



Gators and Golfers Don't Mix

By Kyle Sweet, CGCS, *The Sanctuary Club*

The role of today's golf course superintendent has evolved over the years to expand well beyond turf management. Many would agree that beyond managing the turf, the most rewarding part of the job is learning more about our environment. Environmentalism and golf course management exist hand-in-hand and are embraced by clubs with involvement in Audubon International's Sanctuary Golf Course Program and operating within the recommended Best Management Practices.

Creating, maintaining and improving wildlife habitats results in increased wildlife, and finding a balance between wildlife and golfers can be a tricky task.

Florida golf courses are known for their alligators. Admittedly, many seasonal golfers will seek them out to show to a guest and they commonly make for good conversation at the end of day. Often, the interaction between gator and golfer takes place while riding along a lake edge looking for that wayward shot that might just still be in play.

Instead, the golfer comes upon a sunning gator, that's half asleep and minding its own business. The gator will remain lying there... possibly thinking, "Hey, I was here first and I'm very comfortable. Thank you." Or it leaps up and thrashes into the water. The important thing is that both remain safe in this situation,

but avoiding this situation altogether would be even better.

Here are a couple of easy-to-implement ideas that may help our gators and our golfers.

Alligator Beach

Dr. Kent Vliet, University of Florida Coordinator of Laboratories for the Department of Biology and alligator behavioral expert, visited the Sanctuary Golf Club, Sanibel Island in 2010. During a course tour to view all of the lakes, a recommendation was made to create suitable areas for alligators to bask that were away from typical areas of play. The lakes are mostly vegetated along the banks, so it was necessary to pick areas less vegetated with the correct sun orientation and a subtle rise to provide the best scenario for the gators to use.

Following the tour and recommendation, two areas were chosen. The 9th hole was chosen as very suitable because it had seen several golfer and gator interactions. With a small loader, the lake bank was graded to allow easy access up the bank and dead palm logs were installed to provide a steep wall, deterring the gator from going toward the course once in the area. Important also was the location relative to the afternoon sun. The area



Above: Sanctuary crewmembers building a protective gator beach area. At top left: Gator sunning on a beach created on The Sanctuary Club. Photos by Kyle Sweet.

faces southwest, taking full advantage of the strongest seasonal sun for the gator to bask in. If desired, a covering in natural trimmings could have been placed in the area to camouflage it but was not necessary.

Now, after two years, our golfing members have recognized that “Gator Beaches” work. The gators are keeping happy in the sun away from play, and the golfers have a great area to view them. Win-Win!

Alligator Basking Platform

Paul Bradley, golf course superintendent at Bonita Bay’s Bay Island Club, has been managing his course for the past six years and has plenty of gators and golfers to keep happy. Paul has taken an interesting and effective approach in one of his several lakes that allows gators to bask well clear of his golfers by using a basking platform.



Sam Bradley, superintendent of the Bay Island Club, uses “gator docks” to lure gators away from the golf course.



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Paul began by researching some ideas for this platform online and incorporated his own ingenuity into what is now a very successful idea that was constructed completely in-house. One goal was to recycle products for the construction of the platform, so Paul incorporated 30-gallon, triple-rinsed-and-sealed chemical drums for flotation, PVC piping and fittings for hinges and polypropylene roping for fastening. Additional supplies included lumber and stainless steel fasteners, which in total combined for less than \$1000.

Once the platform was completed, it was transported to the course and placed in one of the club's larger lakes. Unfortunately, it was met with some criticism from nearby residents and was moved to another location. During the moving process, it was painted black and it was being used soon after installation. "First, we saw turtles,



Superintendent Paul Bradley (center) and Bonita Bay crew with a newly constructed gator platform. Photo by Maryle Barbe.

aningas, great egrets and everything but gators," explained Bradley. Soon, however, they realized their goal with the sighting of a big gator soaking up the sun. Now, golfers and staff can both view the gators using the platform while working and enjoying the course. Another win-win!

Alligators and golfers will continue to interact as long as there are golf courses in Florida. In many cases, we have created these watery habitats in our communities and courses and we can have an impact on the protection of both golfers and alligators. I'm sure golf in Florida wouldn't be the same without the enjoyment of wildlife, so good luck with your efforts.

Lake Masters Aquatic Management team gives Superintendent Paul Bradley and a gator dock a tow to its new location. Photo by Maryle Barbe.



Gator basking on platform at the Bonita Bay Club. Photo by Paul Bradley.

Birdies On Almost Every Hole!



