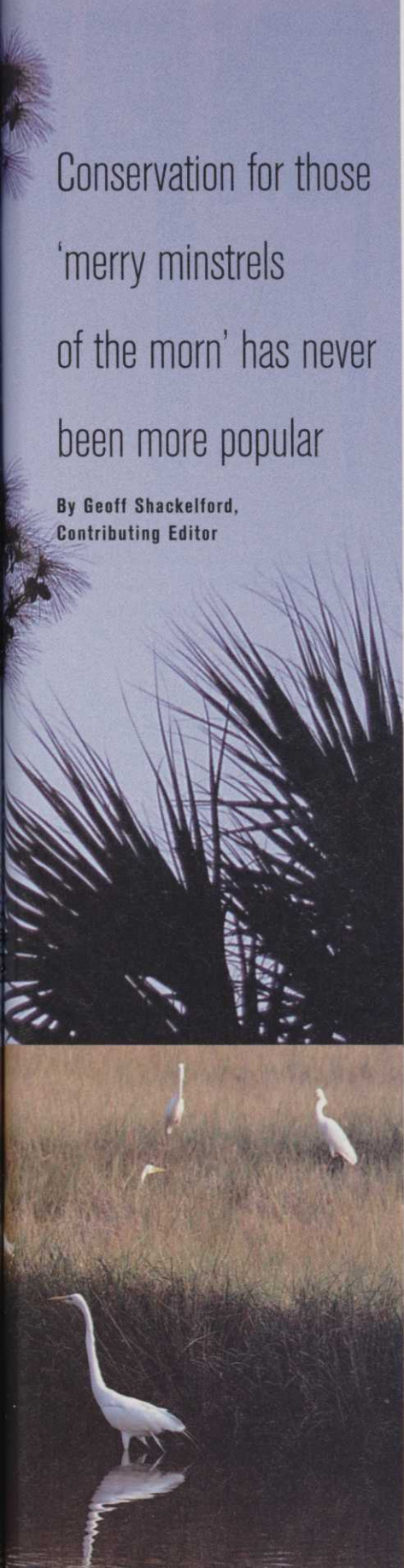


# Bird

*Is the Word*

Conservation for those  
'merry minstrels  
of the morn' has never  
been more popular

By Geoff Shackelford,  
Contributing Editor



PHOTOS COURTESY OF COLLIER'S RESERVE

PHOTO: MIKE KLEMM

“**N**atural” and “environmentally friendly” are words often associated with golf courses. Unfortunately, they are often self-aggrandizing declarations from course owners or superintendents hoping to curry favor with environmentalists, win awards or captivate golfers who prefer to play amid the least man-made settings as possible.

Few courses today achieve a truly natural feel of playing amid natural grasses, native plant material or side-by-side with wildlife. Much of this can be blamed on modern-day golfers who prefer sanitized and easy-to-play courses. Unfortunately, this attitude has its roots in golf's history. Architect A.W. Tillinghast wrote in 1923: “It must be remembered that the great majority of golfers are aiming to reduce their previous best performance by five strokes if possible. If any one of them arrives at the home-teeing ground with this possibility in reach, he is not caring two hoots whether he is driving from nearby an ancient oak of majestic size and form or a dead sassafras [tree]. If his round ends happily, it is one beautiful course. Such is human nature.”

But all is not awful in golf's environmental world. In fact, it's getting better. An increasing number of golfers are noticing those ancient oaks of majestic size.

The industry has responded with genuine efforts in the last 10 years to improve its environmental practices. The campaign has led to innovative programs, better maintenance practices and an emerging trend toward retro-natural golf.

More superintendents and golfers than ever appreciate the outdoor setting of golf, including seeing the wildlife enjoying the land as much as the golfers do. Golfers especially love birds, and will generally support efforts by superintendents to bring more species to their courses. Golfers' affinity for birds is reflected in society's overall love of birds. In 1996, Americans spent \$3.5 billion on food, baths, houses and related items for birds.

But how does one go about attracting more birds to a course, particularly ones already built with no thought to bird habitats in mind? It means overcoming old stereotypes and education, but it can be done.

### Uphill battle

Twenty years ago, many superintendents were hesitant to attract birds to their courses because wildlife groups were quick to accuse golf courses of being poor wildlife sanctuaries. Older pesticide protocols provided the groups with ammunition for their accusations, and superintendents worried they could be labeled mass murders of birds because of their chemical use.

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Other misconceptions also plagued superintendents from wanting to attract wildlife to their courses. Some believed that creating wildlife habitats after courses were complete would be prohibitively expensive and require too much additional work. Such assumptions often led superintendents to conclude that bird habitats on their courses were hardly worth the effort. (There was also a misperception that the water, seed and trees on golf courses would be enough to attract birds naturally.)

But those outdated ideas have changed over the last several years, and more superintendents are willing to expend the time and effort needed to create naturalized areas on their courses. Now instead of being blasted by environmentalists for attracting rare birds to their courses, superintendents are often embraced for being environmental champions.

