings that upper-level management had with congressional staff. And that really did leave an impression on me that while the biology speaks for the biology, there's more to making a decision than just the biology.

WORTHINGTON: So, what came next and how did you get your next job?

LEACH: The Washington office experience was a good experience, but again, I wanted to get closer to family. And thankfully, I didn't meet anybody out there that I wanted to marry, or I would probably have a different career path. So, I came back to Minnesota.

I got a job working for ES in the regional office. No. Excuse me. It was not the regional office at that time. They had Area Offices and I worked in the Twin Cities Area Office in ES doing the Endangered Species stuff that happens, you know, traditionally in an ES office and having the refuge experience early in my years or career with the Service and then contrasting them with what I was doing with ES, I knew I wanted to get back to refuges and there were multiple courses that I could have taken or routes I should say. I stayed in the Area Office for probably 2 or 3 years and that's when I met Patti, my future wife.

And, I think from the Area Office, I went to the regional office to work under Rick Shultz and the Partners program.

WORTHINGTON: Okay. So, the Area Office was in Saint Paul at that time. Was, is that right?

LEACH: That is correct.

WORTHINGTON: And I'm trying to remember who the Area manager was. Was it George Bekeris?

LEACH: It was George Bekeris.

WORTHINGTON: And I think Dick Toltzman was maybe the assistant Area manager?

LEACH: I think he was.

WORTHINGTON: So, George Bekeris was the Area manager, but your responsibilities were more in the Ecological Services side of the house? And then your next job was in the regional office then.

LEACH: Working under Shultz, there was the blossoming Private lands program and Shultz was the assistant to Bob Lang. Bob Lang was the head of the Private Lands program at that time.

That was the brand-new program. Brand new program created by the 1985 Farm Bill, 1985 farm bill. And Jim Gritman was really instrumental in getting the partners program established, I think Region three and the Mid-Continent program by, help me, Tom, the guy from Fergus Falls,

WORTHINGTON: Carl Madsen?

LEACH: Carl Madsen Yeah, yeah. They the Mid-Continent program basically showed the Service that we could take easements to protect habitat on private land from private landowners. And then through the 85 farm bill, the doors were thrown wide open about what the Service could do on private lands. And Jim Griffin was an advocate of that. He and the regional director from Region six and I forget the guy's name at this time, but they partnered and really pushed the partners program at the national level.

WORTHINGTON: And so, you made the switch from the Ecological Services to the Refuge program in the regional office over at Fort Snelling. Working for Rick Shultz. Who was he and Bob Lang were kind of the first staffers to work on the partners program.

LEACH: That was correct.

WORTHINGTON: Do you remember what year was that that you came over to the Fort Snelling? Do you remember?

LEACH: I'd be guessing it was mid to late 80s.

WORTHINGTON: Okay, I remember when I came to the regional office from Minnesota Valley Refuge, I remember when Bob Lang first came and he was, he was a wildlife veterinarian, I believe, that had worked in Federal Aid, I can't remember how, how he came to the regional office, but it was he was kind of a surprise hire. But I remember him being on the phone constantly talking to state people, trying to figure out what exactly they the role of the Fish and Wildlife Service would be and developing a partners program.

And then I do remember when Shultz came over with a real gung-ho attitude about things, right? What did you guys work on? What kind of jobs did you get going? How did you get it started?

LEACH: Well, at that time, when the farm bill was first passed, the service had a role in consultation with well, it was then Soil Conservation Service and on wetland determinations. And we were involved with

wetland determinations, appeals, the whole gamut of things. And we really looked at wetlands through a different lens than SCS did. And that was soon realized by congressional folks. Our congressman in northwest Minnesota, who was the chair of the committee, Collin Peterson, realized that he needed to get the Fish and Wildlife Service out of wetland determinations.

And in subsequent farm bills he was successful in really eliminating our role. And really the only thing we did with the farm bill then was restoring habitats on private lands. So also, when the farm bill was first passed, there was a lot of farms that were going defunct, and they were offered to the Fish and Wildlife Service to become part of the refuge system.

