

GREEN FINGERS

by IAN DAIR

But Bob Taylor is regretting what he said in the November issue of *Greenkeeper International*. In writing about the winners of the BIGGA Golf Environment Competition, Bob described fellow judge Keith Duff as "one of the seemingly few golfing conservationists"

The Royal Mail have made a bomb on stamps as letters of protest and denial have hurled through Bob's letter box.

I play regularly with a nature conservationist and he isn't Keith Duff. This chap can tell what bird is singing, invisible in a far away tree. He often picks up snails (they're like that, nature conservationists) and identifies, them. Funny, most snails seem to be unnamed. He once, got very excited by a black dot in the sky. A rare Pomarine Skua (so rare it's not in my bird book). I believe him – golfers always tell the truth.

Most golfers wouldn't claim this depth and breadth of knowledge, even if they had it. But most appreciate, in a general way, the wildlife that surrounds them as they go round their course. And this is my point. Every golf course plays its part in conservation. While I must applaud the BIGGA Golf Environment Competition, I wouldn't like it to be taken that the runners up, or even the courses that didn't enter, are somehow unimportant.

Imagine a visitor from outer space cruising at three thousand feet in his spaceship. Spread out below is the countryside. A collection of colours. Black for roads, red for roofs, yellow for oil seed rape, blue for flax, dirty brown for set-aside. Where is the green and pleasant land? Ah, there. Standing out proudly as the last guardian of woods, meadows, ponds and long grass is – the golf course.

Every golf course is a conservation area. Courses old and new are green fingers in a land which is increasingly hostile to wildlife. If it's not already under brick and concrete it soon will be. Or if it isn't built on, it will either be under-managed and neglected or intensely over-managed eg. an arable field ploughed and treated

several times a year with chemicals. Compared to this golf courses are permanently stable, low-input environments where wildlife has a chance. Courses make up about 0.7% of Great Britain's 22 million hectares. Not much? It's double that of the RSPB's reserves And over four times the area of country parks.

But you greenkeepers know all this because you went on one of BIGGA's environmental courses or you've got the books (if you haven't, contact Aldwark Manor right away) or you've read about it in this magazine. Amid the enthusiasm I want to mention a word of caution. You might find this hard to believe, given all that has been said and written in its favour. Yet there are people who are anti-conservation. Sometimes, it's the conservationists who are their own worst enemies. I recall a seminar at Aldwark where a course designer was moaning about the difficulties of course building in Germany. There, the local conservationists tried to insist on green sand in the bunkers, to blend in better with the landscape. Then, there's the opposition right in our camp. I was at the First World Scientific Congress of Golf at St Andrews when a really, really famous American course architect described conservationists as being like water melons – green on the outside and red on the inside.

There are prejudiced and ignorant folk in all walks of life, although a higher than average percentage seem to make their way onto golf club committees. Them aside, I acknowledge that all golfers are not conservationists and all conservationists are not golfers – Bob Taylor was right there. But every greenkeeper, however humble his or her course, is a conservationist, an environmental manager looking after one of the few bits of the countryside which are green, wildlife-friendly and accessible to people, whether or not they have time to look up from the golf ball and smell the flowers. You may not have won an award from BIGGA this time round, but you get one from me

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