The 2011 Christmas Bird Count

Members of the 2012 Sanctuary G.C. Christmas Bird Count teams were (l-r): Shirley Levine, Dr. John McCabe, Susan Cassell, Denise Carnell, Merry Lee Neil, Margaret Nelson, Dr. Wendy Kindig and Suzanne Springer. Photo by Kyle Sweet.

Thanks in part to Audubon International's Cooperative Sanctuary Program for golf courses and more avid birders turning to golf courses for their annual Christmas counts, people are learning that golf course truly are great wildlife habitats. Each year there are stories of skeptics who finally set foot on a golf course and see the reality for themselves, and there are fun reports of rare or unusual critter sightings. Several FGCSA members shared the stories below of the latest bird count. Space will not permit listing the species seen on each course. Needless to say, many familiar wading birds, waterfowl, songbirds and raptors are on everyone's list. We will highlight the number of birds and species and some of those rare sightings, which were special for the birders.

Sanctuary Golf Club

Kyle Sweet, CGCS, Superintendent

The Christmas Bird Count is organized by Susan Cassell each year and is well supported by our members. The club has two 6-seater carts that the members use to travel around the course in their groups. The results from The Sanctuary are provided to our local Sanibel-Captiva Audubon Society Chapter. We supply Audubon International with the Christmas Bird Count information with our Cooperative Sanctuary Program recertification application.

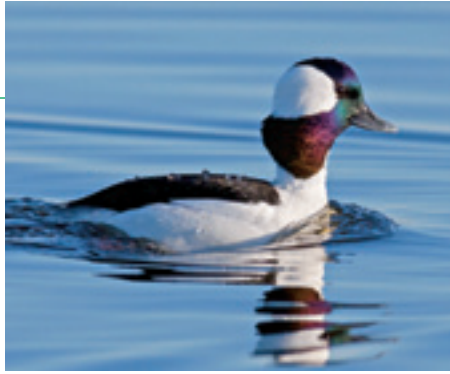
The island splits up into several sections, and for years The Sanctuary group has been doing the course. The way they did it this year was

four people riding the front nine and four people on the back nine. I typically do not join in on the Christmas Bird Count itself since I do all of the member activities throughout the year



Above: Black-Bellied-Whistling Duck. Right: White Ibis

and, as you know, the teams counted 36 different species and 338 total birds. As far as any rare sightings, this was the first year for the Red Head Duck and the Bufflehead Duck and one Yellow-Bellied Sapsucker. Oddly enough, we have only had a very few Yellow-Bellied Sapsuckers sighted over all the years of the counts.



Bufflehead Duck

Hole-in-the Wall Golf Club

Letter from Monica D. Higgins, Bird Count Coordinator

Hi, Russ. I wanted to thank you and all the members of Hole in the Wall Golf Club for allowing us to count birds on your course during the Audubon Christmas Bird Count on Saturday. We had a great time. I have attached a spreadsheet of all the birds we found with the ones found at your course in the last column. We found a total of 46 species and 328 birds there including several that we found nowhere else.

You can also compare the increase this year in bird species and numbers with those from last year when they didn't have the opportunity to include your

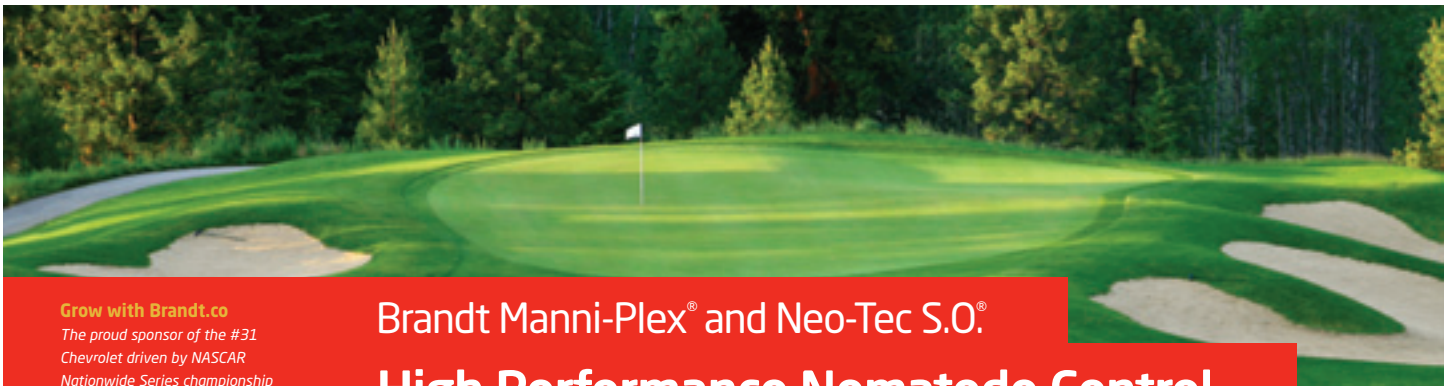
course in the count. I was also pleased to use the occasion to reach out to the non-golfers in my group. At first one of our group was concerned about birding a golf course. She thought it would be too sterile, too many pesticides. I was able to inform her about your work with Audubon International and the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program.

