

Studying Natural History on the Golf Course

From a correspondent

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SOME golf courses, well tended as they are and sometimes enclosed, are becoming better and better havens for wild plants, butterflies and moths, and resident and migratory birds. Many golf links have been encroached upon by the increased agricultural use of land or by tremendous building activity until they have become oases of unspoilt and to a great extent conserved countryside. It is a common mistake to think that a tract of countryside can be conserved without knowledgeable and regular attention, and although golf course upkeep may not be entirely perfect from the naturalists' point of view, for it may be a little too careful, it is obviously suiting plenty of animal, bird and plant species.

There have only been a few reports of cases where insect or weed-killing sprays used on greens have resulted in wholesale death of birds that fed on poisoned insects or coated weed seeds. There have, indeed, been far more records received of preserved species that are now scarce "out in the open". The very fact that links are often fenced and patrolled during daylight hours by golfers and greensmen keeps out many wild-flower pickers as well as itinerant butterfly collectors and bird-nesters. The mowing of the fairways seems to suit some plants, and the restriction of scrub in outer roughs is also helpful.

Early this year Mr Henry Longhurst reported that there were 147 varieties of wild flowers flourishing on the links at Saunton. There are at least 200 varieties on a Sussex coastal course, including some that are rare and that attract ardent botanists from a long way off. Certainly some of the 200 are grasses, like the unobtrusive Dune Fescue and the bulbous Meadow-grass or even sedges like the Salt-marsh Sedge, but these give clues to the types of habi-

tat that this golf course covers and thereby protects, and there are plenty more showy wild flowers as well. In some seasons Sand Catchfly, with its striped and swollen calyx and small, topping bright pink flowers, colours the ground. There is usually a brilliance of blue Viper's Bugloss in the early summer and wide treads of acid-yellow Stonecrop or Wall-pepper

TRAMPLED PLANTS

The dunes on the open, sea side, are spoilt by hordes of picnickers who trample the small plants to extinction and leave tins and bottles about when they go home. On the other side, inside the fence, among the seashore grasses, there is a riot of small-flowered clovers, Fenugreek, and still some Sea Holly as well as streamers of Sea Bindweed with rosy bell-tent flowers and mats of Sea Sandwort. There is even a sandy bank, close to another fence, where "Little Robin", the often taller, but uncommon, relation of Herb Robert, grows.

Six-spot Burnet moths sling their cocoons by the score on the stems of high grasses beside the fairways and Painted Lady butterflies as well as Red Admirals coming in from across the Channel enjoy their first landfall without being chased and captured. This is one of the few places left to look for Clouded Yellows, for even during years when they are scarce there are generally a few here in early autumn. There are always Wheatears and Redstarts, too, in spring and autumn, and occasionally in September small gangs of Stone Curlews, Thick-knees or Great Plover pause before setting off over the sea.

Fifty or more miles away on a sandy inland golf course at the edge of an old forest there are even more extra pleasures for any members who may be nature-minded. A mass of Bog Pimpernel flowers smother the grass at the edge of one of the holes on the ladies' course. Lilac-flowered Ivy-leaved Campanulas decorate the sides of several narrow ditches. Marsh St John's Wort, its hairy

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leaves trapping drops of water and thus turning themselves silver, makes black-watered pools more attractive than they would be without any vegetation, even if it makes it more difficult to find balls that have been sliced across the rough.

SPREADING FRINGE-CUPS

Early in the year Lousewort changes the colour of the grass on the fairway and in the autumn Saw-wort, heather and heaths, and dwarf gorse make the patterns of colour. There are places where Marsh Gentians grow and open their big blue flowers for a few bright hours and one tideside where "Fringe-cups" (*Tellima grandiflora*) were spreading well when I last saw them. To the purists they may be only garden escapes, but they are a long way from the garden here and getting a chance to grow well.

Silver-studded blue butterflies flutter their way all round these long and shorter courses and seem to maintain their numbers. In the open adjacent forest land, they are getting fewer and fewer. It is the same with Nightjars, they seem to stand a better chance on the golf course property than they do outside it. Often when I have left the clubhouse at dusk in the summer I have paused to hear their churrings coming from all round, together, when the wind was in the right direction, with the higher-pitched reeling of a Grasshopper Warbler.

Some of the downland links have great numbers of interesting plants in their precincts. The rare Moon Carrot belongs to the entrance of one club and is given three-star rarity rating in a wildflower handbook. It may not look very different from an ordinary wild carrot flower unless you are expert, but the green frill of bracts under the flower-head are undivided and, I am told, it shines out whiter than white at night. The fairways and roughs on the chalk hills are wonderful places for such eye-catching butterflies as the black-and-white Marbled Whites, or "Half-mourners" as they used to be called, and for the rapidly scarcening Blues, the Common Blue that is no longer at all common and the even more local Chalk-hill Blue and Adonis Blue. The

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last two lay their eggs on the Horseshoe Vetch, a plant that is actually and literally losing ground yearly now that so much of these hills (or "mountains" as Gilbert White called them) is ploughed.

There used to be hundreds of butterflies in and over the grass on Cissbury Hill and on one slope a strong stand of Maiden Pink. Now they all seem to have gone but on the golf course near by there are still plenty of Meadow Browns, Gatekeepers, Small Coppers, and Brown Argus butterflies and one small colony of the Pink. Bee orchids decorate the valley sides above the long fairways, just after the creamy Dropwort is over and sometimes there are numerous Fragrant Orchids too. Tree and Meadow Pipits and Linnets and Yellowhammers all do their best to distract the players.

There are links where the attractions are so great that it is difficult to concentrate. An elderly golfing naturalist once told me that she had found Orange Birdsfoot on a Hampshire golf course and I have searched for it to the detriment of my game ever since. I have repeatedly lost balls into the woodland where Martagon Lilies were reputed to grow beside another remote course. I listen, with envy, to stories about the Sand Crocus which grows on a golf course in Devon and nowhere else in this country, for I have never been able to go at the time of the year when it flowers. I remember, when I was a child, abandoning my game altogether on the course on Wimbledon Common when I heard that Dartford Warblers were breeding in the gorse there. And there have been times, more recently, when I have got to the car park of a course near my home and spent several hours watching spring migrants and finding Shepherd's-cress, or Teesdalia, Hoary Cinqufoil, and Moenchia there without getting as far as the clubhouse.

LOSS OF A HOLE

Watching White Admirals and Silver-washed Fritillaries basking on bramble flowers in high summer on a golf course where wild daffodils grow earlier in the year has often led to the loss of a hole, and the hope of seeing rare plants and

butterflies on any of the New Forest courses never improves my game. Possibly if I ever had the chance to play at Churston, or Mullion, or up by the Brecks at Thetford, it might be as well to explore the courses first and play afterwards.

From a natural history point of view the golf course where the Lizard orchids grow is the most famous. I cannot give a clue to its locality for the tall, grotesque-flowered plants are sometimes abundant and sometimes very scanty. Considering their weirdness, they do not show up well but they smell, when you are near enough to notice, as bad as billy goats. It is possible on this course to pick a small bunch of asparagus, growing wild, and to enjoy the sight of a dense patch of blue Meadow Cranesbill. Creaking-voiced, husky Corn Buntings sing all day and there is a tale that black-veined White Butterflies are still seen here. There are sprawls of golden and white bedstraw which have hybridised to produce a pale yellow-flowered offspring, and skylarks nest on the ground beside such rarities as clove-scented Broomrape.



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