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Ann Hodgson (AH): This is Dr Ann Hodgson with the University of South Florida Library Special Collections. We're here at the Corkscrew [Swamp] Sanctuary and this afternoon we're going to be talking with Allyson Webb, who is the senior resource manager at the sanctuary. We'd like to also acknowledge the funding for our interview series and thank the Duckwall Foundation for their support of this interview program. Allyson, it's great to see you. How are you?

Allyson Webb (AW): I'm great. Thank you very much.

AH: I'd like to start by just asking you how did you get interested in nature and what was your experiences growing up that, you know, fast forwarded you to be here at the Corkscrew [Swamp] Sanctuary.

AW: So, my parents were very outdoorsy people. They liked hiking and nature. So, our family trips every summer, family vacations, initially were always camping trips. So that always got us interested, myself as well as my brothers, in being outdoors. And I also grew up not too far from a creek, and about forty acres of undeveloped land in suburbia outside of Dallas, Fort Worth, which is where I grew up. And so, I spent a lot of my weekends—we would go, “Hey mom, I'm going creeking”. And we would just disappear for the entire day, walking with a backpack with food and water in it and exploring the creek—back and forth catching fish, catching tadpoles. All sorts of things like that. So, that led me to—and then I also had a real passion for animals. And just loved wildlife so, when I went to Texas A&M, I was initially thinking that school. And then I met chemistry and chemistry said “no”. So, I was like, “What am I going to do? I still want to be involved with animals.” So, I started looking at behavioral ecology. So, I ended up actually getting my degree from Texas A&M in just biology, but I have a minor in chemistry and I took a lot of classes in behavior ecology and animal behavior courses. So, it's an emphasis in that field. Then, I also did Peace Corps. I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Haiti from September of 2001 to

November 2003. And that's really eye opening to see what happens if you don't have the means to take care of the environment the way that we really can in developed countries.

So, when I came back to the US, my mom had moved to Florida, in Estero. And so, I came back and she was diagnosed with cancer a week later. And so, I stayed. And she actually introduced me to Corkscrew. So, she and I would butt heads and she was like, "You need to get out of the house. Why don't you try volunteering somewhere? You should check out this place Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary." And I was like, "okay". So, I went online and I was like "Oh, this looks really neat." And I came down after reaching out to Sally Stein, who is the adult education—adult program coordinator but she was also the volunteer coordinator, she did double duty back then. And, we went out on a walk on the boardwalk and I was like, "Man, this place is beautiful". And so, I started as a volunteer here in June of 2004, and I can still remember Jason Lauritsen was the land manager at the time. And I remember the first time I went into the field with him, because the first two times I volunteered I was helping with sharpening chainsaws, and I was like "Alright, this is not what I expected but, well, it's a new skill." And then he was like, "Oh, I have this Ameri-Corps group coming in and were going to go and treat Brazilian pepper." And I was like, "Sweet, my first time to do herbicide application" and started to learn about the invasive species.

I got home that afternoon and I had about fifty fire ant bites, bunch of mosquito bites, I gotten cut because I wasn't paying attention—I'm a bull in a China shop when I'm in the woods I just really am not paying much attention about what's around me but at the same time I am. I'm just looking out for critters as opposed to thorns and something like that. And I had gotten into an ant pile because I had to crawl, because the way that Brazilian pepper grows, is that I had to crawl to the base of and I ended up in an ant pile and I'm getting bit by ants. And my mom was like, "Are you even going to go back?" And I was like, "You know I really liked it. It was challenging. It was different. It was quiet." It really appealed to I guess the introvert in me along with just the cool stuff we saw, the deer, all the different birds. I'm not a huge birder. I've learned over the years to appreciate birds so much more now than I did when I was a kid. When I was a kid, I was like, "Oh, there goes a Blue Jay" you know, kind of a thing. So, that's really when I was like, "Well, I'm going to keep volunteering here."

Meanwhile, I was working part time and about a year later I was volunteering so much that Ed Carlson at one point—they had an intern program and I was with one of the interns and he'd come into the library and looks at me and he goes, "Are you like an unpaid intern I didn't know about? Because you're here a lot." Because I was volunteering like thirty hours a week roughly at that time because I had a part time summer job. But it was weekends, so during the week, my mom was very independent and most of the time she didn't want me helping her getting to and from her chemo or stuff like that. So, I was like, "Well, I want to be doing something", so I would come out here. I remember another time working in between exit and entrance boardwalk, we were hand pulling baby Peruvian primrose-willow. And the other intern that was working with me, she and I were like, "Man, it's kind of hot out here, let's both take a little breather." Then we both fell asleep. We had sat down where we thought nobody could see us, but

apparently a couple of people came into the visitors' center were like "You've got like, some dead bodies out there". Somebody called Jason and Jason comes out and he took a picture and it's just like two sets of work boots sticking out from some dense brush and he showed me those pictures later. And I was like, "Oops, I mean it's hot, it's summer time, it wasn't wet yet but we had both fallen asleep and so, you know." So, I volunteered for three years, and I wanted to work here and I feel like I was— I don't know if you ever did road trips when you were kids, but when you're like five you want to get there. So, soon as you're in the car your like, "Mom, are we there yet?". You're that an obnoxious kid that's constantly "Are we there yet? Are we there yet?". So, every time I would saw Ed, "Are you hiring for the Panther Island Mitigation Bank position? Are you hiring for Panther— When are you hiring? When are you hiring?" kind of a thing and he was like "Jeez Louise, Allyson, we will let you know."

So, I remember, gosh, it was probably, over January of— December 2006 I believe, I got a phone call from the person that was the resource manager at the time and he's like, "Hey, you know, they posted the position." I was like "Oh, I got to go get my resume". I literally the next day was down here, tracked down Ed, and handed him my resume along with— Part of my resume now carries all the work I did with Peace Corps as well everything there. And I just handed it to him and he was like flipping through and he was like, "Oh I didn't know you did this, and this". And so, we ended up talking like an hour and a half it was probably the longest I had a one-on-one conversation with Ed. And then I never got called back for an interview. I never got an interview and I was like, "Aww, I guess I didn't get the job." And then I got a phone call around late February, early March, and it was the resource manager, Mike Knight, and he was like, "So, do you still want the job?". I was like, "Well, I never even got an interview." And he was like "You know when you turned in your resume and Ed just talked to you? That was your interview. Like, Ed just didn't tell you that was your interview." And I was like, "really?" and he was like "yeah". And I was like "Yeah. When do I start?" Like, "woohoo". So excited kind of a thing. So, I actually started as the resource manager for Panther Island Mitigation Bank for the portion of the land we were getting through the mitigation banking process in the northwest of the property. I started on April Fool's Day, 2007. So, that was like my trajectory to how I got here but, any questions from you guys about that? Is that kind of what you're looking for?

AH: Oh, absolutely. Fascinating background. So, tell us now that you're in the senior resource management position, what's your day like? What's you over all program like? How do you spend your time?

AW: So, it's changed a little bit because I started as just— "just" is not really the right word but, just a resource manager. So, my day to day was very much go into the field, find invasives, and kill them, kind of a thing. And that's 80% of my job when I started, and then prescribed fires. Those are the two big areas that we really focus on with land management. Panther Island Mitigation Bank is different in that, more of the Panther Island portion of the property we have now, is different in how intensively managed it has to be, because we have easements and legal obligations that are different than the rest of the sanctuary. You definitely have some ethical

moral and just some— The conservation ethics of we have invasives we want it to be as natural as possible so we need to be doing X, Y, and Z here, whereas at the mitigation bank you have to be doing it from a legal standpoint. So, there's some differences there. About a couple years ago, when I started as the senior resource manager, I started taking over instead of just making decisions for the land that I'm boots on the grounds for, which is the Panther Island portion of the property and the northwest corner. I also started making decisions on and helping to steer the program down here. And I took over also—six years ago, I took over the fire program from the previous resource manager. And really tried to turn that around because we don't burn as much as we need to like, there's not as much prescribed fire or even natural caused fires that are let to go as historically there really would have been. So those are my two main area focuses.