By the time we left, the numbers of birds we had found amazed her along with the great habitats you have developed. She had a total change in her opinion. Perhaps the best moment though did not belong to the birds. Just off hole No. 5 we spied a bobcat! Everyone thought it was really great that you could have such great course in the middle of town that would attract and support not only birds but a bobcat too. All in all, a great day! We got to see lots of birds and met several golfers that were excited about what we doing. Thanks again for the opportunity and I hope we can do it again.

Submitted by Russ Geiger, CGCS.



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Shell Point Golf Club

Submitted by Mark Jacobs,
Superintendent

Kyle Sweet and I were talking at my maintenance facility the other day and he reminded me that the *Florida Green* was looking for comments about the 2011 count. We were discussing our Audubon program that we are working on here



Roseate Spoonbill

at Shell Point. I will be conducting a course/maintenance facility tour here in two weeks, which Kyle and Shelly Foy will be attending.

Here are the results from our 2011 Christmas bird count. There are some residents here who have been doing a Christmas bird count on the course since 2002. They are residents of Shell Point Retirement Community and do the count for the Shell Point Golf Club. They toured the entire course. I'd like to recog-

nize Dr. Bill Saunders, Dr. Iver Brook and Ms. Dotty Morrison. These are the folks who organize and conduct the annual counts, and Dr. Saunders also works with us on our environmental programs.

This year the group logged 32 species and 309 birds. The rare sighting of a pair of Roseate Spoonbills was this year's highlight. The Roseate Spoonbill is our rare one. Below is a summary of the total of species and birds over the past nine years.

2002-2011 BIRD SUMMARY:			
Year	Species	Count	Most Frequent over the years
2002	32	177	63 Boat tailed Grackle
2003	18	88	25 Great Egret
2004	31	311	81 Mourning Dove
2005	29	650	249 Fish Crow
2006	35	364	126 Double Crested Cormorant
2007	33	871	453 Fish Crow
2008	23	478	310 Common Grackle
2009	33	521	239 Common Grackle
2010	32	257	75 Common Grackle
2011	32	309	46 White Ibis




Common Grackle

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Earlier in 2011 at the High Ridge course this Screech Owl was spotted in its nest just 30 feet from the 8th green. Submitted by Steve Kuhn

High Ridge Country Club

Submitted by Steve Kuhn, Superintendent

Our 2011 survey was conducted by Linda Barnes of The Audubon Society of the Everglades. It's the 12th straight year they have done it at High Ridge Country Club, representing our geographical area of Palm Beach County.

The counts were down slightly from years past, perhaps due to a major renovation we did in 2010 and the warm winter up north delaying normal migration patterns and timing. Over the years, our property has been privileged to become home to more than 75 different species of birds. This year, seen for the first time ever, were the Black Bellied Whistling Duck and the Parula. The 2011 Count results: 33 species with 261 total birds.

Christmas Bird Count at Heritage Oaks

Report by Frances and Peter Rice

Submitted by Andrew Bell, Superintendent

This year the Heritage Oaks count was 38 Species, 210 birds. Every year near the end of December, Christmas Bird Counts are conducted across North America. In northern Sarasota County, the Sarasota chapter of the Audubon Society coordinates these counts. As part of this effort, we performed a "backyard" Christmas Bird Count here at Heritage Oaks Golf & Country Club.

This year, we noticed fewer species and a smaller number of birds. We surmise that this lower bird count was due to milder weather for much of North America during the autumn and winter, prior to early January. This mild weather up north likely resulted in many birds delaying their migration south. Not found were a couple of Limpkins that we have spotted from time to time along the shores of our ponds. Also, for the first time, we did not find the usual House Sparrows congregating around one home near the north end of Chase Oaks Drive. An interesting bird we did see is a Great Horned Owl. Notably, during October and November, two of them spent many nights on top of our house, loudly hooting.

Our local specialty is the White-winged Doves. They usually are seen at dusk and dawn during the winter perched together in large numbers along Bee Ridge Road Extension on the wires or in a tree. For the rest of the year, they spread out, and some have been seen several miles away. In previous years, we have counted as many as 38, but this year we only saw 20. ■