And if there were restorable wetlands or key habitats for endangered species, we would put easements on those lands or take the property in fee title. And we worked a lot on that as well.

WORTHINGTON: So, a lot of it was, as I understand, farmers were paid money from either the Service or the Department of Agriculture to protect their land as habitat. They're getting subsidized for habitat protection.

LEACH: No, it wasn't subsidized, it was debt forgiveness.

WORTHINGTON: Okay. So, they were getting loan forgiveness by protecting habitat and then in some cases, of easements would transfer over to the Fish and Wildlife Service and they would get debt relief for those conversions.

LEACH: Correct. Okay.

WORTHINGTON: Do you remember what the attitude was like between the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Soil Conservation Service as these programs were getting developed and implemented?

LEACH: Well, it's really interesting. I think there was a transition going on within the SCS at that time. They were getting new younger employees into the agency, and they were environmentally conscious for the most part. The old timers with SCS really did not like the role the Fish and Wildlife Service played. Uh, SCS was always the white hat guys to the farmers, and through the 85 farm bill they had to be the bad guys sometimes making wetland determinations.

And you know, in the prairie regions of region three and six, tile drainage was really rampant, especially in region three. And if a wetland had any signs of previous drainage history, SCS would identify the wetland as a PC - prior converted -and the Fish and Wildlife Service would oppose that a lot of time.

And because most hand dug tile lines were not effective at totaling removing the wetland character of a wetland. It just diminished the value of it. It removed most of the surface water. So, we were always at odds with SCS on wetland determinations and drainage.

WORTHINGTON: So, after working with the Partners program, where did you go to next?

LEACH: I think I transferred to the North American Plan under Jerry Schotzko. Again, North American was the North American Waterfowl Management Plan, I should say that was under refuges as well at that time and worked for Jerry for a couple of years until Jerry, I think transferred down to southeast Minnesota. They moved him down to southeast Minnesota working on some projects. That's where he was living for the time that I knew Jerry was commuting from southeast Minnesota to the Twin Cities.

And then when Jerry left the North American, I became the Joint Venture coordinator for Region three.

WORTHINGTON: What was involved in the joint venture work?

LEACH: That was really an interesting program from a standpoint of, you got to work with a diversity of partners. Ducks Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, state conservation organizations. So, you were really working with partners to protect habitat, protect or restore habitat for waterfowl on public and private lands. So, what was really nice about the North American Plan a couple of years after the plan was signed by Canada, Mexico, and the United States.

There were some people like the Harvey Nelsons of the world that saw that they needed a funding source for the North American Plan and start lobbying Congress for what eventually turned out to be the Wetland Conservation Act. And through that act, it made federal dollars available to all three countries to do wetland conservation on the North American continent.

WORTHINGTON: Okay. So, you in that job, you worked with a lot of external partners throughout the region, not just Minnesota, I presume?

LEACH: Exactly. Really? All over the country.

WORTHINGTON: Do you remember working with Harvey Nelson directly at all? I remember he set up the first national office, didn't he, after he left the regional director job?

LEACH: Yeah. He was working for the Minnesota Waterfowl Association after he retired from the Service. And I worked with Harvey quite a bit.

WORTHINGTON: Okay. At what point? I remember you spent a year with the Minnesota. With the state government? When was that? Do you remember?

LEACH: That was my time with the partners program. I did a detail two years, but I think it was one-and-a-half-year detail with the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency. PCA understood that water quality was terrible, especially in the agricultural regions of Minnesota. That wetlands were an integral part of water quality. And they wanted somebody from the Service to come show them how do you identify drained wetlands? How do you restore wetlands and how do you protect wetlands so that they could perform their water quality function for perpetuity? So, I accepted that assignment, went over, worked for PCA.

I think it was about a year and a half, two years, and then came back to the North American program.

WORTHINGTON: So, you were kind of a loaned executive from the Fish and Wildlife Service. Is that right? You remained an employee of the Service and you kept your career status?

LEACH: I did. It was the Service paid my salary. I had full benefits again or the same benefits I had with the service. It was just I was on loan to the state.

