An Interview with
Aurelia Skipwith
DIRECTOR–U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

THIS INTERVIEW WAS CONDUCTED BY JAMES L. CUMMINS, B&C EXECUTIVE VICE-PRESIDENT OF CONSERVATION, AND TONY SCHOONEN, B&C CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
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The Boone and Crockett Club applauded the Senate's confirmation of Aurelia Skipwith as director of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. The Club works with the Service to benefit the Nation's fish and wildlife and the lands and waters they need to thrive and has done so since the agency was created over 100 years ago. Here, some of the Club's leadership recently had the opportunity to visit with Director Skipwith.

FC: Where did you grow up and what led you to have an interest in the outdoors and conservation?

SKIPWITH: I was born and raised in Indianapolis, Indiana. My mom, who was the oldest of nine kids, was the only member of her family who moved up north while the rest of the family stayed down in the Columbus, Mississippi area. My dad and mom were high school sweethearts; after a 4-year tour in the Navy, he followed my mom up north and they got married. My mom was a teacher—for 30 years—and my father retired from the Army Reserve with 34 years of service. My grandpa farmed in rural Mississippi and I enjoyed spending the summers with him on the farm. That is where I learned, if you did not grow it, catch it, or kill it, you did not eat! Farming and hunting were a necessity; that was the way of life. Although, my family lived in the city, my mom had a garden in the back yard. You could find me outdoors planting or picking vegetables or helping my father with various outdoor chores, which I loved the most.

I was fortunate in that my mom would nurture my interests–especially the outdoors, animals, and science. While I learned a lot of discipline from both my parents, my dad's military background brought a lot of structure and discipline. As I got older, my mom strongly encouraged opportunities such as internships to broaden my experience. I participated in 4-H events, many times as the student responsible for classroom pets, and interned at scientific institutions and laboratories, such as Eli Lilly in Indianapolis.

I have always been drawn to wildlife and the outdoors, and through experiences where I saw I made an impact, I was led to college where I first studied biology and then law. I rely on those two degrees daily in my job as director.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Aurelia Skipwith

FC: Did you participate in fishing, hunting, or other forms of outdoor recreation while growing up?

SKIPWITH: Absolutely. I would tag along with my grandpa. He had some hound dogs and he hunted everything in Mississippi. Also, my great uncle Joe lived in Indianapolis and one of my fondest and youngest memories is going on a fishing trip to a state park just outside of the city. I was probably about 6 years old at the time. At the end of a long day of fishing, great Uncle Joe looked at me and said that I had caught the biggest fish that day. I remember saying, "I caught the only fish!" But what mattered was just spending all day with him and the rest of the family, and then him making me feel good about what I had accomplished—and that I caught dinner! It is experiences like this one

that sometimes growing up in the city one is not exposed to. For conservation to work well, we all need to make sure we are a part of the solution, and half of the battle is education and exposure, like I had with my grandpa or my great uncle, and my mom proactively finding opportunities for me.

FC: Aurelia, what does it mean to you to be the Service's Director?

SKIPWITH: It's awe inspiring for me to believe it, I never envisioned receiving a Presidential appointment, let alone in a field so near and dear to my heart. I have the honor of leading close to 8,500 employees within the Fish and Wildlife Service and they are passionate people. I also get to work with landowners and the public who are also very dedicated and passionate about how they feel about our nation's wildlife. That is all reflected in our work with Congress, the President, and the Secretary to make sure we are all working together to conserve plants and species not just for this generation, but for the next one too. We need to make good decisions so that the next generation is better positioned than where we are today. So, I rely on my folks and I rely on our partners—conservation organizations, state fish and wildlife agencies, tribes, and other federal agencies—to help get the job done. It's a big role and it can sometimes bring you to tears knowing what a huge responsibility it is. I also want our young people to know this is where you can have a future career as well, the opportunities exist, and we want you to join our team. It is very rewarding.

FC: As the Service's first African-American Director, what does that mean to you?

