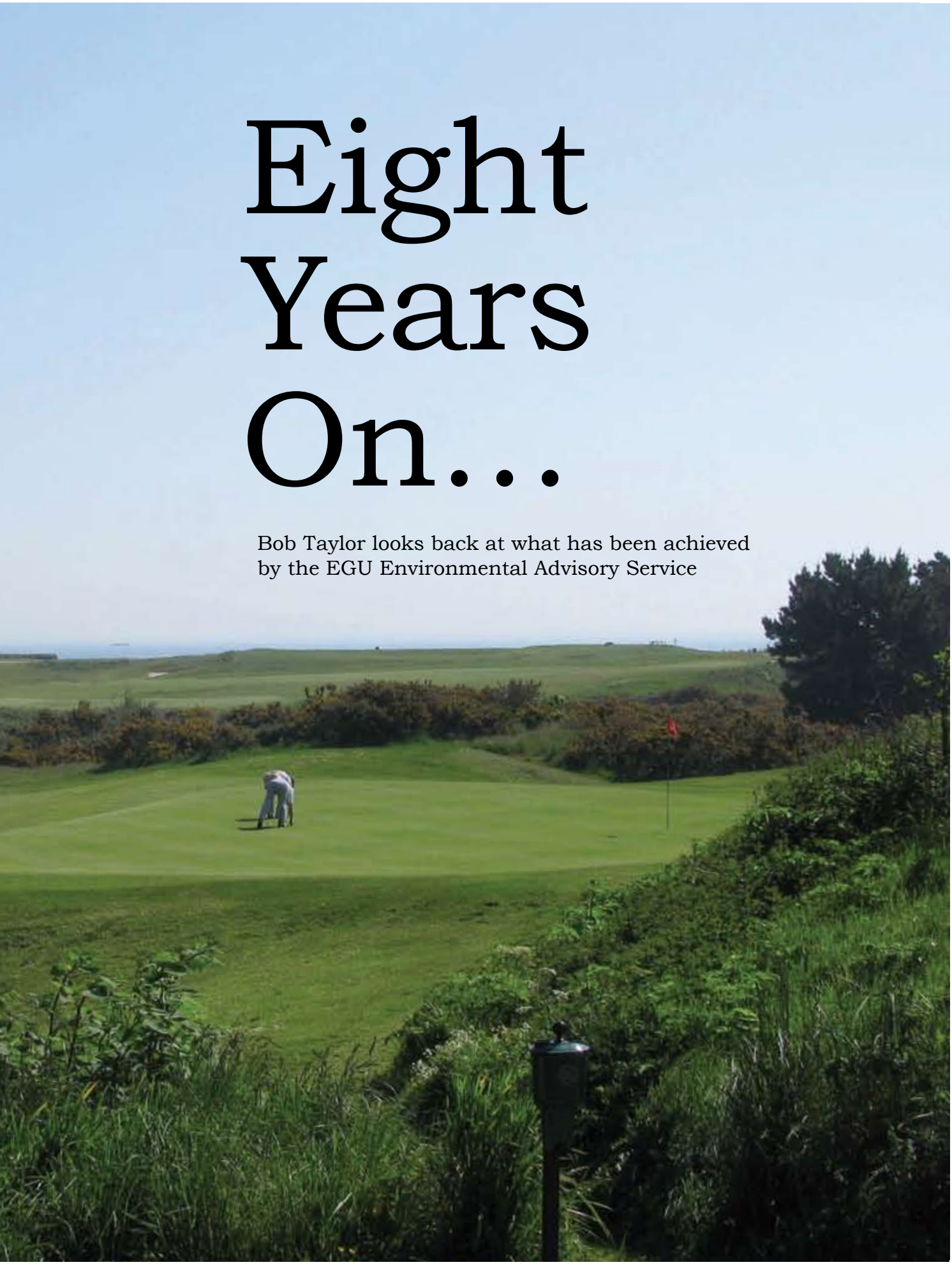
Eight Years On...

Bob Taylor looks back at what has been achieved by the EGU Environmental Advisory Service



ABOVE: Dead wood and boundary rough provides important corridor habitat

Golf courses can, with appropriate management, be valuable landscapes for wildlife with a number supporting some of our most rare and vulnerable wildlife species.

The English Golf Environmental Advisory Scheme (EGEAS) was set up by the EGU in 2002 to raise awareness of the benefits of good environmental and ecological practices to their affiliate clubs and to golfers playing at these golf clubs. A second ambition was to demonstrate and communicate to central and local government, and the local communities around each golf course, that golf is a responsible land user, providing wildlife opportunities and real conservation benefit.

Eight years on, 220 golf clubs have benefited from heavily subsidised ecological and environmental advice and received certification for achieving the targets set. Through media promotion of these achievements Natural England, the Government Department for Food and Rural Affairs, wildlife and conservation groups are all now more aware of the valuable ecological corridor that a golf course provides across England.

So how did the scheme operate and just what has been achieved?