WORTHINGTON: That certainly gave you some insights, I suspect, into how the state government was operating. And again, you got to meet a whole raft of new partners.

LEACH: I did. It was really insightful for me to see the programs that Pollution Control was involved with. But again, I got to see the political influence of the state legislature on their programs.

Agricultural runoff was known to be a big issue at that time, but the farm lobby went to the legislature and really had them in their back pocket. So, anything they wanted to do that was anti farmer. The AG lobby would make their legislators aware of their wishes and most often had to pull back.

WORTHINGTON: Interesting. Okay. I remember that you had that year and a half detail, and you came back and then join the North American Group. After that, I think pretty shortly after that.

LEACH: Yep, you're right. Yeah.

WORTHINGTON: So, what would you describe some of the highlight activities working in the North American program or the joint venture program?

LEACH: Well, two things that I will say, working with a diversity of partners, it really gave me a different perspective of wildlife conservation. It opened up doors that we as a Service could not have opened up. The partners could lobby. And it was really instrumental in promoting legislation. You could understand that they have the very similar goals than the Service did relative to wildlife conservation, but they could actually go into Congress and lobby. And that was really intriguing to me. And I paid a lot attention to that because it paid dividends in the future. And then the other thing that I would say is the ability to put more conservation on the landscape. Working with partners, it was it was really interesting to see how much more habitats could be affected with everybody working in the same direction rather than the Service going alone.

WORTHINGTON: Do you remember some of the names of the of the key partners that you worked with in Ducks Unlimited or pheasants Forever?

LEACH: Oh, sure. Mike McGinty, with the Minnesota Waterfowl Association. He was the president of that time. Joe Dugan was vice president for Pheasants Forever. I was able to get Pheasants Forever on the North American Council, which decided where the North American Wetland Conservation Act funds would go. So that was kind of cool. With Ducks Unlimited I worked with Scott Sutherland from Washington, DC. Scott and I worked on a lot of the legislation, legislative stuff together.

Those are the names that come to mind real quick.

WORTHINGTON: And I imagine. Did you work with the Nature Conservancy as well? Were they involved in many of these?

LEACH: Oh, they very much were. I had started the Upper Miss Great Lakes Joint Venture and we had a TNC representative on that council. Her name was Mary McConnell. She was out of Indiana. And boy, what a spark plug for conservation. And she saw the value of partnering and had very similar priorities with the Service and other partners relative to wetland and grassland conservation. So, Mary was a key figure at that time for the Nature Conservancy.

WORTHINGTON: So, what came next after the joint venture job?

LEACH: Well, then one of my mentors prodded me to apply for a refuge supervisor job. Nita Fuller. Nita, Fuller asked me if I would be interested in the job. And, you know, it was a big job. I'd always watched Matt Kerschbaum or Ed Crozier, you know, those guys that were in that job. Uh, Bill Hutchinson, JC Bryant. You know, you watching those guys? I knew the issues that they were involved with, and I was somewhat intimidated because I didn't have the refuge experience that any of those guys had with the true Refuge program in a supervising field office and all day-to-day activities on refuges. Well, I'd been a part of the Refuge program. I just I didn't have as much experience as those guys did.

Nita really encouraged me to apply, and I trusted Nita immensely. So, I did apply. Believe it or not, I got the job and was thrust into the refuge supervisor ranks.

WORTHINGTON: Nita was the Assistant Regional Director for Refuges at that time.

LEACH: That is correct.

WORTHINGTON: So which field stations did you supervise? Which states did you have then?

LEACH: When I first became the refuge supervisor, I had the eastern part of the region. Don Hultman had a lock on the states that I wanted. So, Don for good reason, had immense experience and knowledge of the Refuge program that I didn't.

So, it was. I think Indiana. Ohio. Illinois, and I think either Michigan or Wisconsin.

WORTHINGTON: And so, you supervised directly at that point the refuge managers in those states?

LEACH: That is correct.

WORTHINGTON: Do you remember what were some of the key issues that were happening at that time or any of those stations?