A typical day in the summertime is starting 6:30 or 7 o'clock in the morning, getting out in the field, getting your swamp buggy prepped—or ATV if your buggy is out of commission, or if your ATV and your buggy are out of commission, figuring out where you're going to go on foot that's close using a backpack sprayer. And then, you go out, and you treat. You're treating based on timing of the year which are what your species are, where those species are, which herbicide you're going to be using, how can you minimize the amount of herbicides that your using, do you want to be hand pulling in that area for some reason. If you have an endangered species, maybe you have a terrestrial endangered orchid, and you have an invasive grass that you need to be working on. Does that grass grow from rhizomes? Does it grow from stolons? So, you have to take into consideration the ecology of a lot of different plants to make your decisions on what are you going to do that day and how you're going to tackle that. And it has to fit into an overall overarching picture of what your long-term goals are, which is to maintain at a certain level, but if you have a new species of invasive introduced, you want to have an early detection rapid response, EDRR.

So, you have to constantly be serving for, “Hey, I've never seen that plant before. Let me get online and let me work a dichotomous key”, or cheat with Google Lens and you have, you know, I Seek and all these other programs now that you can use with the phones where you can take a picture and they can pull stuff up. Sometimes it just gets you to genus or I tap into resources like Jean McCollom, who was an intern years ago and is a phenomenal resource for us. She lives up the road. She and her husband, Mike Duever, and she's a wealth of knowledge. She is somebody that I'm constantly like, “Hey Jean, I couldn't figure out this plant online can you help me out?”, kind of a thing. And if it's something that's not native, then you start looking to if is it something where others are seeing issues to reach out to other land managers in the area saying, “Hey, this is a plant, you know, is this something you're seeing issues with, or is it something that's naturalizing? Is it something that's a one-off, that will probably die off?”. So, you have to make a decision then based on that.

So, there's a lot of rapid assessment going through my brain constantly when I'm out there. So, then you do your work for the day and then you clean up your equipment at the end of the day. Store it overnight and make sure it's secure. That's a really typical day in the summer. When we're doing fire, you know, you might do fire prep or you're going out on the tractor and you're

actually mowing your fire lines first and then you go back and you disc it. Then you go back and you box blade it, pour the soil back in, so you minimize erosion or causing— If you do the same fire line over and over and over again and you never box blade it eventually you actually cause the ground to drop and it can change the hydrology a little bit, which we have some of our fire lines are like that. It drives me bonkers. So, I'll spend time on the tractor which I actually really love because it's too long and if you do it a couple days in a row wildlife becomes kind of habituated. And so, there are times where they'll be a, you know, small herd of deer and they know I'm out there and they don't care, they just forage 10 feet from me.

Backpack spraying, actually, I remember one time early on in my career, there was a seven-point buck like, really big, thick fellow, and for a week I was backpack spraying one area because there was some sensitive stuff and I wanted to be really cautious with how I was approaching the phragmites that I was treating. And initially he just kept coming back and by the end of the week he would be within fifteen feet of me, just foraging, no problem. Because I would come park my ATV and I was on foot the rest of the day. And I never approached him and he never approached me and it was just like, mutual respect of like distance, kind of a thing. I think that's one of the great things about land management is, you have those moments with wildlife that not a lot of people get, you know? Unless you're feeding them but, we don't do that. We're a sanctuary. We want them to be as natural as possible, but he got used to my presence. And apparently, there was some good forage right there because he kept coming back to the same area that week, every day for a while. It just, I don't know if it's just his rounds or how but, that happened but—

So then, fire breaks and then a typical day for prescribed fire is kind of hectic because I'm the burn boss for all the prescribe fires. I'm the only burn boss we have right now. So, my day will start, I'll be up at crack of dawn, checking the fire weather, checking the regular weather, calling and submitting saying, "Can I get a spot weather forecast?". Which gives me a forecast for where we're actually going to be burning. Assessing whether or not the weather is correct—not whether the weather is correct, whether the weather is ideal for whichever unit we were targeting for that day. And then, meanwhile I'll have staff and volunteers that will get equipment prepped that day and there's a lot of equipment prep that goes on. And then, I have to call in. I like to call in, you can actually do it online the night before but I think that the human connection with forestry is important because, you know, at the end of the day if something does go wrong, they're there to back us up. And so, I think it important to have that relationship with them. And so, I tend to call mine in. I actually don't even have an online account to be able to do it online because I just feel so strongly about, you know—I know those people when I call in and there have been times when I've been able to pull up permit for us to burn and gotten an area supervisor permission to do that burn because I've built that relationship over the years.

We've actually partnered with North Collier Fire Departments, bring them out when we're short staffed because it's a mutually beneficial—they learn more about prescribed fire and how we function, because it's different when your setting fire versus when you're putting in structural fire out. So, there's this great collaboration that occurs with us and North Collier Fire Department in particular. But once I get the permit then I send the email out and I let my staff

know. We meet up and then we get in the field and then, we get to light stuff on fire. And there's a strategy to it. There's a lot of different ignition techniques that you want to take into consideration. And how I burn I am cognizant of wildlife in the area and, but we are burning larger tracks than we used to. The wildlife are adapted to fire and I get a lot of questions about that. And then at the end of the day, once we're done with ignition, we go around and we make sure that there's no fire open flames within so many feet of our perimeter of our burn unit. And then I stay on site if it's down here. If it's up at Panther Island, we don't have a facility up there. Down here I can crash in the bunk house. I've slept in my truck in the field before overnight, when I've had a fire where I was a little bit worried about it trying to creep or trying to jump a line overnight even though the open flame was way interior. I've done those multiple times. Not going to lie it is not very comfortable but, you know, it's what needs to be done to ensure the safety of the facilities, the safety of the neighbors, the safety the neighbors land even.

And then, the next day, we'll get up and start what's called "cold mop-ups" and we will go around and we'll check for hotspots, we'll make sure that there's no open flame. If there is an open flame within so many feet, then it's put out, we make sure it's cold. And depending on the timing of the year, how wet it is, a lot of factors go into, do I spend a second day doing that? At minimum the day after cold mop-ups, two days out from the actual fire, we monitor it. You go out and you still I will intentionally be doing exotics work in the vicinity where I have to pass it consistently. Because, you know, everybody thinks the fire itself is the most important thing. No, no, no. The cold mop-up and the monitoring afterwards to ensure that it doesn't go somewhere we didn't want it to go, those are, I think, the most important things that I can do. And so, fire is like is a four-day blur for me. Because it's just like [Allyson groans]. I feel like a duck, you know, a duck looks calm on the top but their little feet going like this. That's me because you need to project as a burn boss, you know, calm and confidence but meanwhile your brain the whole time is like, "What could go wrong? If this goes wrong, how am I going to mitigate it? Who am I going to call on? If this piece of equipment breaks, what am I going to do?". And it's better to be forewarned. Forewarned is fore-armed. So, I'm trying to think through all those things that could possibly go wrong ahead of time, so that I can react in a much faster way. Those are kind of the— I think that covers your question or maybe more extensively than you wanted.