The process

The scheme was initially designed to run for three years, but was later extended due to high demand, to raise awareness of environmental and ecological issues, by providing free consultancy to those who applied. Within the scheme, it was decided that clubs would receive an independent consultancy visit, during which ecological highlights of the site were identified, together with recommendations on how they could be improved and managed more effectively. Following the visit, clubs received a report detailing the discussions held on site and outlining a series of targets set for the club, the progress of which would be reviewed 18 months later during the second follow-up visit. The targets were prescribed giving consideration to what was deemed realistically achievable by the club (based on its available resources) within an 18 month time period. If, upon the second visit to the club, a significant amount of the target work had been completed, the club would receive a certification under the scheme in recognition of their achievement and dedication to ecological management.

Facts and Figures

Following the second visit to the club, during which target progress was assessed, a total of 143 clubs (±70%) had done a sufficient level of work to be certificated under the EGEAS. Given that the targets were set to be achievable yet challenging, this is an impressive rate of success.

Consider trees under the scheme.

A total of 19500 native trees were planted either as replacements to inappropriate trees or to create new woodland ecosystems.

Over 1000 linear meters of hedgerow was planted, helping to reduce some of the losses that have been rife throughout the countryside over the past 30 years. Hedgerows are important for plants, nesting birds, invertebrates and for bats which use hedgerows to navigate between areas.

A significant amount of deadwood in the form of log piles has been created for the life that they can sup-

port. Deadwood is a fast diminishing resource in the countryside and one that we should not overlook. Random dead wood lain on the surface will provide connecting habitat for a range of specialist invertebrate species. Standing dead wood too is in extremely short supply and can be better accommodated than it currently is on our golf courses.

Over 450 bird boxes were erected, providing nesting habitat in the absence of standing dead wood and other habitats such as hedgerows.

Grasslands are a main part of any golf course and it was possible under the scheme to create over 1,516,300 m2 of new deep rough grassland habitat on a range of different soil types.

Over 30 new areas of wild flower meadow were created.

Our heathland too has benefited from the scheme, this fast diminishing resource is vital for sand lizard and other reptiles and is the chosen habitat of butterflies such as the silver studded blue and birds like the Dartford warbler and nightjar. Over 22 additional hectares of heathland were created.

Ponds and other associated water features are important for a range of wildlife, which can vary massively depending upon how they are looked after.

The EGEAS has improved the quality of more than 100 ponds and has resulted in the creation of 20 new water bodies, thereby increasing the country's habitat resource for a broad spectrum of organisms including great crested newt and natterjack toad.

Testimonials

Many clubs following advice from the STRI Ecologists wrote to outline the positives that came out of the service and the visits and a few are illustrated below

Weymouth Golf Club

…Thank you for nominating Weymouth Golf Club for the certificate which has given our conservation objectives some useful publicity in the local newspaper and The Golfer magazine. Informing both the club members and the local community will I am sure prove to be beneficial to our aims of conserving the local environment. Wild flora mixes have been introduced between the 5th and 9th tees. The vegetation is being managed in accordance with the recommendations provided. The information you provided about yellow rattle seed proved to be extremely useful and we were able to purchase enough seed to conduct a trial in several areas of rough.

Davenport Golf Club

….Since STRI last visited Davenport Golf Club in October 2002 the number of long grass areas has increased from one to seven. Many larger areas under and around young trees/copses are being marked out at present. The grass will be cut less frequently and at a higher height of cut which will provide an intermediate rough. An area for a composting facility has been ear-marked and cleared. Both ponds have been cleared of Canadian and other pondweed and the material is left to drain for a day or two beside the pond before removal. The beech hedge to the right of the 16th hole has been extended along the 15th to provide a hedgerow corridor. Other work undertaken has included planting marsh marigolds within two wet areas and several significant new tree and scrub plantings.

Eaton Golf Club

…Since your visit in July 2003 we have set up an Environmental Working Group that produced an Environmental Management Plan, a comprehensive Waste Management Plan and held numerous course walks for members. On the practical side, woodland thinning commenced through nine areas; around 300 shrubs, 142 5 ft trees and 90 whips were introduced at different areas around the course; two areas of long rough (each of around 70 m x 30 m) were allowed to develop as ecological corridors for wildlife; three barn owl boxes were erected by the local Barn Owl Group; considerable work has been carried out with regard to the development of the water features including marginal and semi-aquatic planting. We have also benefitted from an article published in the Liverpool Daily Post (Tuesday 6 December 2005) entitled Eaton are chasing birdies with a difference. We have strived to strike a balance between the needs of nature and the needs of the golfer working to get the balance right.

The club found the work rewarding, putting something down for future generations whilst giving so much pleasure to those using the course.

IN CONCLUSION

A full account of the service, the results obtained, and the comments received from participating golf clubs is contained within a new publication produced by STRI on behalf of the English Golf Union and the sponsors .

STRI and the EGU would like to thank Natural England and The R&A for their continued support throughout.

Copies of the booklet are available free from The English Golf Union, Tel: 0044 1526 334500 or write to Paul Keeling at The National Golf Centre.