

WildSide

Audubon Tour Leadership 101

By Craig Weyandt

In this article, I will tell you how I started and eventually conducted my own Audubon tours at my golf course. I cannot remember where the idea came from to conduct an Audubon tour on the golf course but it may have been from hearing about what Tim Hires and others are doing by inviting school children to come to their golf course for a tour.

I know my golfing members see the course almost every day but I want them to slow down and see things from a different point of view. These tours give me a chance to take not

only golfing members but social and tennis members as well and look at something other than tees, greens and fairways. I can talk to a captive audience about what positive benefits golf courses have on wildlife and the environment.

I hope this information will serve as a guide and inspire you to conduct your own Audubon tours at your golf course. Heck, if I can do it, anyone can do it. What you will gain is a community that is better educated on the work you do to conserve water, wildlife and enhance the environment. It will also bring a greater understanding of the plant and animal communi-



Superintendent Craig Weyandt (standing on the edge of the green) conducts periodic Audubon tours of The Moorings Club to share with his members the positive impact golf courses can have on the environment. Photo by K. Leah Stephens.

ties in which you work every day.

As with most superintendents, I have always had a love for nature. This love for nature only increased after I starting working at The Moorings Club in 2001. Each day, as I would go out onto the golf course, I was greeted by many coastal birds, butterflies and other small mammals and reptiles. I already knew the names of



A cooperative osprey perches with a freshly caught fish for a photo op during one of The Moorings Club's Audubon Tours. Photo by Ullin W. Leavell Jr.

most of the mammals before I started working at the club, but I don't think I could name but a handful of the birds and none of the butterflies.

With the world's largest library online and a variety of Audubon books at my fingertips, I researched the identity of the birds I saw on the course that day. One of my favorite and most used books is the "National Audubon Society Field Guide to Florida." It is a regional guide for birds, animals, trees, wildflowers, insects, weather, nature preserves, and more.

It seemed the more research I did, the more my interest was piqued. Finding the name of what I saw was definitely the hardest part, but getting more information about a correctly identified bird or mammal was easy. I mainly use books for identification and I use the Internet for more detailed information. I sort through all of the information I have gathered and condense it into a short article for the club's newsletter.

Wildlife articles are a great way for members and guests to associate wildlife with golf courses in a positive light. Members have told me that the nature section of the newsletter is their favorite part and they always look forward to reading it.

I always write something positive in the club's newsletter even, if it's just a small turf fact. If there is a problem on the course, the newsletter may not be the best place to air dirty laundry. By the time the newsletter makes it to print, the information may not be timely and I'm sure a tennis player could care less about turf problems. I figure all members (golf, social, tennis, etc.) are going to receive the newsletter, so let's make the articles either positive about turf or nature. So just by writing the articles for the club newsletter, I learned about the local birds and animals. You may not remember everything about a particular bird you have researched but try to remember a key fact or two to talk about on an Audubon Tour. If you can't remember, then take a book or "cheat" cards with you. Trust me, no one will mind.

Even after you have researched and gathered all of the information for your tour, you may not feel comfortable speaking in front of a group or doing the tour by yourself. No problem. All you have to do is call an expert. Just about everywhere in the state of Florida, you can find someone from an environmental learning center or from the local Audubon society who would be more than glad to come to your course and help you conduct the tour.

On my last tour, I invited someone from the local Environmental Learning Center

not because I felt uncomfortable but just to help add something to the tour. It was perfect! We conducted the tour together and both learned a lot about each other's area of expertise.

For example, I learned that Ospreys are either right-taloned or left-taloned just like we are either left-handed or right-handed. I also learned that butterflies don't like mulch and would prefer a rock to sun on. When you give

Plan on having someone from your staff or another department take pictures while conducting the tour. They make great photos for your club newsletter or bulletin board.

these little facts to your members and guests, you hear the "ooh"s and "aw"s that rival those to fireworks on the 4th of July. Well, maybe not quite as much as the 4th of July, but you got the idea.

Planning a route for your tour is very important. You should know how long it will take to complete your Audubon tour. When I walk nine holes at my golf course, it typically takes around an hour and 15 minutes with stopping and talking. Take your planned route and practice with someone to see how long it will take you. Discuss the wildlife that you see while you are walking. Remember, there is always the chance that you may not see much wildlife on your Audubon tour. This may be because of bad weather or just the large group of people walking around, but seeing wildlife is never a guarantee. You should plan on other things to talk about.

I always make it a point to talk about the Florida state tree (sabal palm) and correct pruning practices. By leaving the boots on the sabal palm, you leave a nesting site for mourning doves; and by leaving the seed pods on, you help feed migratory and overwintering birds. After all, the tree is self-pruning and brown leaves naturally fall off in time.

I also like to stop at the irrigation system's weather station and talk about what it does for the golf course. When we speak of irrigation, I tell the group that I'm not a water user but a water purifier. I explain how we use effluent

water for irrigation and the turf filters out nutrients and returns the water cleaner to the surficial aquifer. If you think about it, I bet your course has many interesting facts that you would just love share and never had the chance.

All you need to do now is pick a date for the Audubon tour. Make sure this date does not conflict with any other departments at your facility. Communication as always is the key to success. Once a date has been chosen, I will advertise the tour in the club's newsletter and make other flyers for around the club. If your club has a website you can also advertise on it.

The information on our flyer includes the date, time of the tour (6:45 coffee, 7 start walking), place to meet, where we plan to walk and what to bring. My office manager does a terrific job of making the flyer for our club. It includes pictures of birds and animals, which makes people stop and take a look to see what the flyer is all about. I suggest you include a contact number for more information.

To stay together, it has been my experience that the smaller the group the better. I normally keep the tours limited to 25 people or less. If you get too many people, there tends to be a lot of chatter and people can't hear. Also with a large group, people tend to fall behind. On some tours I have stopped to talk and looked back only to see the last person in the group is a 100 yards back. While this can afford time for questions it can also really slow up the tour and affect the enjoyment for everyone.

On the day of the tour I arrive for work early so I make sure that I am the first one to the meeting spot. I like to set up a small table with reference books and photos that I have taken of wildlife on the golf course. I also may set up another table with orange juice, coffee and some pastries. Anyone who knows me would say that the food is really just for me but the members enjoy it also. As the members arrive I like to check to see if anyone is unable to walk as we will provide a golf cart if necessary. Plan on having someone from your staff or another department take pictures while conducting the tour. They make great photos for your club newsletter or bulletin board.

And that's it! You are ready to begin your tour. As I tell the members, "I'm not an Audubon expert, but I do have a love of nature and I hope to share that with you today." If you have an interest in conducting your own Audubon Tour and have further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. My information is on the inside cover.