LEACH: In Indiana, they had tried to establish a new refuge and it was Grand Kankakee National Wildlife Refuge. And there was some local support because having the previous joint venture experience, I knew all the waterfowl partners in the state. I knew where the state of Indiana was because I worked with all the states closely as the joint venture coordinator.

So, the Grand Kankakee Refuge was a big controversial project at that time. We even had a manager there. Tim Bowdeen. Tim Bowdeen was hired as our Grand Kankakee manager and Tim and I worked very closely and great employee, really busted his butt for the service.

That was one, in Wisconsin. I think I did a Wisconsin because of that time. Prior to that time, the state of Wisconsin was managing our WPAs, and they had made the decision. And I don't know why they made this decision that they wanted the Service to manage our own lands. I don't know if it was push back because they had a director for the State of Wisconsin that was a state rights guy, and he hated the partners program.

Or if it was just a budgetary issue that they had enough to manage with the state lands, they didn't need to be managing federal lands as well. I really don't know why that decision was made, but we had to reassert some responsibility of WPAs in Wisconsin and we established offices to do that in Wisconsin.

WORTHINGTON: And we established 1 or 2 offices then in the state. Do you remember?

LEACH: Yeah, I think there were two, um, one in the northwest and one of those southeast.

WORTHINGTON: So, Saint Croix.

LEACH: Right, And Leopold.

Leopold, Leopold Wetland Management District. I couldn't think of the name initially. Down in the Baraboo area.

WORTHINGTON: And so, you hired managers for those two wetland districts, I presume?

LEACH: Well, I did after the first offices were established. But somebody before me established those two offices. But that was still a big issue at the time, making that transition to management of WPA in Wisconsin.

WORTHINGTON: So, one of the, of course, main duties of the refuge supervisor was to supervise project leaders. How did that transition go for you? I know you had some supervisory experience before that, but this was probably really the full-time job was supervising people.

LEACH: Yeah. It really was. And as you well know, there there's all kinds of actors within the service, some extremely high performers, that all you have to do is give the direction and turn them loose. And there's others that you have to stay in close contact with because they get sidetracked really easy. And I had both I had some great employees at that time. Charlie Blair was over in Ohio, he was excellent. And when I first became Refuge supervisor, and then there were, there were others that were more of a challenge and Nita really helped me through some of those challenges immensely coaching me on what to do. She was, you know, impressed that I was willing to hold the line and hold employees accountable. So, you know, it was really interesting for me to see Nita.

And there were I don't know how to say this diplomatically, Tom, but, uh, we at the time in the Service were not very diverse. We didn't have a lot of women managers. We didn't have a lot of minority managers. And when I had issue with one of my managers that was a woman, I was real hesitant to bring it to Nita because I knew how she felt. And I was really conscious of that, too. I mean, I wanted to make sure of myself when I hold somebody accountable, that regardless of who they were, man, woman, or a minority individual, that I had all the facts that I was making the right decision.

And believe it or not, when I brought this issue to Nita's attention, I was expecting pushback, but I didn't. And it surprised the hell out of me because I knew I had done my homework to get the facts. And Nita concurred with me. And we moved forward and holding this person accountable. And I was really more impressed with Nita then than I had been before.

WORTHINGTON: Yeah. She had a strong moral compass for sure.

LEACH: Oh, she did. She was a great mentor of mine and of building employees, but I hold Nita in high esteem yet today.

WORTHINGTON: Was the Detroit River Refuge getting established at that time, Jim?

LEACH: It was. That was another one. That was a big one. And uh, I forget the individual that was hired as the manager. He was a, I think a Corps of Engineers employee. Do you remember the number name? Tom?

WORTHINGTON: So, he was a river navigator. He had a strange kind of composite job. It wasn't with the Corps of Engineers. It was with. I can't remember who it was at the time. It was a new kind of a hybrid position. Dr. John... well shoot, I can't remember either. Well, we'll fill that in later. The name will come back to me. He's retired now. [Dr. John Hartig is the name of the first manager, now retired] But, yeah, he was the first manager there at, uh, at Detroit River, for sure.

