

# Overgrooming Is Overspending.

*The last foursome has just made the turn. It is a gloriously resplendent and cool July evening at Briarwood Country Club. The sun drops below the tree line; a slight breeze stirs, and the tall bluestem prairie grasses gently bat at the sinuous flight of so many butterflies. In the midst of all the pastoral tranquility, a senior greenkeeper is being severely scolded by the mother red-winged blackbird.*

*You may say what you will of the propriety in his constant cajoling and fun-loving jabs, but there are not more than four or five living greenkeepers today who have given more years, and more hours of service, to the art of our profession than Mr. Paul Voykin. Certainly no one has done more to promote an environment of harmony between the game of golf and the voiceless creatures who share its natural setting.*

“Go away from my nest, you old weed-picker . . . why you . . . how dare you drive your cart so near my babies . . . just you come one foot closer and I’ll soil your ridiculous-looking safari hat.”

Paul Voykin snickers to himself as the matriarch swoops ’cross his path. A golfer now calls from the nearby green, “Mr. P., I just saw a paper cup lying on the fourteenth hole.” Paul shakes his head in mock incredulity, and calls back to him, “Why didn’t you pick it up, then?”

If the mother blackbird only knew what the members of Briarwood have come to know so well—that is, how much love and care this man has for everything within the scope of his 165-acre domain—she would probably alight on his broad shoulders and sing him a song of gratitude.

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On this very evening, I am the guest of Mr. Voykin and he is proudly showing me around. I am especially keen to see his famed nature preservation areas and to hear his own account of what prompted him to develop them so many years ago. The following is just a sample, in his own words, of what I discovered about the ambassador and elder statesman of the nature-friendly golf course.

“All of the wonderful natural areas and prairies that you see at Briarwood started about 10 years after I came here. There was one time when I couldn’t cut a certain area that was well away from play; I was so busy that year and I just couldn’t get to it. When it got to where I could finally cut it, I noticed that there were some wildflowers growing up; things that I had not planted; they just came up from the ground on their own, and it looked so beautiful to me. I was so fortunate to have a green chairman who encouraged me to allow it to grow. He said, look Paul, we can just call this our pasture. I guess I was very lucky to have the right chairman at the right time.

# Revisited



*Tall, queen of the prairie, perennial flowers in backyard.*

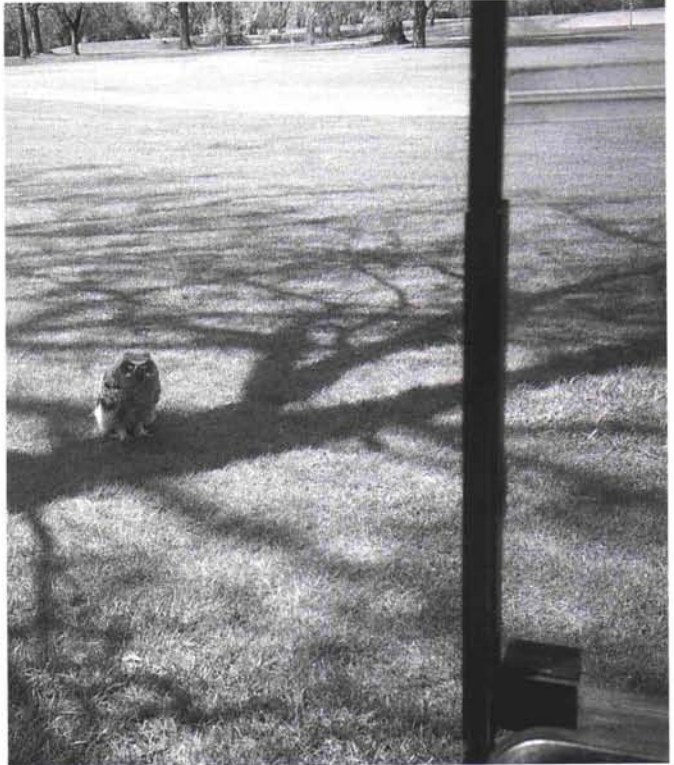
“So we brought in more and more other such areas, and it took some educating of the members, but they learned to appreciate it. The members of Briarwood are the ones who deserve the praise for what you see.

