

# Audubon International

MARKS A  
MILESTONE

*The organization dedicated to preserving wildlife and nature on golf courses celebrates 20 years.*

BY KEN MOUM

Ron Dodson pulls old siding off the Audubon International headquarters around 1988. Below, Dodson and John Santacrose, then vice president of AI, in front of the building.

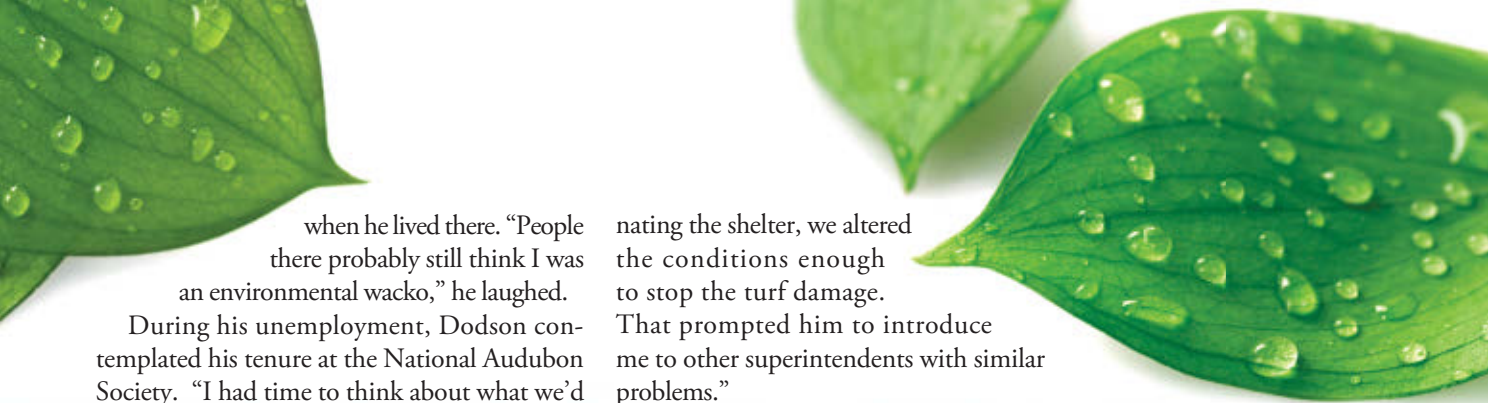


Today, it's hard to imagine golf without an organization whose mission is to help courses navigate their way to environmental consciousness. Several organizations and initiatives aim to do that now, but 25 years ago that wasn't the case.

Then, Ron Dodson had something happen that too many people in the business of golf will find familiar — he got laid off.

Dodson, founder and president of Audubon International, had been a regional vice president of the National Audubon Society. In the mid-1980s that organization suffered some budget deficits and closed a number of its offices, including his.

He needed to find something to do, and had plenty of history in the environmental movement of the era. "I am a wildlife biologist by training. I was a school teacher and did a number of other things, but I was always concerned about the environment," Dodson said. He added that he was talking to Kentucky residents about the environment back as early as the 1970s



when he lived there. “People there probably still think I was an environmental wacko,” he laughed.

During his unemployment, Dodson contemplated his tenure at the National Audubon Society. “I had time to think about what we’d accomplished — the successes we’d had,” said Dodson. “I realized I was tired of talking to the same people all the time — people who already agreed with us. I didn’t want to be just opposed to things; I wanted to talk about what we were in favor of doing, and how we could help people achieve those goals.”

Then, he said, some of the local people in New York suggested he restart the defunct Audubon Society of New York, which had been part of the Audubon Alliance, an organization of state Audubon Societies that predated the National Audubon Society.

He did that, and his organization will be 25 years old in 2012. The Audubon Society of New York eventually became Audubon International, and 20 years ago the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program (ACSP) was launched.

In the years since then, 2,400 golf courses have enrolled in the ACSP.

But it wasn’t a perfectly smooth trip to where we are today. Dodson started with the Community Conservation Network, which would have involved communities, but it didn’t catch on.

So he began working on a cooperative sanctuary system of individually owned and managed properties that he could enroll into a habitat management program. Early on, his father suggested that he should work with golf courses because they could provide food, water and shelter for wildlife. Golfers would be a good audience for environmental education, he added.