LEACH: That refuge and the establishment of that refuge was really kind of fun for me personally because I got to work very closely with Congressman John Dingell. Even went to one of John's Detroit's office and interviewed him.

And we got oral history from Congressman Dingell on why Detroit River was a refuge, an area worth refuge establishment. And also, some comments from Congressman Dingell on waterfowl and waterfall hunting in the Detroit River area. Really kind of a cool interview that I was able to do as refuge supervisor.

WORTHINGTON: Yeah, John Hartig was his name. So, you got to work with Representative Dingell directly and in person. And if I remember, didn't you do a celebration of the 50th celebration of the of the Small Wetlands Program?

LEACH: That was part of that interview as well.

WORTHINGTON: Right. Right. So, at some point, you're you shifted areas of coverage from the east part of the region to the western part.

LEACH: Yeah, I think when Hultman took the job on the river as a new refuge supervisor, it wasn't the refuge supervisor, but it was equal to just a different title. And Nita had enough confidence in me to give me the western part of the region where the WPA's were because she knew that was really the area that I held near and dear were the prairie areas of the region, and I had lots of experience with the states, lots of experience with the partners. And I knew most of our project leaders from my North American days. And I was somewhat of a known commodity.

WORTHINGTON: And if I remember, you made a many hires of new project leaders during your tenure there. Do you remember some of the selections that you made?

LEACH: Sure. There's Anne Sittauer for Sherburne. Barbara Boyle for Tamarac, Scott Glub at Litchfield WMD.

Uh, Bruce Freske at Morris? Todd Luke Windom. And I even hired Barry Christiansen for Windham before Todd.

WORTHINGTON: And was Maggie Anderson already up at Agassiz or did you hire her?

LEACH: Maggie was already there. I didn't have the pleasure of hiring Maggie. Maggie was just a great employee and just a great person. She's a fun person to deal with, even with her squeaky voice.

WORTHINGTON: You're well known as a terrific supervisor of your project leaders. What were some of the approaches you took to managing the people?

LEACH: Well, the probably the worst part of being a refuge supervisor was supervision. But the most important job of a supervisor is supervision. So, I spent a lot of time supervising, staying in contact with my employees. Remote supervision is a is an art. And I think the way you excel at that art is by constant contact phone calls, emails, visiting your stations at least once or twice a year, paying attention to what you hear in the grapevine.

And I think I did all of those things pretty well. You could always do better. And that was really the key. I mean, I would give broad goals and objectives to field staff stepped down from what Nita wanted or what Schultz wanted, or you know, you guys wanted that were assistant regional directors or deputies.

And, and we'd give broad charges and then I'd hold folks accountable for, you know, throughout the year, not just during performance review. Most project leaders knew what I was thinking before we had performance review time. So, if I knew of an issue or if I had concerns about an issue, I would talk about it directly with the project leader and they'd know my concerns. Nothing was hidden or off limits.

As far as discussing with any of them. And I really felt good that many of them would bring up personal things to me. You know, because I was concerned about their families, I was concerned that they had balance between their personal and professional lives. You know, the Fish and Wildlife Service or any job is important, but it is in my mind the way I supervised it came secondary to your family.

Well, to be honest with you, it came secondary to your religious beliefs as well.

WORTHINGTON: Yeah, well, you were known, I think, as a model supervisor, and I remember the care you took in your performance reviews, in contrast to some other supervisors who didn't really take a lot of time. Could you just talk about your performance review process with your managers?

LEACH: Yeah, I'd set aside a minimum of an hour for a discussion, and we would discuss priorities at that station, how they accomplished them, how they supervised their interactions with partners, any of the major problems that they had with staff or with partners. And then I'd always want my project leaders at the end of our discussions to critique me. I mean, were there things that I could do better for them? Are there things that I was doing that was hindering their performance? You know, if I was doing something unconsciously that that annoyed them, I wanted to know. It was an open discussion. I, I knew I was not God's gift of supervision and anything that I could do to improve if it was reasonable that I could control, I would do it.

WORTHINGTON: The other area that I think you excelled at in in my looking back is the land acquisition program as a supervisor of the wetland management districts especially, which is a continual acquisition mode. Talk a little bit about your strategy for how to choose where to acquire lands.