Pause in recording

AH: This is Dr. Ann Hodgson with the University of South Florida Library and we're back with Allyson Webb. Allyson is the senior resource manager with Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary. Allyson we're really enjoying this interview, we're really appreciate your being here with us today. I wanted to follow-up just a little bit, you've described a couple of the key resource management activities that you do. Can you explain a little bit about why fire is so important in the South Florida ecosystem and what your overall fire program accomplishes in today's world?

AW: Sure. So, I do a lot of presentations on fire actually for the general public and one of the things I always say Florida is forged in fire and water. There's a dichotomy there that's really

important to recognize. And we're the lightning capital. So, historically before we had manmade structures and you had roads and things that would stop fires, people stopping fires too, you could have a lightning strike and it would carry. You would have the summer thunderstorms coming in at the peak of the dry season. And you have the lightning coming in and ripping, and so we still have a lot of wildfires that do start from lightning, although ninety percent of wildfires are human caused. So, we try to mimic that in a— I hate using the term “controlled”, but in a more controlled setting. And by controlled for me, I always use the term prescribed fire because I think it's a misnomer to say controlled. We don't have control over fire. It's a living, breathing entity. And once it's out of that drip torch and it's on the ground we are minimizing the risk of it getting out of our targeted unit and how do we do that? We do that by monitoring weather, by picking weather that is going to be optimal conditions for the unit that we're burning. By having trained personnel, by having the right equipment, by communicating with other land managers and others in the area about what we're doing, by letting fire departments know, “Hey, we're burning today.” So that if they get sixty calls about the smoke plume from my seventy-five-acre burn, then they know they know what it's coming from. Or that they know if I call them, I'm probably going to need assistance for something, kind of a thing.

So, fire is important for a lot of reasons. We have species of plants that require fire for them to germinate. I like to think of it as if I'm say, a bigger mammal, like a black bear or a Florida panther, when you're driving down [Interstate] 75 and you see a wall of vegetation, I don't want to have to go through that as a walk, you know? It's kind of a pain honestly. It's a lot of energy when you think about it for them to have to push through that vegetation. Well, if you have fires coming through regularly mimicking, wildfires then you're keeping those big brushy species in check. You're not going to eliminate them but you keep them in check by burning at the right time of year. So, its beneficial for them in that regard. It's also beneficial if you think about deer. Like, there's links between when deer drop fawn and when fire programs are and when fire historically is. So, when you have fire come through, you have lush new green grass coming up, well it's pulling those nutrients from that ash, and so it's more nutritious forage. So, when deer have young, then those young are then foraging when they start foraging on grass and supplementing for mothers' milk, its more nutritious for them, so there's that benefit. So, there's disease control in terms of disease and insects even. If you have insects coming into the area and they're not adapted to fire then you come through with fire that's going to help tick control actually. I remember reading an article about ticks and, that's kind of a random one but, if you have an area where its burned pretty frequently next to area isn't, you have increased rate of ticks in this area that hasn't burnt as frequently because it helps keep them in check. So, access. It opens up access to get to things like, to other invasives. And fire is a disturbance. Invasives species appliance tend to respond very well to disturbance.

So, one of the things that's from land management is you get fire through an area and then you can strategically come in and go, “Okay, six weeks afterwards, I'm going to go in and survey for something like Cogongrass” which is highly invasive. It's really difficult to kill and it's difficult to manage, but if you use fire and herbicides jointly, and you have an integrated plan, then you can eliminate it. Just using herbicide, you're not going to get rid of it, in my opinion. It opens up

access to allow you to do some of that, or if you want to hand-pull an invasive, you have an invasive that comes up, its more open. You can pick it up. You can pick it out. You can minimize disturbance of say, little blue maidencane, a really beautiful native grass that you want come in. There's a lot of different reasons for it. So, I do get a lot of questions in terms of prescribed fire. Not just the why we burn but the timing of the burns. And as people are becoming more engaged and more educated on prescribed fire, we do get questions about "Why are you burning in the winter?". Well, we have three hundred and sixty-five days in the year, out of those three hundred and sixty-five days, limit that down to say, six months where we really target fire. If you try to only burn, we have—we try to burn it—our goal is to burn a minimum of fifteen hundred acres a year. We don't hit that very often. We would have hit in 2020 but the pandemic shut us down. We were at almost at twelve hundred acres. We would have gotten that. But we tried to burn roughly fifteen hundred acres per year and that's actually some places, that's one fire for them. But because of our proximity and the encroachment of development we have to really be cautious about smoke.

There's a lot of legality and guidelines associated with smoke management specifically. We are pretty lucky in that we do have the swamp to burn into. So, you know, a lot of times we want an east wind or, from the North side we want North wind to push the smoke into the swamp. So, we're always looking at wind direction and where's the smoke going to go. How am I going to communicate with people where the smoke is going to go? Sorry, that was a side bar but, you know, we are behind. We need to be burning more frequently and so since we're behind we are still burning some in the winter. So, we'll start burning in December. I'll start looking and planning. We'll start prepping in November for higher priority units. And then, over time we also combine a lot of units. We also have a lot of small twenty-five acre, fifty-acre units. You get more bang for your buck, so to speak. It's a lot less stressful for me even too if we combine acreages. So, its beneficial to have them broken up into smaller units, so that you have access in case something does go wrong. Or if you want to burn later in the season and you call in for a permit and they're like you can't burn five hundred acres today then I can be like "Can I burn one hundred acres?". One hundred acres is better than no acreage, right? So, it changes the manageability in a way that is still strategic and allows you still be strategic and still achieve goals, even if it's a smaller acreage.

If you're burning something the size of a football field, you have a lot of lines all the way around there that you have to then monitor and maintain, but if you're burning something that's the equivalent of five football fields, you're actually getting a lot more taken care of in the interior and your actually overall monitoring less acreage in terms of your perimeter lines. So, we do try to combine them when it's feasible, when we feel it's safe and smart. If we need to, then we can use smaller units. So, we don't tend to burn at actually quite as big of acreage as say, [Fred C.] Babcock/ [Cecil M.] Webb Wildlife Management Area, to the north of us. They're one hundred and one square miles. They have burn blocks that are three thousand acres just for one burn. We also don't necessarily have the staffing. We use a lot of volunteers for something like that. We were trying to get caught up and get to the rotation where we can start burning more and more of our units in April and May. The problem is that when you get into April and May, you are

starting to get —April, May, June— you’re getting into wildfire conditions, and so we don’t want to stress an already stressed workforce.

Florida Forest Service does a great job of supporting us, but they’re also supporting Big Cypress, they’re supporting Everglades, they’re supporting Collier-Seminole preserve, they’re supporting Estero Bay Buffer Preserve, CREW [Land & Water Trust]. There’s a lot of acres that need to burn in this area honestly, and so you have to take into consideration if something goes wrong, what resources are available to assist you? So, there are times where I might be like, “Oh, I really want to burn this right now” but, I know that there are six wildfires in the region and it’s like “They’re not going to permit me today.” Maybe I can do this twenty acres instead of this three hundred acres. “Hey, guys. How are you doing?” That’s when the conversation—when you call in forestry and you have that conversation and say, “How are your resources? How are things going?” kind of a deal. And you have that give and take. But we’re trying to shift the timing to be more towards what is called a growing season burn so that we’re mimicking, more closely mimicking, natural fire regime because that’s when natural fires would be occurring. They wouldn’t be occurring in December. We’re not getting lightning storms come through in December.

