

WILDLIFE TOURS 101

Feather Your Nest

By Craig Weyandt

Ecotourism is growing in popularity every year. You can't pick up a paper today without reading something about the environment. People will pay thousands of dollars each year to travel to faraway places to see animals in their natural environment. A commonly accepted definition of ecotourism is; "Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people." Does that sound like a golf course or what? Only problem is, people don't know it and were not telling them.

For the past five years, I have been conducting wildlife tours (*ecotourism, if you will*) at The Moorings Club. The idea was not mine but Shelly Foy's of the USGA Green Section. Originally I wanted to put up nesting boxes at the club and Shelly suggested that I use ornithologist George McBath to assist me. George, who has done a lot of work on Florida golf courses, said he could put up the nesting boxes on one day and conduct an Audubon Tour on the next.

Ever since then I have gone from having one tour a year to four tours per year. While George was only able to conduct that one tour with me, it was enough to plant the seed and I eagerly continue the program today.

Why I do it? I like to think of it as "feathering your nest." Please excuse the pun. What I mean is that I am educating the members not only about Florida native plants, animals, migratory species, endangered or threatened species, but I'm also able to have one-on-one communication to be able to explain the golf course maintenance practices we use that work with nature, not destroy it.

Some of the facts that I try to drive home:

- We are water purifiers, not water



users. We recycle effluent water through the turf, returning it to the surficial aquifer cleaner than it was.

- We take soil samples to determine nutrient needs. We only fertilize when and where we need to. Fertilizer is expensive. Wasting it does not make good business or environmental sense.

- Chemical use is very limited and most of the chemicals we use on the course can be purchased at any home improvement center. Spot spraying makes up 90 percent of our weed control program.

- We use a solar-powered weather station to determine irrigation needs. The weather station calculates the evapotranspiration rate (ET) and changes the watering times for every head on the course each night to water based only on the turf loss of that day. Wonder if their home sprinkler systems do that?

- The sabal palms on the course have not been trimmed in five years. Not because we can't afford it, but because there is no need. Sabal palms are self pruning and removing green fronds removes a food source of the tree. By removing the "boots" on the palms we take away nesting sites for birds and the berries are a food source for overwintering and migratory birds.

Those are just a few of the points that I try to drive home when on the tours but it's the one-on-one interactions with the members that means the most. When else would you get to explain your maintenance practices to your members in such an up close and personal matter?

So here's what I do:

I have a sign-up list for the members

or guests placed in an accessible location (ours is in the pro shop). I limit the number on the tour to 25. It's much easier to keep the group together and avoid too many distracting side conversations.

I sometimes invite a local expert on wildlife. My guest comes to me from the "Environmental Learning Center" but there is also the local Audubon society, Florida Fish & Game, etc. Be creative! While you don't have to invite anyone, you can kill two birds with one stone.

Did I just say that?.

What I mean is, you can learn, the members can learn and you can educate two audiences about what really happens on a golf course.

Know your route and walk it in advance. This way you will know approximately how long it will take and can make notes of points of interest. Bring your guest along so he/she is familiar with the site in advance and see what ideas they may have. For example you may have a dead tree (snag) on your course that you can explain the tree is not dead, but alive with wildlife. I also like to demonstrate a soap flush and talk about our insect control program. The weather station is always a big hit.

Every golf course is different and unique with its own challenges. Once again, be creative.

We all have a love of nature. I'm sure it's one of the reasons that you are in this business. Share it with your members and guests and that passion will shine through. We all need to take a proactive stance on showing just what environmental stewards we really are.