

# The Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program Celebrates 20 Years!

Compiled and Edited by Shelly Foy, USGA Green Section



*Editor's note: This section consist of a series of articles highlighting the benefits of participating in the ACSP. They have been edited slightly to conserve space.*

## INTRODUCTION

By Ron Dodson, President,  
Audubon International

It seems nearly impossible to believe that it has been 20 years since we launched the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary System. What started as a new way to promote membership with an environmental organization has started a partnership-oriented approach to conservation.

We wanted to stop yelling and screaming and start listening and working with people where they lived, worked, and recreated. With the help and support of the United States Golf Association, we have been proven right!

Although we have always said that we will work with anyone, anywhere, it has been golf by far that has outpaced any other type of land use in participation in the Cooperative Sanctuary System.

The program works because golf course superintendents want to work outdoors, they understand plant management, they don't want to spend any more money than necessary to meet golfer expectations. I would hazard to guess that the majority have found that managing bird nesting boxes, watching bald eagle nestlings, taking pictures of the

occasional fox on the course – and even the deer that made tracks across the green – was actually a very pleasant addition to the work week.

As states go, Florida has been the leader of the pack. There are more golf courses in Florida than any other state, but even on a percentage basis, Florida is a leader.

The recent economy has been tough on everyone; but Florida seems to be especially hard hit. The management of Audubon worried about the state of the economy and what sort of drop-off rate we were going to see in our membership ranks.

But a drop-off didn't occur, and this includes the hard-hit courses of Florida. I like to think most golf course superintendents understand that conservation starts with the word "conserve" and that doesn't only mean environmental conservation, but it also includes economic conservation.

Doing good for the environment means doing good for the budget. Courses embedded with a conservation ethic embedded in the fabric of the way the course operates, the way the course management thinks, and the way the course membership acts, are the least likely to close up shop.

Those courses that were built on the foun-

dation of over-use, hard-to-maintain and unrealistic expectations are the first ones to face the economic realities we have all read about in the newspapers. While it is sad to hear about a course closing and friends and neighbors losing jobs, the situation was brought about by previous, unsustainable decisions.

Florida is in a tough position, but those courses that come out of this downturn will be the strong, conservation-oriented courses, and they will be even stronger. Walking the walk is much more important than just talking the talk.

Thanks for sticking with us these past 20 years and I look forward to the next 20!

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## Estero Country Club: The 100th Certified Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary in Florida

By Shelly Foy

I had the pleasure of touring Estero Country Club very early on a recent cool, foggy Monday morning when the course was closed for maintenance. Even though the course is totally surrounded by urban sprawl, I felt I was in a nature preserve. I now understand why superintendents say their favorite time on the golf course is very



*Estero Country Club is the 100th Florida Course Certified in the ACSP Program. Photo by Shelly Foy.*

early in the morning when no golfers are in sight.

Superintendent Bruce Bach had invited me to speak to the members about the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program, and to present the club with its certificate signifying it was the 100th golf course in Florida and the 796th in the world to be certified in the program!

Estero CC was built in 1985 on 167 acres of former pasture. This club with 350 golfing members beautifully illustrates how a course, completely surrounded by residential area, can offer great habitat for a variety of wildlife. It has an outstanding ACSP in place, and the keys to its success have been member support and commitment, naturalizing out-of-play areas, and replacing a 22-year old irrigation system.

Bruce said members had been interested in the ACSP for a long time, and knew replacing the irrigation system would yield successful results. In June 2008, the course underwent a five-month irrigation replacement project.

Management also wanted to reduce turf, so the original designer, Gordon Lewis, developed naturalized areas to replace 7 acres of turf. The goal was to reduce water use

by 15 percent with the new system and an additional 10 percent by replacing turf with natural areas. The club now saves \$50,000 annually on repairs to the irrigation system, and anticipates significant savings with its 20-year contract with Lee County to provide the club with reclaimed water; their sole water source.

Jim Sluiter, staff ecologist with Audubon International, noted that "Estero Country Club's water conservation on the golf course is exceptional. The new irrigation system provides outstanding reliability and flexibility in their watering program. Uniform and responsible irrigation has resulted in reduced fungicide applications as well... I am learning that the certification submissions delivered by a course are often a great reflection of their dedication to their stewardship efforts. Estero C. did an exceptional job submitting all materials. The comprehensive water quality testing was very good, and their formal documentation of all efforts speaks highly of their work ethic."

Estero Country Club's outreach and education program keeps members updated on the ACSP, and reaches out to include the surrounding community in environmental programs and projects.

Estero hosts an annual Golf Maintenance Facility Open House for members and neighbors. It recently worked with Boy Scout Troop 119 to install 20 nestboxes to be monitored by club members.

