



Golf Courses Gone **Wild**



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It doesn't take much to implement a
successful wildlife program at your facility.
Just follow these steps ▶ ▶





About the Photographs

Joe Hubbard, director of golf course maintenance at the Broken Sound Club in Boca Raton, Fla., has worked hard to make the 36 holes he oversees a haven for wildlife. Hubbard photographed all the critters featured in this story at the Broken Sound Club.

◀ **FOR THE PAST FEW YEARS**, I've been asked to serve as a judge for the Environmental Leaders in Golf Awards (ELGAs) by the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America. While evaluating each applicant's environmental stewardship efforts, the specific section on "Wildlife/Habitat Preservation" always seems to be the weakest part of the submission. Perhaps it's because most superintendents don't know what to do or how to do it when it comes to wildlife/habitat preservation. But we really should.

For many golfers, the opportunity to see, interact with and simply enjoy the company of wildlife on the golf course is an important part of enjoying their rounds. As the green movement continues to sweep across the country, golf courses have the unique opportunity to illustrate just how environmentally friendly our industry is by showcasing the plethora of wildlife we preserve and encourage to thrive on our properties.

With that in mind, the following is a simple how-to guide with suggestions to help steer you to implement a wildlife-enhancement program successfully at your facility by tweaking the existing ecosystem already in place at your course. While these steps are certainly

not revolutionary, they do provide a simple and sound framework for helping manipulate this ecosystem within and around the golf course.

STEP ONE – Know What You're Getting Into

The keys to a successful wildlife-enhancement program are planning, patience, flexibility and enjoying what you're doing — in essence, they're pretty much the same skills necessary to becoming an excellent golf course superintendent. Approach a wildlife enhancement program as you would almost any other maintenance program on your course, with a basic knowledge of the process and complete understanding of the effects you'll introduce.

All types of wildlife are intimately involved with their habitats. It's important to understand that while requirements may change throughout the seasons, all habitats must provide the same basic elements: shelter, food, water, some degree of protection from enemies and a sufficient amount and type of space for living.

One of the basic laws of nature is if you provide a good habitat, wildlife will always appear and use it. Every wildlife-enhancement program includes some amount of habitat manipulation, such

as knowing what mix of plants and protective cover are best suited for your desired species. Often, small changes bring large results, or, simply put, less is more. This is one of the best mottos when it comes to wildlife enhancement.

STEP TWO – Do An Inventory

As any good chef will tell you, making a gourmet meal begins with the ingredients. With wildlife enhancement, we're talking about knowing what already exists in your golf course ecosystem.

Begin with the animals. Categorize and write down all the various birds, mammals and reptiles that inhabit and utilize your golf course in any way. It doesn't matter whether they're permanent or migratory — list them all. These animals are the guests who you're encouraging to make the most of our golf courses.

It's a good idea to keep a current list posted in common areas of the maintenance facility where staff members can add new ones as they appear



around the golf course. This inventory should be viewed as a living document that will change often. Over time, the inventory will help document your wildlife enhancement successes through the sightings of new animals on your course.

Next, inventory the trees, shrubs, flowers and other native vegetation on the course. These are important to know because they provide shelter and food sources for many of the animals you want to help support and enhance. Certain animals are drawn to areas because of specific trees and plants. This information is vital to a successful program so your level of habitat manipulation can be precise.

STEP THREE – Make a Clear and Flexible Plan

The phrase “wildlife enhancement” is a lot like the phrase “turf management”; rather vague in nature and encompassing a vast amount of different concepts. You need to clearly decide what it is you want to accomplish with your wildlife-enhancement program. Do you want to simply attract more birds? Do you want to encourage smaller animals for the birds of prey on

your course? Do you want to add an area for watching bird feeders? Each of these plans requires drastically different steps to accomplish the desired goal. I suggest you start small and work your way up to larger programs only after having some success and gaining that all-important confidence boost that comes with doing something new. Rather than feel you’re taking on a monumental task, you should chip away at what you want to do.

Once you decide what your enhancement plan is, do yourself a favor and make it as flexible as possible. Wildlife enhancement is not an exact science. There are countless variables to take into account that will affect your program. What works one season may not work the next and vice versa. Always be open to experimenting with new ideas that make sense to you. Making a wildlife-enhancement program too strict will only diminish your chances of finding success.

STEP FOUR – Go Native

In most cases, wildlife-enhancement programs include planting or transplanting a variety of plants. Try to always use native species. They’re naturally hardy to your geographic area and rarely pose a problem of spreading to create a nuisance situation. The same philos-

ophy also applies to trees and shrubs. Diversity is the key element of a wildlife-enhancement program.

Be careful not to interfere too much with the natural landscape. The optimum look you want is natural, and too much tinkering with an area will give it an overly manicured appearance. This is a prime example of the less-is-more mentality. Remember to think of your wildlife-enhancement program as tweaking your ecosystem, rather than giving it a complete makeover.

No matter what level of wildlife enhancement you want to incorporate at your golf facility, these basic steps are a good place to start. Obviously, you’ll discover what works for you. You’ll also find that most programs will garner some serious support from members and surrounding homeowners. While that’s not the primary reason for beginning a wildlife enhancement program, it certainly doesn’t hurt you, your course or our industry. ■

Gray is superintendent and general manager of the Marvel Golf Club in Benton, Ky. He’s the only two-time overall winner of the Environmental Leaders in Golf Awards and the 2008 Winner of Rain Bird’s Intelligent Use of Water Award.