### **Solving a skunk problem**

Then, Dodson says, he got a call from the superintendent at McGregor Links Golf Club in Glens Falls, N.Y. and went there for a visit. “He showed me where they had skunks rolling up turf to get grubs,” he said. “He didn’t want to use a chemical to eliminate the grubs but wanted to stop the turf damage.

“So I gave him my spiel about wildlife — how it needs food, water, shelter. We located the skunk den sites in stone walls, and by elimi-

nating the shelter, we altered the conditions enough to stop the turf damage. That prompted him to introduce me to other superintendents with similar problems.”

Then one of his board members noticed someone faxing golf course plans at his sporting goods store, and suggested that Dodson help with the environmental elements of the plans. The course was the Lake Placid Club, and Dodson took the time to put together some suggestions.

He said, “I ended up tromping around the site and found some greens in a bog and one fairway too close to a river that was in the state’s wild, scenic and recreational system. I knew because they were going to have to deal with the Adirondack Park Agency, getting the plans approved as drawn would be difficult. So I wrote a report and sent it to them.”

In the end, Dodson was right, and the developers were forced to abandon the project. All was not lost, however. While working on the report, Dodson had the good fortune to meet Jim Snow, then a regional agronomist with the USGA Green Section. They talked about starting a golf course program, but it never went past the discussion stage.

### **The USGA joins the effort**

Then, Dodson got a membership solicitation from the USGA. That prompted him to write a letter to the USGA about what he was doing with golf courses. And that resulted in an invitation to make a presentation at the GCSAA Conference

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## Audubon International's 20th

An area of Hollyhock Hollow Sanctuary, near Albany, N.Y., was donated to Audubon International by Dr. Robert Rienow, pictured. The group's headquarters is located on the sanctuary.

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and Show in Orlando. It was an opportunity he couldn't turn down, but he probably didn't expect 1,200 people to show up, either.

It was clear that golf course superintendents were ready to hear his message that golf courses were going to continue to be targeted until the industry took a proactive approach to environmental issues. It was there that he publicly unveiled his organization's interest in working cooperatively with golf courses to change behavior and perception.

By then, Jim Snow was the director of the Green Section, and the idea of cooperating on a program for golf courses came to the forefront. Snow agreed to solicit funding from the USGA Executive Committee. But the reaction wasn't all positive. According to Dodson some members wondered why the USGA would want to give money to an environmental organization.

Then, Dodson said, "Someone in the meeting

who had been involved with the Lake Placid Club said, 'Is this the organization that Ron Dodson runs? Because if I had listened to his suggestions and advice four years ago, we'd have saved \$4 million. If he's going to run it, I'll vote yes.'"

The USGA did offer Audubon International a grant, and within a year 150 courses had signed up. By 1994, more than 1,100 golf courses had joined the ACSP for Golf Courses. That year, the Green Section Record reported that 15 courses had received certification from the program, and a year later the number of certified courses had expanded to 36.



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In recent years, the economy has had a dramatic effect on the golf industry, and some courses have found even the small annual cost of being in the ACSP difficult to justify.

According to Gregg Breningmeyer of John Deere Golf, his company wants to do something about that problem. It has offered to pay half the cost for new or lapsed members.

"We like to make the best use of our resources and if we talk about our sensitivity to the environment, we need to follow up on that with action," Breningmeyer said. "There are people in golf who are doing things that are not only sensitive to the environment but also enhance it. We need to support those people."

### Where things stand today

According to Kevin Fletcher, executive director of Audubon International, there are 2,400 courses enrolled in the program, including ACSP, Classic and Signature categories. About 750 of them are already certified and another third of the courses are actively working to get certified.

Fletcher has been with the organization for 10 years and executive director since 2007.

"We have tried to focus on real, measurable results on the ground and on tying those results to the business value of environmental stewardship," he said. "As an organization involved with golf for 20 years, I am happy with what we've done, but it's still only a blip in the graph. We have enrolled about 15 percent of the courses in the U.S.

"That's why it's important to tie the program to return on investment. We want to see measurable growth in the 85 percent of courses we haven't reached and we want to look at the entire facility, not just the golf course. We are exploring how we might do that. It's clearly a need." ■

*Contributing editor Ken Mowm lives in Topeka, Kan.*



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