The club's Resource Advisory Committee includes members, staff, Lee County officials, experts on horticulture, landscape, and irrigation, as well as a local superintendent who is very active in the ACSP. The committee meets regularly to discuss ongoing and planned environmental efforts. Club members strongly support ACSP, and plan continued outreach and education programs to improve and expand the club's environmental stewardship efforts as well as its standing in the larger community.

Estero members are involved in every aspect of their program, including water-quality management. Staff educated homeowners about the effects of poor fertilizing practices on the health of the lake system and encouraged them to discuss the problem with their lawn-maintenance contractors.

Since joining the ACSP, the golf course now uses 90 percent slow-release fertilizer and has increased use of natural organic fertilizer to further minimize the potential for leaching and nutrient runoff. In 2007



*Recent Estero irrigation upgrades improved turf quality and helped reduce costs.  
Photo by Shelly Foy.*

Estero established buffers by raising the height of cut along all lake banks from 1.25 to 6 inches.

The result has been lower maintenance requirements in lakes for control of algae and aquatic weeds, and a steady increase in the amount of wildlife. Ducks once were rare; now several species call Estero CC home. Wading birds are in abundance, and eagles and osprey regularly fish the lakes. A family of otters often visits. Estero's inventory lists 53 birds, and more than 14 species of mammals, including bobcats. Management has received nothing but positive responses from members about the increase in wildlife and the beauty of the naturalized areas.

Since joining the ACSP, Estero CC has added 20 wildlife habitat areas, and has decreased the amount of managed turfgrass by an additional 7 acres for a total of 23.9 acres of natural areas.

They restored 1.8 acres of wetlands and increased their native plant percentage from 50 to 75 percent. They have increased their naturalized shoreline from 25 to 75 percent. They regularly remove exotic plants – 90 melaleuca trees in 2009 and this year ficus trees. Member education about the problems caused by invasive trees was key to the removal program.

A unique feature of Estero CC is a railroad track that runs through the middle of the property, which is seldom used except by maintenance vehicles. The Seminole Gulf Railroad owns 65 ft. on each side of

the track and is responsible for maintaining this acreage. The roadbed creates an incredible wildlife corridor.

Estero CC also has reduced fungicide use, a move made possible by the new irrigation system and the ability to maintain healthier turf with fewer inputs. Committing to spot-spraying instead of broadcast or boom spraying, fungicide expenditures are now one-third of what they were in 2004, and insecticide expenditures have been cut in half.

The real success to Estero Country Club's environmental programs is they have made good, solid, well-conceived decisions. The members have bought into the program,

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### **ACSP Perspectives from Long-Time Members of the Program, Tampa Palms Golf & Country Club**

*By Bill Kistler, CGCS*

It has been almost 18 years since Tampa Palms became the first golf course in Florida to become a Certified Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary. Many things have changed over the years, but one thing has remained constant: Tampa Palms Golf & Country Club remains a great wildlife sanctuary.

Our property totals 277 acres, of which only 90 are maintained turfgrass. Only five holes have homes next to the course, and woods and wetlands make up the rest of the property. Our wildlife inventory is vast

and includes alligators, wild turkeys, deer, bobcats, otters, wild hogs, red shoulder hawks, and over 33 additional species of birds.

Water management at Tampa Palms has changed over the years. With the implementation of a computerized irrigation system, control of where and when water is used has greatly improved our usage.

It has been an honor for Tampa Palms to be a part of the 20 years of commitment by Audubon International to work with golf courses and communities to raise public awareness about water quality and water management and to help provide wildlife habitat for golfers and the public to enjoy.

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### **Hole-in-the-Wall Golf Club**

*By Russ Geiger, CGCS*

Nearly 17 years has elapsed since the Hole-in-the-Wall Golf Course became a certified Audubon Sanctuary. Throughout this span, vast resources have been directed toward achieving the program's goals, resulting in improved wildlife habitat, conservation, and member awareness of the importance of the certification process.

As the manager of the golf course and grounds, I have been directly involved with numerous projects and specific maintenance practices that have greatly benefited the property and native wildlife species. Over 40 acres of wetland preserves have been carefully restored to their natural state after decades of invasive, exotic vegetation. Large native trees such as cypress, palm, pine, and live oak have recovered from near destruction over time as exotics smothered and robbed the natives of required space, sunlight, and water.

Consequently, many native species of birds and other wildlife have returned to the property to thrive and reproduce such as the beautiful North American wood duck, black-crowned night heron, osprey, and bald eagle. Just 15 years ago it was rare to observe these birds on the property and today they reside in increasing numbers.