But you have to burn when you can burn, so it’s balance there between “I really need to get fire on the ground, but what’s best for wildlife? What’s best for our long term?” So, we’re trying to make that shift so overtime, and we have started to get some of those units that haven’t burnt for a while like fifteen years, twenty years so you have a lot more debris, you have a lot more fuel in there that’s going to burn hotter. It’s actually more dangerous in a lot of ways. So, you’ve been hitting some of those and once you get that first fire in, you get that fuel down. Then you can come in two years later, three years later, run fire through it again. We have a fire management plan now. We have a land management plan that we’re in the process of updating. We updated five years ago. We created a fire management plan. It’s all focused on fire. What are we going to do, how are we going to time it? That guides us. We are updating it this year but every September I have a meeting with the conservation director, Marshall Olson, and Jean McCollom, she wrote it, and she picked stuff from my brain, and then she put it into a document for us, thankfully. And we literally sit down and say, “Okay, what went really well last year?” We document what we burned. I have notes on those and all of this goes into a document, we didn’t have that before. It’s more heavily documented now. And we can assess and we can say, “Okay, this burned well, so we’re not going to target this this upcoming year.” And we can prioritize based on what we accomplished the two years before and look at what’s about to no longer be in prescription and in maintenance. And by in maintenance, it has to burn within the last five years. We try and burn every two to five years. And once you get past a five-year mark, you’re like, “Aww crud, Allyson, you need to get that done” kind of a thing.

Now it’s not always feasible because we have equipment, hurricanes, and outside things that I have no control over. So, we’ve turned a good healthy corner where you can actually look at a graph and see where we used to be like, “Oh, we burned three thousand acres this year, or two

hundred acres, five hundred acres too.” Now we’re a little more consistent. We’re up there in the thousand range. We just need to keep improving on that so— That’s my job. Working on it.

AH: As you refer to the different units at the sanctuary, at Corkscrew Swamp, can you talk a little bit about what is the configuration of Corkscrew Swamp? Can you give a little bit of history? How did the sanctuary get selected and preserved? And then, in the context of how you manage, what the relationships of these different units, different habitat types? A little bit of background.

AW: Oh, sure. The sanctuary itself was started to protect the old growth bald cypress forest, and I think that’s a great story. There are probably others who can better tell that story. but I think it’s great because it was a grassroots movement. It was the neighbors putting their feet down and saying, “No, you’re not going to take our bald cypress. We don’t want that. We want this to remain.” And it also protected the rookery for the wood storks, as well as other species. So that’s how really Corkscrew got started. It was a grassroots effort to protect the virgin bald cypress forest. And then the benefit of Audubon coming in because of the rookery here, because of the nesting, the wood storks and the great egrets, the ibis, and all the other species that also nest here. Over time, acreage has been added. There’s been donations of land or there’s been grants and we’ve purchased land but, we’ve grown from, I want to say it started from like three thousand acres now we’re at thirteen thousand four hundred and fifty-ish, around there. So, we’ve definitely put on a lot of acreage. A lot of that acreage, honestly, is cypress forest, if you look at a map.

So, cypress forest doesn’t necessarily burn and I don’t want to —knock on wood— don’t want to curse myself because the lettuce lakes were from a hundred-year fire, kind of a thing. Drought and fire got into there and burnt down into the peat pocket. Peat fires last and smoke forever. Like, they’re pretty nasty. I don’t want to cause that. I will lose my burn license. So, we try and protect them but, with the way the other habitat types are at Corkscrew that are important for wood storks and other species is wet prairie. It’s a short hydroperiod. And by hydroperiod, I mean how long does it stay wet. That’s what a hydroperiod is. So, we have the cypress stay wet almost year-round, right? There are pockets in there that are going to be wet the whole entire year. And under drought condition it might dry out, but under a normal, typical year it’s not going to be completely dry in there. So, it has this buffer of moisture in the peat to protect it from fire in the peak of the dry season. But you also have wet prairie. We have upland species as well.

So, I’ll talk about the wet prairie first. So, there are different kinds of fire lines. You have hard lines which is literally where you go in and you mow and you disk and it is down to mineral soil. There’s nothing that can burn in that line. Cypress are something called a soft line. So, historically if you had a fire, if we weren’t here, this was uplands, right? Where the visitor center is. If a lightning strikes in late May and hit to the east of us and the winds were coming out of the east pushing to the west, the fire would go across and it would carry and eventually it would hit the cypress, the old growth bald cypress and the cypress around it and it would piddle out. Because it would no longer be able to burn. Fire needs three things. It needs fuel, it needs oxygen, and it needs heat. Well, when you hit water. If you get in there it’s wet, you lose your

fuel and you lose your heat. So, your kind of going to run out of—it has nowhere else to go. That's how historically wet prairies were maintained. Because it would hit if you have baby cypress out there that are less than say four feet and you have this fire come through at that time of year, it's going to kill that baby cypress. Same thing with pine trees. If they're really young, fire gets hot enough and its coming through, ripping through there, it's going kill that pine tree. Lack of fires where we're losing development is the other side, but as far as fire goes, wet prairies are important we need to burn that frequently and at the right time of year.

Same thing with uplands, if you don't burn uplands frequently enough then your oak trees come in, and over time you end up with a hammock. And hammock support different wildlife species at different times of year, then say an upland pine flatwood versus a wet prairie. But they all work together and I think that's something that's important. That's one of the beauties of Corkscrew is yes, we have thousands and thousands of acres of marsh, wet prairie, and these wetlands, this cypress. But we also have important upland habitat which is important for bear denning sites. It's important for Florida panther for denning. We actually were scheduled to do a fire close to the visitors center this past January and the research team and the land manager team, you know, there's a happy marriage there. We work closely together and I remember the research director was like, "Hey, just an FYI, our cameras picked up these two kittens." And I'm like "Whoa, kittens?" So, I had a conversation with some biologists about how young is too young because we're trying to support and help those animals. So, we decided that to be cautious and didn't do the fire because they were young. They were only like two months old. And so—not sure I was supposed to talk about that but it's out there now.

I think it's an important thing to recognize that we do take that into consideration as what is wildlife doing. We have trail cameras set up throughout the sanctuary for the research program that helps us monitor wildlife for different reason but it's an added benefit that, if we're seeing young panthers, then we can make the decision, "Okay, they're too young." Their strategy when there that young is to hunker down and stay in one spot. They're not going to run. That helps us make better decisions and I think it's a cool story that we're like, "Okay, you know what. Hey, we can go another year. No big deal." So, the uplands are important too but they all work together. Healthy uplands are going to help you have healthier wetland systems. If you don't have a lot of run off from your uplands because you're not fertilizing something or changing something, sometimes I think people think wetlands and uplands work separately from each other but they are integrated. So, our units are set up—they're set up kind of historically right now. And I can't speak to why they set some of them up, but a lot of times they would follow some kind of historical break. So, like, Sanctuary Road—I mean Rookery Lane. Sanctuary Road runs into Rookery Lane and so that a natural fire line. When you have a road next to you, we always burn within east component to push the smoke into the swamp and away from our neighbors, and that one of those area where we always bring in North Collier Fire Department with us for safety purposes.