“At the time we were doing this, there were no seed suppliers of prairie plants, so we had to harvest our own wherever we could. I planted areas here and there, and then I began to see birds and butterflies that I never saw here before.

“When I came to the Chicago area in 1956 from my birthplace of Saskatchewan, Canada, I missed the prairie chickens, the partridges and the wild things in general. I remembered when my brother Peter and I used to walk home from school, and we would pick wild crocus for our mother. We lived in the country, and so many

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*A baby great horned owl at Briarwood C.C.*



*Yearly perennial flower burn in spring before nesting.*

wonderful birds would migrate right over our house.

“Everything on the golf courses had become square and sterile; the wildlife was vanishing, and we were mowing everything from fence to fence. We even mowed the grass right to the water’s edge of our ponds and streams; even a crayfish was not welcome on a golf course.

“In the beginning, everyone thought I was crazy to quit mowing these areas. Some people called it Paul’s elephant grass, but I knew I was doing the right thing. We had pushed nature off the golf course, but I believed we could bring her back and make the game better at the same time. Look at all of the flowers blooming on my golf course. Have you ever met anyone who doesn’t like a flower?

“Then, in 1970, I was asked to give a speech for the USGA, before approximately 600 people at the Biltmore Hotel. The title was ‘Overgrooming Is Overspending.’ I showed slides of some of the wild areas on my course, and it was obvious that some people thought I was absolutely nuts, but the majority seemed to think that this idea was long overdue. At the conclusion of my talk, at least 30 people came up to ask me questions.

“It was my perception at the time that the architects in particular were most against natural areas on golf courses, but when the public began to express concern over the environment, the architects pointed to the efforts of myself and others as evidence in favor of the environment. I think that those of us who did this work in the early stages, were in our own way, influential in helping the game continue to grow.

“Now we have golf courses that are 50% wild areas. I was just

giving the right speech at the right time, when people were becoming concerned about endangered species and overdevelopment. People were beginning to damn the impact of golf courses on the environment, but as we all know, the opposite is true, and the members of Briarwood just took it a step further.

“And it’s not only grasses and forbs that attract wildlife. Trees are the best birdhouses. I tell my friends with birdhouses that I have a problem at Briarwood, I have so many birds that they are flying into each other. The Audubon Society once asked me what I spend on birdhouses and I told them I spend \$25,000 per year, except I call them trees. We even have great horned owls here, and this year our friends fledged the most beautiful baby owl you have ever seen.

“All of my natural areas are unique, planted with different varieties of prairie plants. Some of them are adorned with large rocks modeled after the Japanese Triangle, a trick that I learned from my old friend Ray Rawyn, who recently

passed away. The stones provide a focal point of interest for when the grasses and forbs are dormant.

“The most important thing is, I have done this because I like doing it. I don’t seek any medals; this is not to get another certificate for Paul, but to give something to the dragonfly. The members of Briarwood have given something back to nature, and that is all that matters to Paul Voykin. Before all of this, we cut everything down and the prairie creatures had no place to nest and live.

“I will tell you that I hardly ever take a day off, and I do not like to leave too early, because I am afraid that I might miss something beautiful on the course. When my brother Peter and I were young men, we went to see Ben Hogan, and he told us that if we worked in the golf business, we would be able to live like millionaires. After Peter and I heard Ben Hogan, we became greenkeepers for life, and we truly have lived like millionaires. So tell me, why would I want to leave the golf course for more than a moment?”



Paul’s three-year-old granddaughter, Bethany Rose, in front of one of his next-to-tee creations.