Golf course maintenance strategies have progressed by utilizing Best Management Practices centered on conservation of resources and limited impact to the immediate environment. Inputs such as controlled-release fertilizers have helped

to improve the consistency of turf growth while simultaneously eliminating excessive leaching and thus reducing overall costs. A new, more efficient irrigation system utilizes 30 percent less water than previously needed to irrigate the course while improving playing conditions and increasing energy savings at the power meter.

Many additional elements included in the ACSP form an extremely viable and cost-effective management approach in caring for and maintaining a given property.

Golf courses are relatively complex landscapes and are very dynamic in terms of their specific needs to satisfy the demands of clients. By using the approach outlined by the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program, managers can be successful in providing quality course conditions and enhancing the local environment.

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**Royal Poinciana Golf Club**

*Matt Taylor, CGCS, Director of Golf Course Operations*

Royal Poinciana has been a proud member of the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for over 15 years. The program has helped our club showcase our conservation efforts and the natural beauty of the property. There has been increased member and staff awareness of the importance of conservation and doing the right things for the environment.

Constant and consistent communication over the years has given many members a better understanding of course-management efforts, and particularly the constant need to reduce maintained turf acreage by creating more natural areas. We use our club newsletter to educate members about water restrictions and the effect this will



*Estero C.C. is teeming with wildlife. Photo by Shelly Foy.*

have on the golf course; and at the same time we explain the overall effect of removing areas of irrigated turf, the amount of water we will save, and how that saving can be applied to areas that are in play.

We use every opportunity to educate members about making better environmental decisions, and a good opportunity came after Hurricane Wilma in 1995. Our native trees survived much better than non-native trees, and our policy since then is to use only native plants.

An additional benefit of being a Certified Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary has been the weight it carries with local and state agencies when working to acquire permits for course renovation and updating project work. These agencies are aware

of the requirements for certification in the ACSP and know that we are making sound environmental decisions that not only benefit our property, but the surrounding community as well.

Participating in the ACSP just makes sense. It gives golf courses a place to have their environmental efforts recognized. There is strength in numbers, and the more golf courses that are fully certified, the better the overall message that we are good stewards of the land we manage.

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**Olde Florida Golf Club**

*By Darren J. Davis, Director of Golf Course Operations*

Olde Florida Golf Club was the fourth golf course in Florida to become certified by Audubon International in the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program. It's been more than 15 years since we completed the required documentation of our environmental efforts to achieve the designation, and I can honestly say that it was well worth it then, and our involvement in the program continues to pay dividends.

I joined the program shortly after being hired by Olde Florida in 1992. I can recall an internal conflict I had when joining.

In my mind I was already a good steward of the environment, so I pondered my decision to become involved. However, after joining and becoming a certified ACSP golf course, I realized the program is extremely beneficial in advancing my knowledge and – equally important – my ability to educate others.

In addition to the knowledge, the potential cost savings, and other numerous benefits, the program provides a platform for me to tout the environmental benefits

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*The Estero Country Club serves as an urban nature preserve.  
Photo by Shelly Foy.*

of Olde Florida Golf Club, and of golf courses in general.

Most golf course superintendents truly are environmental stewards; however, just “saying” that your golf course is good for the environment is no longer sufficient. Regulatory agencies and the general public continue to become more skeptical of the environmental attributes of a golf course and many hold a very negative outlook of golf courses. It is more important than ever for golf course superintendents to “walk the walk and talk the talk.” Being a certified ACSP golf course has enabled me to do just that.

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**Twenty Six Reasons to join the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program**

*By Tim Hiers, Senior Agronomist, The Old Collier Golf Club*

There are a myriad reasons to join Audubon International’s Cooperative Sanctuary Program and the bullet points below will illuminate some. Personal satisfaction and professional benefits are key factors for participating in the sanctuary network.

When work is more satisfying it is usually more productive, and this can contribute to job security. The reduced risk of liability exposure, lost time due to accidents, negative financial consequences, and bad media coverage are benefits not easily demonstrated on paper until they happen.

Participating in the ACSP adds another positive dimension to my job and gives me credibility when discussing environmental issues with activists groups, members, or government agencies; not necessarily because I am in the ACSP program, but because I have learned the language and I know how to integrate these applications (actions) into everyday golf maintenance procedures. Understanding carrying capacity, mesic plants, interspersions, etc. are part of my daily routine, which in turn helps me manage our watershed, wildlife, and native plants to their highest value. And now the 26 bullet points:

- Makes the job more interesting by expanding your horizons
- Can enhance your resume and increase your chances of being hired at a particular club
- Can reduce liability exposure to your operation (BMP’s can reduce fertilizer and pesticide applications, and improve storage and handling
- Will make the golf course more interesting (contrast native to turf, additional wildlife, wildflowers, etc.) for golfers and your staff
- Members may gain a new appreciation for what you do
- Conserve water
- Conserve electricity
- Conserve fuel
- Conserve pesticides
- Conserve fertilizer
- Conserve labor
- Protect and enhance the watershed on your property
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- Have access to all the experience acquired over the years