So, most of the fire I inherited, sometimes I scratch my head, I'm not going to lie. You really when you're setting up fire lines, in my opinion, you really want to try and have line of sight so

you want to be squared off when you have squirrely like an “S”. That makes it a little bit nasty because it’s like, “Oh where’s the fire going to go?” When the wind is switching and you have an “S” in your fire line.” It’s like, “Well, crud.” So, a lot of times you try to make them more square or rectangular, straighter lines is better because you can monitor them a lot easier and more rapidly that way. But I inherited what I inherited and I’d rather just go ahead and— that’s one of the reasons for combining some of the units too is to make them more squared off. So, there’s a fair amount of line that I don’t even mow anymore. Or we mow them but we don’t disk them because then they’re access points for us to get in and do interior ignition safely. It also is access for wildlife if wildlife is in there. They know to use roads. Wildlife is smart. They’ll get out of there. Or they go in their burrows or whatever. So, sometimes the units will mimic and follow natural lines, like using the cypress or sometimes they use already existing roads because if the roads aren’t in there, take advantage of that. You don’t want to put something new in and possibly cause some environmental damage unnecessarily or cause some shifting of hydrology unnecessarily. So, we kind of work with what’s already in place for the most part. Then you can make improvements then if you want. If they’re too narrow you can make them wider which we’ve done on a couple of occasions too.

AH: Now, you mentioned the panther reserve, the panther mitigation area.

AW: Yeah, Panther Island Mitigation Bank.

AH: And that was added to Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary about when?

AW: So, the [Panther Island] Mitigation Bank, the original bank— there’s an original bank and we have an expansion. So, the original mitigation bank is twenty-eight hundred acres in the northwest corner, roughly make the shape of an “L”, so it’s roughly four sections. The mitigation banking process is long and tedious, I won’t go into that, but they did the restoration work which consisted of reintroduction of fire, invasives removal, and actually a lot of soil movement and earth movement and creation of wet prairie hydra pine and emergent marshes as well as some deep-water pockets. And so that acreage, that original twenty-eight hundred acres was added on. There’s a lot of background with mitigation banking, but once it meets the success criteria and it’s approved then, it turns over to a perpetual land manager. And that land is deeded to that perpetual land management entity. And that’s us for that original twenty-eight hundred acres.

AH: and then another expansion was added after that?

AW: Yeah, so the expansion is the result of Ed Carlson had seen— he’s the one that actually brought it in and brought on the mitigation property. That was his idea to get involved with the original bank. The expansion bank is another, I forget how many acres it is off the top of my head, I want to say sixteen or eighteen hundred acres. That’s different. So, when CREW Rookery Swamp to the south of us was looking to start— which is state owned lands. When they were looking at—they wanted to get the tram line that was the northern most and our southernmost boundary. Well, they wanted that land. And meanwhile up next to the expansion, up next to the

original bank on the north side, there was land that they had that Ed was like, “Well, hmm. You guys really want this. Well, this would be a really great thing for us to get and then mitigate.” And so, they actually did a land swap with the Water Management Districts and no money was even exchanged because it was almost exactly the same acreage. I want to say that the land swap itself was finalized in 2008-ish somewhere relatively quickly after I came on. But actually it becoming a mitigation bank took longer because you have to go through a permitting process, you have to have a plan in place, you have to do a lot of survey work, et cetera. The actual mitigation expansion didn’t start until 2012, maybe, 2015 actually closer to there. 2015-ish.

And the difference between expansion bank and one of the big differences between the original bank and the expansion is we’re a partner in that. We’re an investor in the expansion because we own the land that’s being restored. And so, we’re not adding acreage from it. We already own that land. We’re investing it. We want to see it go from fallow ag field that was ninety-five percent invasives to— and its beautiful up there— they targeted wet prairie and a little bit of hydra pine, predominantly wet prairie and emergent marsh, thinking about wood storks and foraging habitat. And what would benefit us down here in terms of bringing our wood stork colony back to nesting at Corkscrew is a target with them.

AH: What is some of the successes that you’ve seen through your management program in terms of being able to support or to revive plant species or animal species?

AW: So, oh man. Bobwhite quail come to mind actually. We used to have more bobwhite quail here and every once in a while, we’ll get a call and that’s because we’re burning more. So, bobwhite quail really like having pockets of denser vegetation like saw palmetto and then open areas, open grassy areas in between and burn frequently because when they’re burned frequently, they produce more seed and they feed insects. And so, with the mitigation banking in particular, the original bank, when we started burning more frequently, we saw more cubbies of quail up there. And we’ve actually started, when we’ve increased burning down here, periodically we’ll get them, so I think long term we’ll start seeing more quail down here as well as we improve and continue to increase our fire frequency.

I think the fact that we do see panther kittens here speaks well to our management and is, in my mind, a success. Again, I think that’s tied to impart quality of habitat. Yes, panthers do need, obviously, huge ranges but the fact that we have a female who we suspect actually denned right by the center— that was where we were going to burn, where people go by. But the fact that we had that, speaks to like, “Okay, when they’re young, she can’t leave that den for an extended period of time. Well, why would she pick that spot in Corkscrew?” Well because she has the prey base and the prey close by. And so, I think that speaks well and reflects well of our management practices as well.

The wood storks, we have a restoration program going on right now in the back country, where we’re actually going in with changes in hydrology and changes in fire regime, we’ve seen the encroachment of coastal plain willow, or Carolina willow, which is a native. But when you get

your system out of balance, natives can be invasive. So, it's an invasive native and it's really overtaking our marshes and our wet prairies in the back country. And so, we've been doing a three-prong approach, where you come in initially in peak of the dry season. We mechanically remove it. We mulch it on the spot. Then, we do follow up herbicide spot treatment as needed to keep any regrowth from coming back. Ideally, the water levels come up and they drown. Doesn't always happen that way. But we have that spot treatment as a safety net and then once you have enough pyrogenic species, you know, fire living species, like your maidencanes, a lot of grasses, there's a lot of sedges actually like sawgrass that likes to burn, then you get fire back in and you can use fire to maintain it. The changes in hydrology are in the loss of short hydroperiod wetlands in the region especially with the core foraging area for a wood stork with how far out they fly out to the nest to forage. That's more habitat loss and so we can only do so much.

The research team and the policy team looks at what we do here and try to influence how people do things outside of us. And so, we're trying to bring our wood storks back and hopefully no overtime with the restoration work that we're doing, we will eventually start to see wood storks foraging in areas where before a forage wasn't available because of the willow. And I think that's an interesting story and I hope that in twenty years if someone is doing an oral history again, that they're talking about then and maybe I'm still here. Not quite. Oh, I'd be retirement age about then. But in twenty years, if I'm still here and you come back and I'm director of land management or something and I'm like "It worked. What we did really worked and wood storks are back." But you know a lot has to happen. They've lost their grocery stores. That's an analogy I use a lot. If you think about it like, do you drive twenty miles to go to the grocery store or do you go to the grocery store that's closes to you. Most of the time you go to the grocery store that closest to you. And if you have fifteen grocery stores around you and you go to this one grocery store and you really need sweet potatoes. But you can't get sweet potatoes, so you go to the next one. It doesn't take a lot of energy if they're close together. But the more spread out that those grocery stores, the more energy it takes. Whether it be for humans— you look at gas costs, wear and tear on your vehicle, your time. Well, wood storks are having to take the same thing it's just their energy is literally energy devoted to them and their health and energy devoted to their chicks. And so, I like to say that we've lost our grocery stores. Their grocery stores are more spread out, they're not as full, their prey base may not be the same, and we need to bring those grocery stores back in and have them be high quality areas for them to forage in so to speak.

AH: Let's take a break for a moment and we'll be back.

Pause in the recording

AH: You know you've talked so much about all of the different kinds of land management activities that you're engaged in all year long. You spend tons of time out in the wilderness, out in the sanctuary. Can you tell us what are some of the most interesting experiences you've had with wildlife down here in South Florida?