LEACH: Well, knowing the WPA program stretches from the Dakotas, eastern Montana, you know, east to Minnesota and south to Iowa. But in Region three, it's exclusively in three states for the most part Minnesota, Iowa, and Wisconsin with a few WPAs in Michigan.

My strategy really was... With the limited migratory bird dollars that we had. We had to acquire the best of the best. And from a duck production standpoint, we went back to the biology and looked at the biology and the best duck production habitat in Region three was in western Minnesota and north central Iowa.

So, my strategy and I promoted it to my supervisors, and they gave me the blessing to implement it was to use migratory bird dollars to acquire drained wetlands in Minnesota and northern Wisconsin and excuse me, northern Iowa, not Wisconsin. Wisconsin could still acquire wetlands for as well as Michigan, but they had to use other funding sources like the North American Wetland Conservation Act, state grant programs.

However, they could find money in the project. Leaders in Michigan and Wisconsin that were aggressive and to go after other dollars besides migratory bird dollars were rewarded during performance review time.

But in Minnesota and Iowa, we further looked at where in those states was the best of the best duck production habitat. And we used references, past survey information, and then project leader knowledge,

project leader staff and knowledge to identify where the priority areas we should be acquiring and where we should not be acquiring. And other thing the other part of this equation besides where's the best biological habitat is, where can we as a Service and we as a wetland management district program manage this additional habitat without additional staff? And when you acquire land, it requires management. If we were going to be the premier land management agency within federal government, I told my project leaders, we have to manage habitat, so get your ass out there and manage either through fire, water, management, however you're going to do it. Restoring wetlands. We needed to show the public that we were managing habitat and that our land just did not grow up in the trees through lack of attention.

So, the biological aspect was one part of it was the best of the best for ducks. And then the other part of it is where could we manage without additional staff? And we really focused on round outs to existing WPAs and that's where my project leaders at that time were really looking for, for land acquisition round outs to existing WPAs Well, our acreage was going up the time travel was essentially the same. So that's how we really focused. Biologically, what was the best habitat to acquire? Where in their district? And then second of all, prioritized round outs versus new standalone WPAs.

WORTHINGTON: Interesting. And the biological information, I know you used a lot of the data that was developed by the Habitat and Population Evaluation team, the HAPET group that was funded by migratory birds and part and by Region six. In part they developed what you call the thunderstorm maps. Can you just describe that just a little bit, that science and how you used it?

LEACH: Sure. That again, just one of the tools that help us focus where we did land acquisition. It was the HAPET office, as you described, was really a biological office that was formed to implement the North American Waterfowl Management Plan. So those are two offices, one in Bismarck, one in Fergus Falls. And those two offices were really looking at duck biology.

What was the important things for duck biology in the prairie landscape? And I would take the data that they would produce the numbers of pairs that would settle on the landscape, the numbers of wetlands that are in a district, or the geographic area of a district. And together with the project leaders and their staff, we would form priority areas within a wetland management district for land acquisition.

And everybody was on the same page. While I was there on where they wanted to acquire. Every once in a while, we would have an outlier that a project leader would want to buy for some other reasons, social reasons, or local politics. And we would discuss the merits of that. And sometimes we would acquire outside of our focus areas and sometimes we would not.

WORTHINGTON: That was a remarkable use of, I think, the science and the partnerships to help convey that. The other remarkable partnership I think you helped developed was when Minnesota passed the Legacy Act, where a percentage of sales tax dollars was dedicated to a conservation efforts. You really helped the Service become a full partner in how to use some of those conservation dollars at the state had.

LEACH: A lot of people thought I was wasting a lot of time that the state government would never give state dollars to a federal agency for land acquisition. And again, it's all those previous contacts that I had made with the partner organizations, with state agencies that gave me a glimmer of hope that we could do it. We just saw the state focused on the goal. And luckily at that time, Tom, you know, you and Nita were in control of the refuge program. Pat Carroll was an instrumental ally in the land acquisition program to help me convince the state, that it was a good deal for them to give us state dollars for acquisitions and those WPAs would be open for public hunting for perpetuity.