SKIPWITH: Well, I may be the first Black director but I must point out that President Trump nominated me twice for this position, so that means a lot that he's the one that stood up and supported me and took up the fight for me; I think that speaks volumes. Knowing our nation's history, how it has changed, and being the first Black director, I want others to know you can go after your dreams and do anything that you want to do. It's not about color—it's about content—and one day, I want our nation to get to the point where we do not need to always talk about diversity and inclusion because everybody is already at the table. When we can look around the room and see Hispanic, black, native, and Asian folks, to name a few, then we will not need to talk about diversity, because the diversity in the work force is the same as in this nation. That's where we need to get to. It helps others to see that there is someone that is in the Director's seat that they can attain to or that it is possible. It means a lot to my family, and me as well, considering where my sharecropping grandfather came from, looking at my mom, who picked cotton in the fields and her background as one of the first black women to graduate from the Mississippi University for Women, and my dad as well. To say it happened in a lifetime, that is special. I am always thankful for my angels because those are the people that work behind the scenes and sometimes you don't know who they are, but they are the ones that are really pushing and pulling you to the next phase, and it's not always possible to do it on your own. We should all continue to build our networks because you never know where you will need someone's help 10 years or so from now.

Aurelia Skipwith, joined by her mother, Lillie Bell Skipwith, places her hand on her family's Bible as she takes the oath of office administered by Vice President Mike Pence.

FC: What are the top priorities that you want to accomplish?

SKIPWITH: Access, access, access. It's great because the President, the Secretary, and I want everyone to use our public lands. There is a reason that there is an adjective in front of it—because it's for the public and we are working so hard to create more opportunities. The next phase is, now that those opportunities exist, how do we educate people, so they know that they are there? I want people to say, yes, I have been out on this refuge that was formerly closed and now is open. Access happens on many levels, but first is not only the opening, but making sure that we are doing everything that we can to reduce regulatory burdens, that we are doing everything we can with outreach, especially partnering with other organizations. Our public lands are part of our American heritage. So, how can I do a better job at the Service to get more people outdoors to hunt, fish, recreate, watch birds, walk their dog, etc.? That also provides an economic boom, especially to those local communities, which is so important in these times.

Director Skipwith meets with the Congressional Western Caucus.

TOP: Director Skipwith after a successful feral hog hunt in Texas.
ABOVE: Director Skipwith has hunted and fished almost all of her life.
BELOW: Director Skipwith holds a non-poisonous snake at Fort McCoy, Wisconsin.

Our refuges are not only places for people to go have fun, but we want this to be a stable unit in that community because it's providing an economic benefit which is something that is key to the Trump Administration. Are we providing more jobs? Are we improving the economy? Yes and yes! And the Fish and Wildlife Service plays a huge role in that and so do the hunters and anglers.

The other priority is making sure the Endangered Species Act is implemented in a way that allows us to carry out the Service's mission. It's a wholehearted effort to get a species off the list. So, when we do—it is a celebration, like celebrating a family member getting out of the hospital after a long stay—and it's really unfortunate when you have a delisting success that happens, and we get sued. At that point it goes into the judicial system where decisions are no longer just made on the best available science, it is drawn into settlement conferences and legal maneuvers, which waste the taxpayers money and does nothing for the animals those groups purport to want to help.

FC: What do you see as your greatest challenge?

SKIPWITH: I want to meet all our folks in the field. Every employee plays a key role in what the Services does, and that ranges from the IT person, to the engineer, to the mechanic, to the biologist. For the Service to operate and work, it takes people from all walks of life. I would say another item that is important for me as well, is working more closely with private landowners. In the past, the perception of the Service was the Federal Government versus private landowners. I will not let that perception stand. Sixty percent of the habitat for listed species is on private land. If we are going to save these species, we must work with private landowners as partners. I am stressing that to everyone in the Service and trying to show that in our dealings with the community.

FC: What role does hunting have in the Service?

