

Golf course management is a challenging job at the best of times, but a course situated on an SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest) presents challenges all of its own.

Managing an environment



Right: Skylarks are one of the many protected species at Fairways Golf Club



Right: Course Manager Lee Squires

At Fairways Golf Club near Clacton-on-Sea, Course Manager Lee Squires (left) juggles the demands of maintaining a high quality course with the need to protect the skylarks and swifts that make it their home.

Part of The Orchards Park at Point Clear, Fairways Golf Club caters for the Park's golfing members. Situated by the River Colne, the perimeter area of the course lies on a sheltered site adjacent to salt flats and this provides an ideal habitat for large numbers of skylarks as well as a range of scarce and rare plants and insects – the reason for the SSSI status.

The nine-hole course was constructed three years ago on an almost square 27ha field which had remained wild for at least ten years before work began. The course was completed by September of that year, with Lee taking up the post of course manager in February 1998.

"Right from the beginning I knew that it would be a challenging course to manage," recalled Lee. "When I first came here it needed a lot of attention – the greens hadn't been cut for six months and the grass was an inch long. There was a wide variety of weeds present including some wild carrot in the plot.



Above: Clover was just one of the problems for Lee



Left: Creeping Buttercup

"Added to that, the course sits on clay, so drainage can be a problem and the course surface can crack in summer when it dries out."

But the SSSI rules mean Lee faces a number of restrictions to what he can do to the course – and when.

"For example, I was only allowed to use a herbicide on parts of the course after 18 months of discussions with English Nature, our SSSI advisers, because of fears about any runoff into the protected areas," said Lee.

He works closely with the organisation's Chris Gibson to ensure they can help provide the best habitat for the birds. The rough or semi-rough areas of the course are not touched and Lee was only given this permission to use a specific herbicide twice on the course after careful consideration of products with English Nature.

"I'm lucky in some ways as there are virtually no daisies, dandelions or annual meadowgrass on the course. But my main weed problems – clover, creeping buttercup and particularly bristly oxtongue – present quite a challenge."

Bristly oxtongue is perhaps the worst weed headache, and following discussions with English Nature to find the most suitable and environmentally safe product to use on the course, a programme was chosen to control the weed – as well as clover and buttercup – on the greens and surrounds.

"Steve Denton, at Rigby Taylor, suggested a programme of Bastion T at three litres/ha to help control the clover and creeping buttercup, and we were allowed to spray the course just twice last season as a one-off," said Lee.

"We also knew that the manufacturer had experience with Bastion T's off-label recommendation for control of bristly oxtongue. A short while after spraying the oxtongue had curled up and we found the whole weed had been taken out, right down to the tap root."

Bristly oxtongue, a broadleaved biennial, has been a problem on the course since its establishment and Lee had been looking for an effective way to control the weed.

"There were only a few tiny dots left in the turf where the weeds were and these will soon fill out when the grass starts growing again," says Lee.

Leatherjackets can be the other main headache at Fairways.

"We have seen masses of them on the course here at times. We have been allowed to use Lorsban T on one fairway where the problem was particularly bad. As for disease, we don't get too much here, and I try to keep it that way. Fertiliser use has also been restricted, and last year for the first time since the course was established we put 11kg/ha of nitrogen supplied from Taylor's 3:12:12 outfield fer-

tiliser, applied at 35g/m² on the fairways.

"Thatch isn't too much of a problem as the course is still relatively new. But the land on which the course was constructed is now beginning to settle, so I will have to start planning a scarifying and aeration programme."

The course's underlying clay means that it can be very wet during winter and so it is closed for play from November to February, reopening in the spring for the first few members of the season. Again, this fits in with the management strategy which English Nature believes secures the protection of the SSSI while allowing the area's use as an attractive golf course in the summer months.

English Nature's Chris Gibson added that the area is also designated a European site and therefore has International importance to wildlife.

"The restrictions on the management of the course serve to ensure it is operated in a welfare-friendly manner and is supportive to a range of birds, and we believe the work carried out by Lee and ourselves has fully met these objectives," said Chris.

As for Lee, his busiest period is just starting again.

"The members are starting to come back to the course, and are the skylarks and swifts. This year I hope the bristly oxtongue won't also be back, though!"