And it's one of my highlights in my career to do that, knowing that that legacy will carry on and that we've protected thousands of acres of habitat in Minnesota because of that partnership with the legacy program in Minnesota.

WORTHINGTON: And if I remember correctly, the state dollars would go to a partner like Pheasants Forever or the Nature Conservancy, who will actually do the acquisition work. And then we would then it would be transferred to the Fish and Wildlife Service for management. Something along those lines?

LEACH: Yeah. Initially the dollars were going to come to the Service, but there were some technical issues with that happening, so we had to scramble to come up with Plan B and Plan B was to have the dollars go to an NGO who could spend the more efficiently than we could, and as long as their priorities were the same as ours and that's where the thunderstorm maps came in again and the focus areas of the Service. Pheasants Forever, Ducks Unlimited, all the partners, the Nature Conservancy, who did Tallgrass Prairie National Wildlife Refuge acquisitions for us.

Their priorities were identical with the Service priorities - so very infrequently that we have any discussions about the priority of this acquisition versus another we were in lockstep with Pheasants Forever, Ducks Unlimited and the Nature Conservancy on where we would acquire lands with Legacy funding. And then you're right, eventually once all the land acquisition was done, the title work, the surveys then and the habitat was restored, which was almost at no cost to the Service except for staff time.

It was just a gift horse that. Unbelievable. We couldn't walk away from, and I think the Service is still enjoying the benefits of that program.

WORTHINGTON: Yeah, absolutely. It seemed it seemed to me that your experience in the joint venture and then with the state and with the habitat acquisition, it was just a perfect confluence. If I remember you, you spend as much time with the partners as you did with your project leaders. It seems like it at times and had remarkable achievements. So, at some point, Jim, you decide to take a job with the Minnesota DNR. How did that happen?

LEACH: You want the truth, or you want me to be politically, correct?

WORTHINGTON: Well, you know, this will become of it'll be a public document. So, you have to decide what you want to describe. And you can use any words you'd like.

LEACH: Well, let's just say that I was feeling it was time for me to do something different. My work with the Service, I had really some things that that I had accomplished that I was very proud of. You mentioned the Legacy connection with, with the WPAs, with the Northern Tallgrass Prairie National Wildlife Refuge. I'm very proud of those. I'm also proud of having my fingers in establishing Glacial Ridge National Wildlife Refuge. That one is a big one for me as well, but I looked at the horizon and the year that I decided to retire, and I didn't know what the future held for the Service. Given some of the leadership at that time. And it was not going in the direction that I thought I would be supportive of.

So instead of trying to fight it, I decided it was probably time for me to leave and the State was interested in me coming to work for them. The state of Minnesota. And I told them that I was interested in the idea to let me know when something that came up that they thought I would be interested in. And sure enough, a Director job came available with the retirement of the of a good friend who was the Director before me, and the State asked if I'd be interested in applying for it.

And I did. And lo and behold, I was selected as the Director for the Fish and Wildlife Division for Minnesota DNR.

WORTHINGTON: And let's see. That would have been.... What year was that?

LEACH: 2016, April/March 2016.

WORTHINGTON: So, you retired from the Fish and Wildlife Service and then became the Minnesota DNR Director of Fish and Wildlife. So, describe let's take a few minutes and talk about that job if you're okay. I'd love to hear about that and how it was different and how it was similar in some ways.

LEACH: Well, it was a great job. It was just everything was new. Everything from the programs to the administrative stuff to the computer work. Everything was new. So, I was starting in a higher echelon position with the state without any of the past experience on their policies, on their processes. The only thing that I had going for me was I knew the biology and I knew the state of Minnesota pretty good as well as the partners.

So, it was uphill learning state processes and policies.

And it was a great job from a learning experience.

Having attended the Advanced Leadership Development program within the Fish and Wildlife Service, I really had to fall back on some of those skills because I had to rely on a lot of staff to get information for me, and I had to rely on staff to provide their best biological opinion on issues before I could make a decision that I would recommend to the Commissioner. So, it really pulled out those strengths that I had.