#### Nothing beats research

Superintendents who want to create bird habitats usually have a personal interest in the species and a tolerance for areas on the courses that aren't highly manicured. These natural areas provide living spaces for indigenous birds, which are attracted to native plant material.

Unfortunately, developers often strip this vegetation from many courses during construction or later eradicate it to clean up courses to appease golfers who suffer from the Augusta syndrome. It's been a long road to educate golfers about the importance of natural areas, but superintendents' efforts seem to finally be bearing fruit.



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Collier's Reserve CC in Naples, Fla., features bird houses throughout the course. Specific bird houses will attract specific species.

In the past 10 years, a significant trend for golf courses is the return of these areas to non-irrigated native prairie grasses, which more golfers consider an acceptable look today. Such areas attract more birds.

#### Where to start?

Scott Gillihan, author of *Bird Conservation on Golf Courses* (Ann Arbor Press, 2000), knows something about attracting birds to golf courses, and his book is great reading material on how to do so. Gillihan and the Audubon International program advocate the return of large areas of native plant material to make these areas more habitat-friendly. Ultimately, however, superintendents' determination will establish how involved they want to get in attracting interesting birds to their courses.

The preferred system for attracting birds is establishing large "corridor" paths to provide space for a variety of species to nest. Since that's rarely feasible on an existing course without undertaking a large and expensive program, conservation possibilities still exist on smaller scales.

If the creation of bird habitats is a pet project for the maintenance staff or a green chairman, you can use Gillihan's book as a guide or consult with a local ornithologist to determine

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PHOTO: MIKE KLEMM

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the needs of local or migrating birds, particularly when it comes to what native plant material attracts them. Also, with a small investment, quality birdhouses and feeders specific to the species you want to attract can be purchased, though Gillihan advocates going native before turning to man-made birdhouses.

To build a quality habitat on an existing

course, Gillihan suggests facilities determine which birds are potentially present and which missing or uncommon birds a course would like to attract. It's important to attract a variety of species because it leads to a healthier overall environment for the animals, he says.

Local bird watchers and environmentalists can compile a list of birds present on a course at a reasonable cost, while also providing information the necessary basic habitat re-

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## Piped-in Sounds Are For the Birds

Last year, CBS received calls from avid bird watchers who said they were perplexed by the singing of certain birds during golf telecasts. One caller insisted the sounds made by one bird were those of a canyon wren, a bird never seen east of Texas. But there he was, chirping up a storm at the Warwick Hills Golf & CC near Detroit during the Buick Open.

Another bird watcher heard the whistle of a white-throated sparrow during the PGA



PHOTO COURTESY OF COLLIER'S RESERVE

Championship at Valhalla GC in Louisville, Ky, in August 2000. Unfortunately, that bird is not seen in the South during the summer, and it's doubtful he was a visitor to the corporate tent village.

CBS eventually confessed to its piped-in bird sounds, justifying its action as adding "ambient sound" to the telecasts. Apparently, the production staff first tried to attract the sounds of local birds by placing trays of seed near their on-course microphones. After that experiment failed, they used recorded sounds to lend a sense of naturalness to the golf, although better research would have prevented the use of bird sounds not native to the area.

— Geoff Shackelford

quirements for those species. They can educate superintendents on how to get the most out of feeders, which foods attract certain birds, how to place birdbaths appropriately, and how to use brush piles for many habitats.

If you want to your course's bird habitat to shine and perhaps receive recognition for your efforts, a \$150 membership in the Audubon International's Cooperative Sanctuary program will provide you with the latest news and education about environmentally sound land and resource-management techniques.

The primary benefit of the Audubon program, as well as the USGA's Wildlife Links Committee, is recognizing superintendents and architects for quality work. This is important considering that most golfers often need to see and learn from examples before allowing their own courses to "go native" to attract birds.

There are other fine examples of golf courses that have become bird habitats, but it's important that each course take its own path based on incorporation of indigenous environments, Gillihan stresses. The bottom

## Birdcall

For information on attracting birds to your golf courses, check out these sources:

- **Bird Conservation on Golf Courses – A Design and Management Manual** (Ann Arbor Press, 2000), by Scott Gillihan
- **Audubon International**  
([www.audubonintl.org](http://www.audubonintl.org))
- **USGA Wildlife Links Advisory Committee**  
([www.usga.org/green/environment/wildlife\\_links](http://www.usga.org/green/environment/wildlife_links))
- **Coveside Bird Boxes**  
([www.coveside.com/default.asp](http://www.coveside.com/default.asp))

line is that birds can be great for golf.

"Birds are an obvious choice for enhancement activities on golf courses," Gillian says. "Birds interest people because of their singing, their color, their interactions with each other and their food gathering and nesting activities. Healthy populations of birds indicate a healthy environment and a healthy golf course." ■

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