SKIPWITH: So, there are some great hunting organizations out there, and my question is, have we done the best job we can in engaging them? President Trump and Secretary Bernhardt have made public access to public lands and outdoor recreation top priorities. So, at the Service I'm thrilled to build on that foundation and find ways to do more. We need to leverage the networks of the many hunting organizations to be able to reach the public to say, "Hey come to our refuge, hunt at our refuge, and bring a friend with you." I was just recently in Texas on a feral hog and quail hunt and had a fantastic time. We talk a lot about engaging new audiences, and sometimes other organizations have a better idea on what those new audiences need. I see those organizations as a gateway to do that.

Director Skipwith spoke at the Annual Meeting of the American Wildlife Conservation Partners in Omaha, Nebraska, on March 10, 2020.

FC: The Service has made diligent efforts to delist recovered species only to be litigated with the outcome being judges making the decision to return those recovered species to the list. Do you see a path to correct this litigation action that allows wildlife to be managed by wildlife professionals rather than the judicial system?

SKIPWITH: We are doing everything we can administratively to figure out how can we make the Endangered Species Act work the way that it was intended to. Some people have weaponized the Act to the point that it doesn't work. They have used it to just promote lawsuit after lawsuit. Litigation takes away resources from the species that need help. So we work hard to get the community involved, use the best science available, and we defend our positions so that when those unscrupulous groups file lawsuits, we win.

FC: You obviously place a lot of value on family and family land. How much emphasis are you and the Administration placing on working with private landowners to accomplish mutual conservation goals?

SKIPWITH: The Trump Administration places a large emphasis on working with private landowners—keeping working lands working as well as working with private landowners to improve access to public land. Private ownership of land is what this country is based on. It is how we settled this country, it is our heritage. It is so important that we teach our kids, and our grandkids, how to take care of the land once we are gone. So many of today's generation have a 9-to-5 job, so to speak. Most of them are removed from the understanding of the land. I remember my parents sitting around the dinner table talking about how to use the land to make a living–provide for the family. They would always talk about how to make a better life for their kids. Around this nation, we have multiple users of many landscapes. You have habitat, you have species, you have moms and dads growing food for their kids, or fiber for a nation to construct homes, and many other uses. Conservation on private lands is really about a mutual relationship that is good for both the land and the landowner.

FC: It is obvious you have a strong passion and understanding of the role private lands can have to conservation. Our nation has strong incentives to private landowners to improve wetlands and water quality, which are regulated through the Clean Water Act. Before 1990, for instance, wetland birds and waterfowl were on the decline, trending downward by 10 percent per year. Since Wetland Reserve Easements and the North American Wetlands Conservation Act were enacted, those populations have soared by 51 percent, demonstrating the success of a non-regulatory and voluntary, incentive-based approach to species recovery. With two of the most contentious regulatory mechanisms in the nation—wetlands and listed species—one seems to be working well and the other not so well. Is there a desire by the Service to develop a significant, incentive-based program to work with private landowners to recover and delist species?

SKIPWITH: We absolutely need to find ways to better work with private landowners, because they own the majority of habitat where listed species are found. I am always looking for ways to incentivize species conservation, because at the end of the day if there is no incentive, how else do we exponentially get more private landowners to the table when it comes to candidate species, or other species. There are some great programs at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, for example, and we would love to be able to see more at the Department of the Interior, especially at the Fish and Wildlife Service, to do for species what the USDA has done to improve water quality and reduce soil erosion.

FC: What can private organizations, like the Boone and Crockett Club, do to help you achieve your mission?

SKIPWITH: You are doing the most important thing that can be done. You are communicating and getting the word out. I look forward to us working together more. I especially would like to work with the Club to leverage your networks so that we can get more people outdoors. When we look at the statistics of the number of people participating in outdoor recreation, numbers are going up for fishing, but they are declining for hunting. Yet, hunters fuel the very system of conservation we enjoy today. Their funds are necessary for state wildlife agencies to operate, and they are necessary to support local communities, and hunters are necessary to protect our heritage. ■

Director Skipwith visits with B&C Chief Executive Officer Tony Schoonen (left) and B&C President Tim Brady (right) at the Spring Dinner of the Boone and Crockett Club.