To rely on other people in those types of jobs. You can't have enough time to research or know the history. You know, the biology. But the biology is only present day. What led up to this point and I didn't have that history. And the other thing that I didn't have was the knowledge of which DNR staff could be trusted with good information to do a good job, and which couldn't.

And that was a challenge also that I had the luxury within the service because I knew everybody, and I knew the history of these employees. I didn't have that with the state. So, it was a learning experience, trial by error. And I made some mistakes trusting some people that I thought were reliable that really weren't. And I think what happened in any new job for sure, but it was trial and error. We had some major issues within my division from walleyes in Lake Mille Lacs, to wolves. to chronic wasting disease in the deer herd in southeast Minnesota.

And all of these issues were major issues within DNR, but almost more importantly, they were major issues on the political front in Minnesota. So, the governor was interested in every issue that that hit the newspaper. And we were briefing his staff weekly on issues; Mille Lacs was almost a weekly update for the governor's staff, which there was not a decision we would make that would please anybody.

And we were constantly hammered on Mille Lacs, on CWD (chronic wasting disease), wolves would raise their political head periodically. But I found out that, well, I was involved with the political process at the federal level, at the state level, it's really closer to home. You can get one constituent calling a legislator and that legislator will get in touch with the department that has that issue. So, we were constantly referring or responding to legislative requests for information we'd have to brief legislative staff.

And it finally got to a point and, this most recent election in 20, what was it, 2018 or 2019 when the governor changed hands? The commissioner and assistant commissioner that hired me were, were not

asked back. I decided it was time for me to leave too, because I didn't like what I saw coming in and it was time for me to do something else.

And now I have a job that no supervision, no priority, or nothing that I have to do, that I have to worry about, and I can enjoy it. It's a mindless job that's kind of fun.

WORTHINGTON: And that's working at a golf course, right?

LEACH: Working on the golf course, running specialized equipment to keep the golf course looking good.

WORTHINGTON: Well, you had a remarkable career of great achievements for conservation in the Midwest and in the nation for sure, Jim. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about that I haven't had a chance to visit with you about that that you want to describe?

LEACH: I thought it would come up, but I'm going to mention it. I could be the first, second generation Lebanese American that's ever worked for the service.

WORTHINGTON: Well, you probably are. So, tell me about your parents. Did they immigrate from Lebanon? No.

LEACH: My parents were both born in the U.S. My grandparents came from Lebanon. And like I say, I'm second generation Lebanese American. And I did, you know, the ancestry.com. My kids wanted to see if I was totally full blood. And the ancestry.com came back that I'm 98% Lebanese and 2% Middle Eastern, whatever the hell Middle Eastern means.

WORTHINGTON: When did your grandparents come?

LEACH: That was in the 1920s.

WORTHINGTON: And they moved to Minnesota.

LEACH: My grandfather on my mother's side or my father's side did for sure. I think my grandfather on my mother's side, for whatever reason, located in Crookston, Minnesota. Just west of Glacial Ridge.

You know, I looked up immigration, then and looked at immigration now, and, boy, my grandparents were not helped one bit by the government. They scratched and saved and did odd things and they made a living for themselves that I look at my parents and my mom was a full-time housekeeper, but my dad really was the breadwinner for the family, and he worked his ass off and they both sacrificed for their family, and they lived the American dream. They did something that I hope we can leave for our children.

WORTHINGTON: Well, this has been great, Jim. I really appreciate you taking the time and visiting. And as I described the process, this recording, I'll send the tape recorder to NCTC and they'll do the transcriptions and they're getting better at it, but it'll be months, so you'll have forgotten all about it. And then one day I'll give you a call and say, hey, it's coming. You'll get a chance to look it over and make any, you know, factual corrections you want, or if there's anything you want to change, we'll work on that at that point in time.

And then the other thing, at some point I'll need to get from you that waiver form, but that can come down the road that, that gift and waiver release just so that information will come public.

LEACH: When we get together for dinner on our deck. We can do it then.