

Certain golf architects from the early 20th century believed course design would evolve in the future, even hinting that some of their timeless (it turns out) creations would appear dated.

Masters like Alister MacKenzie, George Thomas and Robert Hunter felt that improved construction techniques and overall wisdom would allow for the creation of more subtly strategic and ruggedly natural designs.

They envisioned landscapes converted into intricately designed fields of play yet built and maintained in such a way that a passing car would not know they had just seen a golf course. These natural settings would allow golfers to leave their troubles behind while touring a wondrous landscape for a few hours. If well-designed, they would provide a unique test of skill but allow golfers to feel rejuvenated no matter how lousy their golf games were.

This links-inspired architectural vision not only required educating players on the merits of natural golf but also necessitated careful construction practices, a meticulous maintenance meld and an overall embrace of the native environment.

The game traveled off into unforeseen directions and their vision was forgotten by most. Though we are seeing a wave of courses embracing many of the links fundamentals, all facilities would benefit from their vision.

In recent years, the industry has made huge strides to improve its image environmentally. Pesticide use and water use have been curtailed and an overall appreciation of golf's place in nature is now being acknowledged by even the most strident of one-time golf despisers.

As cities grow, we all know that golf courses have become valuable wildlife stations for birds and other cool critters. Notwithstanding the Canada geese issue, wildlife has to be embraced by the golf industry not only for its reputation but to enhance the golfer's experience. And to relieve superintendents of the unfair burden of killing wildlife.

The aforementioned master architects were infatuated with the notion of a "contest with nature." As a recreational pastime, golf courses could merge the best elements of hockey, fish-

Keep it Real: Embrace Nature

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



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ing, baseball, tennis and hunting onto one unique landscape.

Minus the bloodshed.

The old architects knew from links golf that two elements kept the early Scots coming back every day: the surprises that awaited each round and the joy of getting to know a home course's quirks, local flavor and comforting predictability.

Spotting wildlife on the course is the simplest and most satisfying of pleasures. There's a wonderful reassurance felt by golfers in seeing the return of species for their breeding or migrating seasons.

We've all known the macho superintendent who hunts but after a few years at his course goes from wanting to eliminate all pesky critters to enjoying them or protecting their rituals despite cries from heartless members.

Or go to the construction site of a course and hear about all of the annoying red tape required to accommodate wildlife. Then go back and hear the pleasure in the voices of those watching golfers play the course as native birds continue to enjoy their home. All thanks to precautions taken during construction.

Birdwatching (or birding) is the fastest-growing outdoor activity in America, with 52 million Americans calling themselves "birders." Children make up a surprising portion of this birding population, meaning many future golfers will be that much more likely to stay with the game if their local course is populated with interesting species.

The incentives for embracing wildlife are aplenty, but the extra effort to preserve the lives of native habitat comes down to making golf courses what they should be: a contest with nature, in the most natural setting possible.

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