AW: So, I think one my—well gosh I got a lot of those. So, I think my favorite panther story is, I've had over fifty panthers sighting so I average like two a year, but that's because I'm out there all the time. But I remember one time driving down the back country roads because there's a road that goes through only for staff or access purposes, and a panther just literally trotted out in front of me off of another road and turned on to this road. He just kind of looked at me and he kept on going down the road and I was like, "alright." So, I'm just driving really slowly just kind of watching him. Then he went off to the side and I thought he went down into some water because this road is swamp on both sides, it's marsh and wet prairie on both sides. And so, I stopped to try and find some tracks with my phone and try to take a picture for social media because they love it. I get to see all the cool stuff, right? So, social media is something I help with. I had set my phone down and was like, "Oh, is that a track?", and I was back behind the passenger's side at the rear of the truck. I hear this noise and I look to my right and maybe six feet away is that panther. And I just see his head and he's looking at me from the other side of a baby cabbage palm. And I'm just sitting there and we're just looking at each other like, "Don't look at it directly in the face."

It is a predator. But it was a kind of surreal moment. I could've probably subtly grabbed my phone and taken a picture but I was like, "No, I'm just going to sit here and enjoy the fact that I am five feet away from this endangered species", that there's estimates of about a hundred and eighty to two hundred members left of this animal. It felt like twenty minutes but it was probably like a minute and then he just went back the opposite direction. I was just like, "Alrighty then. I'm going to keep going." And I texted Jason and was like, "I'm going to be a little late for the meeting because I was just having a moment with a panther." And he was just like, "what?" So, when I think of the Florida panther, it's just one of those magical moments where you want to reach out and pet it but you don't, obviously, it's a wild animal. But it's one of those moments that lives in your memory.

Another one would be a Florida black bear. So, I've actually seen more panthers than black bear or bobcats, but one of my favorite black bear experiences was on the same road again. Towards the, not peak of the rainy season, I want to say it was probably around January, I was going down for a meeting coming down here from Panther Island and this black bear just lumbers up out of the water in front of me, and he shook off a little bit. He looked like he was wearing pants. So, the top half of his back was dry but the bottom half, even though he shook a little bit, water was dripping and it was like muddy water. So, the top half was black, the bottom half was a little brown, so he looked like he was wearing pants. And he just lumbered slowly along just up the road and I was just like, "okay." People have asked me before well why would you go through the back and I'm like, I'd rather be stuck behind a bear, watching a bear's butt waddle down the road than in I-75 traffic any day. If my traffic jam is a bear in the road, or a panther in the road, or alligators that are basking across the road which happens, that's a whole other ball of wax that I'll get to. I'd much rather have that experience. That bear was in front of me for a mile and a half. And he would, every once in a while, he'd stop and look and the whole-body language was like, "Dang it, the truck is still there." You just feel like his whole-body language was just this

big sigh of “Ugh, it’s still there.” And eventually I got to a point where it opens up, and he went off into some like wet prairie. That’s one that sticks out in my mind.

I haven’t had a lot of bobcat sightings. I had one actually relatively recently where it just popped out in front of the road and stared at me then it went off into the brush. But kittens are hilarious. I was driving my ATV, going to check on something one day and I knew that there was a bobcat den in the area because I’d seen a lot of tracks. We don’t have a lot of hills but there’s a sloped area that was cabbage palms, saw palmetto at the top, and two kittens had been wrestling and they rolled right out and stopped like five feet in front of me. And I was like, [Allyson imitates a vehicle stopping] and slammed on the breaks of the ATV real fast, and they popped up and they were both staring at me like, “What is that?” And I’m like, “Wow, you’re so cute but where’s mom?” because they’re just sitting there right in front of me and they were very curious. They didn’t run they just kind of were like “What is that?” It was probably the first time they had seen a person. It’s kind of crazy to think, it’s the first time those kittens have probably seen a human being and didn’t know what we were. And then they scurried off in heard some meowing— not meowing but like some chatter and I suspect that was mom and the kittens. So, that’s one of my favorite kitten sightings because they were really close too.

I’ve had a lot of birds poop on me. It’s not necessarily the best. I actually remember when I was a volunteer and Jason Lauritsen was telling me there was a black vulture roost in the back country. He was telling me this story where he had two interns with him one day and they were in a— this is an old beat-up Ford truck. It was a single cab and they were all sitting in the front and he had leaned out and was like pointing at something in the tree. Black vulture pooped right on his shoulder, and he was like [Allyson imitates Jason in disgust] and he leans in— they carrion, and if you want to make someone sick with a smell, that’s the smell you go with. And literally, one of the interns was hanging out the window and he was like, “Oh. Oh. I’m sorry.” So, he’s driving the rest of the way with his arm out and he was telling me this story and I was just like, “Uh, how did you get poop—” And then low and behold, I had a black vulture roost— I’m always like “Hey guys and gals!” They know, they’re used to me. I pass them every single day no matter where I’m going on Panther Island. I have to go across this one spot and they love being there. I think there’s an obstruction current that goes across and they like that spot. They can sun. They go down and drink the water, which is fun to watch them drink because they’re always paranoid about alligators, so they’ll drink and then they back up and they drink and then they back up. But yeah, I was driving under one, one day and was bloop bloop, all over the front of the ATV, back of the ATV, shoulders. I was just like, “Oh, this is really not cool.” So, I’ve had a bald eagle also did that to me. The front of the ATV splatter. Glad I was wearing sunglasses.

But, it’s kind of funny when you think about it. In some cultures, birds pooping on you is considered good luck so, I’m always like, I have really good luck because I’ve had tree swallows which is like really hard pellets, depends on what they eat, so that happens to me all the time. I just think it’s comical. I’m trying to think what other wildlife. Crested caracaras. I love crested caracara. They’re an endangered species and there’s an isolated population in the state of Florida.

And that's another actual success story too. With increase in fire, they've started nesting in this one spot. And I remember doing a Christmas bird count and being like "Yeah, I saw crested caracara in here the other day." And sure, enough a dolt went right in to a cabbage palm. They nest in cabbage palms, and so I kept monitoring that area. We shut down certain roads because you don't want to disturb them and then I had to go by there one day. And I was like, "Well, I'm going to part the ATV, and just going to kind of hang out." And this juvenile fledgling comes out and around the saw palmetto and it just sitting there looking at me. I was like, "My first juvenile crested caracara and it came from that nest." So, that was really, really cool to see and then another one popped out so there were two of them that successfully fledged that year. That was really awesome and that's a success for us I think from a management standpoint.

I got chased by a sow up a tree one day. That was early on in my career and I remember I was treating Brazilian pepper, and so I had a machete with me and I had my teardrop sprayer. I was in this little area and I was like, "What is that smell and what is that noise?" And then, all of a sudden, something big, it sounded like a freight train, was coming at me. And I was like, "I don't know what's going on." I dropped my teardrop sprayer and I ran with a machete, which is not the wisest thing in the world to do, because if I had tripped, that could've been bad. But I didn't luckily and there was an oak tree that had a couple little limbs and I shimmied up the oak tree thinking if it's something bad, I have a machete. I don't know how I climbed a tree with a machete but I did. And then this big sow came and she went around the tree a couple times. And I was just like, "Well, dang." You know, you hear stories about like wild hog and you don't think about it. She went around. Eventually, she left. I went back to my ATV and I'm leaving the teardrop sprayer. I know roughly where it is. I'll come back in a week. I came back in a week and there was remnants of afterbirth just a little bit. You could just barely tell. So, she must have just had babies right in that area and I was heading right towards her. I remember telling Ed that story and he was just shaking his head at me.

