

A lot to live up to

We face a daily barrage of statistics. For example, earlier this year the English Golf Union reported that there were almost as many planning applications for new golf courses (1,890) as there are existing courses. Nearer to home, the greenkeeping market in the UK was recently estimated to be a massive £187m per year.

Not wishing to be left out, I too have some statistics for the readers of Greenkeeper International. Think of the M25... that's if you can bear to! It runs round Greater London and its suburbs, an area of land which roughly equals the total area covered by golf courses in Great Britain. It is a substantial area indeed and is one which is managed by greenkeepers.

Returning to other people's figures: a few years ago the then Nature Conservancy Council (NCC) the nation's advisor on conservation matters, published findings concerning the loss of wildlife habitats. These made disturbing reading. In the years since the Second World War Britain had lost 95% of its flower-rich meadows, 60% of its lowland heathland and around half of its ancient woodland. The losses were the result of agricultural intensification, industry, housing and road development. Although these losses have slowed down in recent times, due to a combination of agricultural recession and government policies designed to reduce over-production whilst lessening the impact of agriculture on the environment, they still continue. Needless to say, Britain's wildlife needs all the help it can get in the face of such an onslaught and that is where golf courses come in.

Before we continue, consider the following tale. Among the wildlife frequenting the golf course is the greater-spotted-golfer (*Homo golfus*) of which there are over 2 million in Britain. This species depends almost entirely on golf courses for its existence, where it can be seen foraging on golf courses during daylight hours hunting for small, spherical objects either singly or in groups of up to four individuals. Greater-spotted-golfers are, by and large, harmless creatures, though greenkeepers are advised to approach them with care as they have been known to become aggressive under certain conditions (eg. in inclement weather). The species is breeding well in Britain and its numbers are growing steadily, in fact golf courses architects and constructors are working hard to create new habitats for the increasing population. So far the story is a happy one. But what if the unthinkable happened and 95% of the greater-spotted-golfer's habitat disappeared. The two million individuals which now range across 2,000 courses would have only 100 sites on which to live, and a single golf course would be unable to sustain the needs of 20,000 individuals. If this ever happened, not even St Andrews miracles could save the greater-spotted-golfer!

The above may only be a story, but it is said that truth is stranger than fiction. There once lived in Britain a creature known as the large blue butterfly (*Maculinea arion*). It was a beautiful butterfly and could be seen on bright summer days flying among the meadows where it lived. However, as the meadows started to disappear, so did the large blue. It became extinct in 1979.

Extinction is forever... and that is why conservation is so important. Golf courses can be a valuable resource when it comes to nature conservation and already make a significant con-



tributions to our natural heritage. This fact was acknowledged by Ian Dair the communications director of English Nature (EN) (England's successor body to the former NCC) who highlighted the environmental responsibilities of greenkeepers in a recent August edition of Greenkeeper International.

He also stressed that the public perception of the impact of golf on the environment was an important issue that needs addressing. Like many of my colleagues, I am frequently asked the question "What's ecology all about?" When faced with such a question I am often tempted to reply "Oh, just life, the universe and almost everything". It is precisely because the environment is so big that we, all of us, tend to be somewhat overawed by it.

But it needn't be so. The environment works according to a few basic easily understood concepts. Nature has its own economy and budgets accordingly. All living things operate through a series of checks and balances, cycles and networks. The skill of an environmental manager... and here I include the greenkeeper, involves understanding something of how the environment functions so that one can work with it rather than against it.

In the course of researching, writing and helping to promote the NCC/EN publication 'On Course Conservation' and its follow up document on environmental management planning I have seen some many instances where golf courses are managed for wildlife to the benefit of golf and the environment.

Still more can be done to improve nature's handicap. Your course needn't have a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) or some other recognised designation to be of value to wildlife, just keep on managing with good golf and conservation in mind

and let your course continue to be one of Britain's unofficial nature reserves.

There's a great deal of conservation potential within the average course. Take water features, for example: lakes and stream are not only of landscape and strategic benefit, they are also a focus of attention for wildlife in the absence of the scores of village and farm ponds which have been drained. Hedges within and around the course are also good places for wildlife many of which do a good job on the course in keeping down pests including worms and leatherjackets.

Conservation requires planning and forethought-just like any other management project. With this in mind, does your course have a conservation management plan? Does it have a tree planting or agrochemicals policy? Do the members know about the wildlife on their course? Likewise, do they know of the work you are doing to protect and enhance the environmental value of their course?

Greenkeepers have a great deal to be proud of as custodians of golf's living heritage and a lot to live up to too. So keep up the good work... and keep golf green!

◆ The author, Dr Anne-Maria Brennan, is a biologist with research interests in the environmental aspects of golf. If you have any questions, comments or examples of the greening of golf we would like to hear from you... just write care of the editor.

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