Audubon, courses team up to save wildlife

More than 100 courses already signed onto program

By Mark Leslie and Kit Bradshaw

Golf courses and an Audubon Society wildlife sanctuary program "are a perfect match," according to an environmental specialist with the U.S. Golf Association.

By July, more than 100 courses in 26 states had shown interest in the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf Courses, administered by the New York Audubon Society and USGA.

"I am continually finding that many golf courses are already way in advance," she said. "They have been doing conservation practices. Or they have one element of the environment they are interested in. For instance, they have put up their wood duck boxes, or worked very hard to keep their purple martins populations."

"It's amazing to find so many who have already participated in this fashion. It's refreshing," Superintendent William Black, who has signed his Congressional Country Club in Bethesda, Md., on to the program, said. "A lot of us have been doing a lot of these programs for years anyhow."

Since 1981, Congressional has had a program that has greatly increased the Eastern bluebird population on the course. "People

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Drought information network established in California

"It's fairly straightforward," Ennen said of the system, which walks users through a variety of information options like "press letter A for agricultural news." Ennen said the drought information maintained by ATI-Net includes a listing of California water districts and the population bases supported by those districts; as well as updated general drought information; county-by-county look at the drought; and government assistance programs available to help companies hurt by the economic impact of the drought.

While most of the aid programs were originally set up to help agricultural enterprises such as farms, Ennen suggested that golf course superintendents review the listings, to see if any aid programs would apply to the golf industry.

Such aid could include grants, loans, cost sharing, or technical assistance. ATI-Net also includes an analysis of state water supplies by region, assessing both the current and potential impact of the drought on those water supplies. A list of publications that provide drought information is also available to ATI-Net users, Ennen said.

For more information on ATI-Net call 209-278-4872.

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Audubon Wildlife Sanctuary Program catches on

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had always said the Eastern bluebird is fragile and can't compete in an environment with pesticides. In fact, we are increasing our population by providing nesting houses for them," Black said.

Black and his crew built 10 bluebird houses the first year. It was such a success that they have kept adding houses until they now have 75 along the edge of the fairways.

At Tam O'Shanter Public Golf Course in Canton, Ohio, President Chuck Bennell said the program is "a wonderful idea" he hopes will catch on nationwide.

"It's going to require that operators see it as something that's interesting to do and fun to do, and not a hassle," he said. "Most people I know in the golf business are proud of the beauty of their course. This is a way to share that beauty with people who may not be golfers, but who might come out to the property and help identify what wildlife we have."

AUDUBON-USGA PARTNERSHIP

Ron Dodson, president of the New York Audubon Society, had instituted sanctuary programs with corporate and school landholders when he met with USGA Green Section National Director Jim Snow and decided to get involved with golf courses.

"We view all open space as important to wildlife," Dodson said, "and through this program we are able to work in a positive way with managers and golf course superintendents to have courses be part of the sanctuary system."

Spurred by its overall environmental program, the USGA has fully backed the effort. It added Sadlon to its staff and contributed $30,000 to the New York Audubon to produce a brochure and support Dodson's time and travels working on the project.

Interested superintendents should contact the Audubon Society in Selkirk, N.Y., telephone 518-767-9051. They will be asked to register for $100, for which they will receive a resource inventory handbook and one-year subscription to Field Notes, the Cooperative Sanctuary newsletter.

After they complete the questionnaire and resource inventory handbook, the Audubon prepares a report based on this information. The report suggests various wildlife habitat enhancement projects and resource conservation programs, along with fact sheets that provide details of the projects.

If a course feels through, it becomes a "certified cooperative sanctuary."

Asked the incentives for a superintendent to get involved in the program, Sadlon said, "It helps them manage their course the way they'd like to. It helps them express some of their environmental concerns, to describe to the people in power the importance of certain management techniques, such as integrated pest management and water conservation.

"I do think it is helpful in becoming certified to being able to tell your local municipality that you have become a certified cooperative sanctuary. That shows, from an image standpoint, that you have taken action to be environmentally conscious."

Black said: "It's a great idea, a good way for golfing people to show we do mean well... The majority of superintendents and people in the golf course business are environmentally in tune and are doing things to help wildlife. We don't go spreading a lot of poisons around. We try to be very careful."