I set myself on fire when I was a volunteer. I didn't think I was going to get hired after this. We were burning just North of the visitors' center and I knew that they were getting ready to hire and so I was like, "I got to impress Ed. I got to impress Ed." So, I had gone back out to along the fire line to refuel our drip torch but I didn't realize that there was a leak. So, I got some on my boot and I had no idea. So, I'm walking with the drip torch, back up the fire line to go crawl up on the boardwalk to go back out because we're burning the north of the exit boardwalk, the wet prairie. And, there had been disced but some pine needles had fallen and it could have crept across. And so, I just used my boot to snuff it out and I took a couple steps and I'm like, "What? My foot is really hot." So, I look down and my boot is on fire. The drip torch fuel that had leaked on to the boot was, you know, so I put the drip torch down and I just smothered it with some sand and I look up and Ed is just standing there with his arms crossed leaning against the boardwalk and he's just shaking his head. And I was just like [embarrassed sound]. I also set myself almost on fire when I was in burn school. So, you have to go to a prescribe fire training school and they require a full Nomex we allow staff to burn in jeans as long it's one hundred percent cotton. We're working towards getting all Nomex, but I have hips. It's a little difficult for me to find pants that fit comfortably and so I assumed that I could do the same kind of gear. And they were

like “Mo, no, no.” So, they gave me a jumpsuit. Well, the crotch of the jumpsuit was almost at my knees. So, it was really difficult to walk in.

And so, the instructor was like, “Hey, you have burn experience. Go help this guy. He’s not understanding.” So, I’m in some thick saw palmetto and I got tripped up by some grape vine. And I go down and the drip torch had fuel and has got fire on the top. I managed to not drop any on me and I was like, “I’m okay.” Ten minutes later, same thing happens only it lands on my leg and I was like, dang it. I had put myself out and again, the instructor Barry Coulette saw and he was like “You are awfully calm about setting yourself on fire.” And I was like, “Well, it’s Nomex, what are you going to do? It’s going to happen on occasion.” That’s what your torch fuel is so, yeah, I’ve done that a couple times.

I’ve surfed on an alligator back accidentally. This is a favorite that people are always like “Yeah, what?” So, I didn’t have, when I first started managing the mitigation land up in the North West corner at P.I. [Panther Island], I didn’t have an ATV or swamp buggy or anything to work from so I was storing my herbicide in my garage, using my personal vehicle to come out. And I would back pack spray, so I was hiking a lot. I was hiking through like, waist deep water and I thought I had stepped up on a log and I was just enjoying the view, taking a breather, standing there. Then I notice I’m moving sideways. And I was like “I don’t understand what was happening.” Because if you’re up on a loose log, you would expect it to roll, not move continuously in the same direction. It took a couple seconds for it to be like, I’m standing on an alligator. This is probably really big alligator because I’m not a small person. So, I kind of pushed off and stepped backwards and sat there like, where did it go now? Because I don’t know where it is. This massive twelve-foot gator surfaces like, right past me. His tail, his head. I was just like, “Oh crap, I was on the back of an alligator.” I remember telling Ed, and he was just like, “oh yeah that’s happened to me a couple times too.” He was nonchalant about it. Now I laugh about it and I, your rule of thumb is if you walking in water, you’ll want to shuffle your feet so you kick them and so they take off. And normally I do that, but I was just having high step through some denser vegetation and that’s why I needed a breather and that’s why I took a little step onto an alligator back. Interns in the past have been like, “what?” because they come from different areas. And I’m like, I grew up in Texas. We have gators in the South but not necessarily where I was so.

I’m trying to think. So, I’ve had a lot of incidents with insects. One of the worst and funniest for that is, again, I was spraying from the ATV and I had— a lot of times, you get off and you drag your hose so you can really get right at the species that you want to hit and minimize herbicide use and minimize risk to any native species. I will often have headphones and have one hanging out so I can hear rattle snakes or wildlife. One earphone in listening to music while I work. Well, I didn’t realize I was standing in an ant pile and so, all of a sudden it was like, I don’t know how, I know that there is a pheromone or a signal that send out. Searing pain. I was just like, “Aw crap.” So, I run back over and I have no choice at this point. I have to strip. Like, pants come down and my pants are down around my ankles and pulling all the ants off. And then I hear something in the distance and I’m just like, “Oh no.” They were doing a donor buggy tour. And I was like, “no!” So now I’m trying to work really, really fast and then you have to get them off

the inside of your jeans. And then they were still in my boots so I had to take my boots off so, literally, I don't think I've ever flown through getting ants off of my body so fast in my life. But I got them all and I had just pulled my jeans back on and snapped and done my zipper. And they came around the corner and I was bootless and I'm just waving. And later on, they were like, "You were really like flush." And I was like, "Well, I just gotten my pants back on." And they were like, "what?" And I was like, "Well, you want to see the inside—" Well, I had like 60 fire ant bites. That was fun and that's happened more than once. It's happened three different times where I'm like, "Oh crud, there's a tour coming. I better go find a spot where I'm not visible." So, that was a good one.

I had some other interesting—I fell in a hole one day. And while I was still trying to get myself out— Oh, I know one. Oh, a good alligator one. So, there's a cypress dome up on P.I. [Panther Island] and I had an intern with me one day. It was the peak of the dry season and we were backpack spraying inside the cypress dome. Again, so you can be really strategic and specific about what you're getting. And I hear my intern right as my leg goes into a peat pocket and just went straight down. So, my left knee is up in my face. My right leg is extended straight, I have a backpack sprayer on, so I'm just like off balance like, "What is going on?" And my intern is yelling and I'm like, "Oh crud." So, I'm trying— so I have to belly crawl to get myself out because I couldn't get my— It was too far up so I couldn't push myself up and out. So, I manage to get out and I go running out and there is an eleven, twelve-foot alligator right next to the truck and she had gone to refill. Massive gator. And not only was he long, he was girthy. Like when you see a big gator it's like, oh yeah that's a long gator. But now when now when I see them, they're long and then they're thick and I'm like, "Man you are old and you've been eating well." This was one and this behemoth, he was resting by the truck. And she was like "What do I do?" And I was like, "Well, we wait until he moves on." And so eventually he got up, he lumbered in, It's funny to watch, I don't even know how many pounds he would weigh, to watch him walking slowly. And then he found another sunny spot and he was like [Allyson makes a deflating noise] and he decompressed his legs, and it was like watching an alligator elevator, dropping his body onto the ground. And he just laid there in the sun for like ten minutes and then repeated the process. He would only walk like ten feet. And so, it took like forty-five minutes for him to get to the point where he was no longer near us.

And so, we go back in and she's like I'm going to stay along the perimeter and I'm like, "Oh, it's fine, there's probably no more alligators." Because there were two gator holes in there, right. He goes into one in like three other big alligators pop up and I had been spraying right along the edge, had no idea they were there. And I was just like, "Alrighty then. Duly noted. That's big enough for multiple large alligators." They were all right next to each other, but they were hanging out in this one particular pocket. That same cypress dome I can never work and treat with one of the mitigation guys again because we were working in there together and it was still wet and he actually slid into an alligator, like bodily. I was working the hose real and he was out spraying and literally, physically he just disappeared and the water was not deep enough for that. It was like maybe shin deep, knee deep, so two feet deep maybe? And I was like, "Where the hell did he go?" So, I'm like trying to run out there while there's all this vegetation and there's peat. I

can't get out there and his head surfaces and I was like, "What happened?" and he was like: I slipped into a gator." Like, he literally just went down like, they go down. I was like, alright. So, he's soaking wet, I'm laughing because I'm like thankfully he's there because I didn't know what I was going to do like, what happened? So, he was fine.