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from Audubon International staff and all the golf courses that are a part of the program

- Increase the carrying capacity of the wildlife on the golf course and surrounds
- Improve the image with the public in general
- Improve relationships with the media, environmental groups, and government agencies
- Attract new wildlife species
- Reduce equipment inventory by increased efficiencies and reduced areas of irrigated and maintained turf
- Reduce the chance of job burn out by adding another dimension of interest to your job
- Provide an opportunity to mentor the next generation of golf course superintendents to be stewards of the land
- Provide an opportunity to meet interesting people (ornithologists, botanists, etc.) and to gain some of their experience and knowledge
- May help to ensure more practical regulations on golf courses, as various groups (agencies, etc.) learn the true benefits that golf courses have for the environment and local watershed
- Can improve the overall golf experience, environment, and your job satisfaction
- May actually help to reduce stress by drawing more of your attention to God's beautiful creation

## CONCLUSION

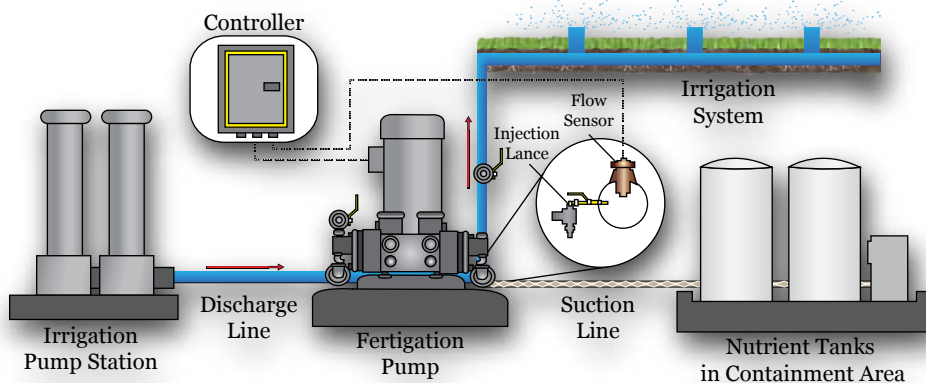
Florida golf course superintendents are fortunate to have so much statewide support of the program from the FGCSA, the Florida Green and our golf courses enrolled in the program, the 100-plus golf courses now Certified Audubon Cooperative Sanctuaries, and various environmental organizations, as well as state agencies.

Over the last 20 years, the USGA has supported the ACSP both financially as well as through staff support.

“This is a very valuable program for both golf and the environment and I am proud of all AI has been able to accomplish,” said Jim Snow, National Director, USGA Green Section. In Florida, all of our Green Section staff is available to help you successfully implement this program on your golf course.

Twenty years is a nice track record for any program. It is time to join. There is strength in numbers, and with your participation we are gathering valuable information we can relay both inside and outside our industry on golf's environmental sustainability. Help us celebrate 20 years of success with the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program by going on line at ([www.auduboninternational.org](http://www.auduboninternational.org)) and joining the program today!

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**Natural Areas Are Not Maintenance-Free**

*Todd Lowe,  
USGA Senior Agronomist*

Most golf courses are a blend of manicured turf areas amongst areas trees, shrubs, and other landscape plants. Naturalized areas are important golf course features, as they not only benefit wildlife, but improve the overall golfing experience. They provide habitat and food for a variety of birds and animals, which also provides golfers with a more fulfilling experience than simply chasing a white ball around 18 holes of turf. It is not uncommon to see many different types of birds, mammals and even reptiles during an average round of golf in our region.

It is thought by some well meaning golfers and even superintendents that naturalized areas can be installed to reduce maintenance costs. While these areas can reduce many routine inputs like mowing irrigation, fertilizers and pesticides once established, they are not maintenance-free.

Naturalized areas that are not periodically weeded, pruned, or edged can take on an unkempt appearance that is unacceptable to most golfers. Out of play natural areas require less maintenance, but areas that are adjacent to golf coursetees, fairways, and roughs are generally maintained to a higher level of aesthetic quality.

Otherwise, succession occurs, where these areas can be overtaken by other plant species (weeds) and become overgrown over time. Maintenance practices like weed control, pruning, edging, and even mulching should be considered when certain plants are selected and naturalized areas are installed on the golf course. Maintenance practices in natural areas do not occur as frequently as those in manicured turf areas but they can be intensive.

Natural areas are important for both the environment and the game of golf and should be encouraged; but don't be confused – these areas are not totally maintenance free.

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