Of Congressional CC's 500 acres, only five acres of greens and tees and 50 acres of fairways are intensively maintained, he said. "Yet people point their finger at golf courses and say, 'All they do is pollute the environment.' That's not the case."

Bennell agreed. Mentioning a North Carolina golf course where the scorecard is a bird watcher's guide to the course, he said: "When I found out about the Audubon program... it occurred that, first, it's fun to watch the birds and enjoy the wildlife and flowers when you're out on a course; and, second, the more we could attract birds and other wildlife to the course, the more the customers are likely to recognize it is a safe, as well as a beautiful, place to be. If you've got lots of birds and squirrels running around, it reinforces that you are being responsible as far as what you're spraying or fertilizing with."

Bennell said joining the sanctuary program will "enable us to plug into something very good for us technically and from a public relations standpoint. And it will enable us to make friends with environmentalists long before we would need to know them to be the good guys when there is a crisis somewhere."

"My own feeling is the political aspects of environmental responsibility are going to be as important as the technical aspects. You not only have to do the right thing, you..."

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at more than 100 courses across the country

have to be known to do the right thing. "All of this comes together with the Audubon program, where we are able to get very good advice from a naturalist organization about how to use the areas of the course that are out of play for wildlife habitat."

The Specifics
Sadlon, who holds a landscape architecture degree from Rutgers University and has continued advanced studies in environmental sciences with a specialty in wetlands, said wildlife enhancement projects are broken into the four important elements: Cover, water, food and space.

- Cover could be a simple nest box providing a place for shelter and breeding. "We advise concerning whatever species is there," Sadlon said. "Some wildlife is more adaptable to an open environment; others, like the woodpecker, need a wooded area. We give superintendents specifics, like the dimensions, material and size of nesting boxes."

- A food enhancement project "might incorporate planting shrubs or other plant material that provides a food source. Sometimes trees are a seed source. Sometimes grasses, berry-producing shrubs might also double as a cover enhancement project," she said. "You could also start a bird seed-feeding program... which brings wildlife closer to the golfer, and that is one of the goals — for the golfer to understand who also uses their course."

- Water is usually tied in with the irrigation pond or water feature of the golf course, Sadlon said. "We encourage that some edge of the pond be left in a natural state that is more beneficial to the two other elements important to wildlife — food and cover," she said. "You can have your water feature and manufacture it close to the edge on half the pond; but we encourage the other half be left natural.

- Golf courses are a natural to fulfill the space requirement for animals. "Courses have space available, quite a bit of it out of play."

We encourage that space be left as natural as possible instead of being harbored. We encourage the natural vegetation be left," Sadlon said.

She added that flora and fauna are also part of the program. If a course contains a threatened species, Sadlon or Dodson tells the superintendent what its cultural habits are so they can provide for it.

Dodson said that in addition to internal recommendations, the Audubon Society keeps courses updated on ways to educate the public about courses.

"We recommend that the courses become involved with the local citizens' groups, with the Girl and Boy Scouts — by having them build the bird boxes, for example — and with the media," he said. "One of our goals over time is to enhance the image of golf courses as important areas for wildlife."

The 26 states that had at least one golf course sign onto the program by July are Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Virginia, Washington.

Greg Graham
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weather. At this point last year our greens were already transitioned. We had 12 days (last winter) in a row with a high temperature around 27 degrees and a low about 12. The greens were frozen solid.

Graham said the course suffered moderate damage, with three greens having to be re-done.

Environmentally, Desert Inn has experienced little problem. University of Nevada at Las Vegas researchers drilled three 50-foot wells at the course and found no chemical contamination.

"We don't use a lot of pesticides or insecticides anywhere but on the greens. I'm not on a preventative program at all. I pay attention to the conditions and when I need it I use it," he said.

The desert heat requires Graham's crew to work from 5 a.m. to 1 p.m. That means mowing occurs while the course is most heavily played. Delaying mowing until mid-afternoon would interfere less with play but costs the crews time and reduces the efficiency of the mowers.

"You don't have the flexibility of changing schedules you would on a normal golf course because the union requires overtime. It increases the cost of business because you need a little more equipment and a few more people and there's a lot of hand work here on things like flower beds. But the hotel wants us to keep them up that way. That requires more people. We have 23 people on an 18-hole golf course. A normal course would take 15 to 18."