Later in the day, we go around to a different spot and he goes across this hole— I say hole but it was really probably just a little pond. And he's on the other side, twenty feet from me and I'm again working the hose real maneuvering the hose so it doesn't get snagged on something and he pops it to get it untangled from something on his side. So, you have that "S" curve that travels through the hose, right? Smacked an alligator on the snout that we didn't know that he had literally walked right next to and she— I say she because I just picture an angry mom— but the alligator just came flying up and he backpedals and I'm back pedaling and she fake balked. Like sometimes they'll rush at you but it's just a fake. Like a display thing. And I fell and I'm sitting stuck between two cypress knees. Like look, I'm glad I fell between the cypress knees, because otherwise that would have really hurt. And I'm just sitting there and I'm laughing and she's just kind of settled back down. And now she's got her snout above so we can see her. And I was like "You've got to come back across." And he was just like, "I hate you right now. We're never treating together again." And to this day we have never actually been on a swamp buggy and worked, like actually done land management together other than fire because we both were like, "Yeah, no." That was just too much that one day.

Another cool panther sighting was actually after prescribed fire, when I was doing monitoring. And it was the next morning and the sun was coming up. And there just a little lingering smoke and all of a sudden, just this mass comes out of the shadows. I'm like, "What is that?" And he gets a little closer and he's coming towards the truck and then it stops. And I'm sitting there and I'm like, "Oh, well it's a panther." And he turns and he just disappears back into the little bit of smoke that was there. I was like, that's pretty cool and ephemeral. What other— there's so many stupid stories I could tell but if my boss hears this she might be like, "Allyson, don't do that again." I've fallen off a swamp buggy before, on more than one occasion, into the water. Like not paying attention and slipped and right back and there's an alligator next to me. I've had a lot of like, "What's up alligator?" I've had to move an alligator's tail to get him to move. I actually asked FWC [Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission] one time, "So, if I'm in the back country roads and I have to do something to get the gator to move out of the way is that considered harassment?" And he's like, "Allyson, it's okay." Because I feel really badly but there is this one alligator, he's probably thirteen feet, and the state record is fourteen feet, seven inches. I swear we have one somewhere in this swamp probably that can beat that but, I'm not going to go measure them. But this guy, he knows that he is— I've had to sit there and wait for thirty minutes before he will get up and move. I have nudged him with a truck before. You go super, super slowly until [Allyson makes a small thud sound] — doesn't move. Does not move.

So, one day, I had to get home for a doctor's appointment and so I had gotten a cut off a piece of phragmites and hid behind the side of the truck and poked his tail. It's like a fly landing on a piece of paper. The paper doesn't notice the fly so I was like, "What am I going to do?" I'm like

sitting there and fifteen minutes goes by and still hasn't moved. So, I walk around the other side of the truck. And he knows I'm there, it's just messing with me. And I'm just like [Allyson makes frustrated sound]. So, I go back around and grab his tail. He does not like that and I put his tail back down and then he finally moved. It took thirty minutes to get him to move and I was just like "Oh my gosh, I could have gone back and around and it would have taken me the same amount of time." So, I don't recommend that, ever, but there's nowhere to turn around. It's like one way. You're not turning around out there.

I've had a couple of young bucks. They will practice with each other. They form little bachelor herds and they'll have their little clashes and stuff. I have had them literally not paying attention again. I stop to watch them and they were just right next to me. They just kept fighting and battling it out and then finally were next to me and I was just like, "Well, I'm going to start the ATV and move on because I didn't want an errant hoof to hit me or anything like that. So, I pull forward and when I started the ATV, they came apart and took off. That's pretty cool to see and I see tons of birds all the time. You know when you have migrating birds come in and you have tree swallows coming down and they come in and they're going after the wax myrtle and they're going after the berries. And they're swirling around and they're hovering, that's really cool to see. I'm trying to think. There was one other story and I was like, "Oh, I should tell them this story.

Oh! Well, this one is good too. I slipped one time in the mud working by myself and again, I was backpack spraying. Fell between two cypress knees and actually got wedged. Like I couldn't get up. Like I started trying to get up, and I'm just lying there in a puddle of mud. I had to unstrap and I had to literally like push with one foot to get just enough to pull the backpack up and out. I literally got wedged between two cypress knees. I had a swallow-tailed kite drop a snake on me one time. That was not fun. It's funny now but is scared the bajeebies— not much scares me, I'm not a screamer or anything, but I screeched with this happening. You don't expect a black racer to fall out of the sky onto you but I was— I forget what I was doing but, all of a sudden, boom. Right in front of me. And I was just like [Allyson lets out a yell]. Swallow tail kites were circling and it was already dead so I threw it off to the side and drove up. And a little while later I watched a kite pick it back up again and took it off. It was cool because he ate it in the air. That's always really cool to see. I've seen a swallow-tailed kite turn on the fly and grab a bird out of the sky. It's amazing to watch them fly. So, I always love when they come back down.

We have pockets of sunflowers up there. The Southeastern sunflower, the *Helianthus agrestis*, and we get them down here. And if you guys get a chance to go out on the boardwalk, you'll see them. And I remember the first like, my mom loves sunflowers, so like every time I'm out here, you know my parents taught me to love nature. And so, it's kind of a just a nod to the way that they raised me and the appreciation that they instilled in us. So, every year at sunflower season, I always feel like it's my mom and my dad, but my mom in particular is just like saying, "Good job, honey." It rejuvenates me every year because the summer is hot and so all of a sudden, it's fall and sunflowers are going to be blooming soon. It's just like a little nod from heaven for me that I'm where I'm supposed to be and doing what I'm supposed to be doing.

I could keep telling stories for a really, really long time. But I think those are the— Oh well, there is one where I never heard an alligator call, like when they rumble, when they're making the— I had never heard that before. And I was spraying, there's a water flow way up on P.I. [Panther Island] and that's a whole other ball of wax— it has to do with offsite waterflow and rehydrating a cypress slew. I'd never heard it before and I called Ed and I was like "What's this noise?" And he was like, "Oh, that's the bull gators bellowing" and I was like, "Oh cool." So, I turned it off and just sat there and it would be like one bull gator down here and another one and then another one. So, now I have the bad habit of whenever I hear a bull gator bellowing, I try and find them, which is probably not the safest thing, but that same cypress dome where we have the two incidents with Robert from the mitigation bank and myself, that where that big, thirteen-foot guy is. And so, I erroneously made the decision to try and find him when I thought it was him bellowing but it was a different alligator bellowing and I had climbed up along a downed tree, and I'm looking for the— and I'm like "Oh, I can see the one alligator bellowing." And then I hear another bellow and I look down and he was right underneath the downed tree that I just crawled up. And so, I was like, "Welp, better not fall when I'm coming out of here now." But that was really cool and my phone had died so I couldn't even get video. And I was like, "Dang it, that was the whole point of me coming in here was to try to get good video of an alligator bellowing." I've just had a lot of really wonderful experiences and I keep thinking one day I'll write a book just of the— some of it's been stupid stuff that I've done that I will not divulge but a lot of it's just been really cool.

AH: Thank you so much for sharing all these experiences with everyone and thanks for talking with us this afternoon. I really enjoyed hearing all the aspects of your job, all the work that you've done. And it's a real credit to you that so many of the species here are responding to the land management that you and the rest of the team are doing.

AW: Thank you.

AH: So, thanks for being with us.

AW: Thanks for having me. I appreciate it.

End of interview