



Going Wild on the Golf Course

By Warner Shedd

The beauty of wildlife on the golf course, such as this Sandhill Crane, can add pleasure to even the worst golf round.

There are at least three good reasons why those responsible for managing golf courses should be aware of, and care about, wildlife. The first is that, collectively, wildlife represents a sort of miner's canary — an indication of the overall health of a course and its immediate surroundings.

The second is that many golfers really enjoy the added pleasure of seeing numerous wildlife species while golfing, which means that abundant wildlife can serve to attract more customers to a golf course.

The third is perhaps a bit more altruistic: golf courses that once were in fairly rural settings are now hemmed in by creeping urban/suburban sprawl, and they have become important greenbelts in the midst of development.

I can personally speak to the second of these reasons — the added pleasure of seeing a variety of wildlife while golfing. I'm an average golfer, and, like all hackers, I sometimes become frustrated with my inability to hit decent shots. However, I can honestly say that I've never been too frustrated to pause

and enjoy wildlife whenever I've seen it on a golf course.

The key to wildlife abundance is similar to the real estate mantra of "location, location, location," except that in this case it's "habitat, habitat, habitat." By their nature, most golf courses provide a wide variety of habitats. These include mowed areas; the edge cover of tall grass, shrubs, and a variety of other plants coveted by many species; and adjacent mature forest growth. This mix is a fine recipe for wildlife abundance and variety.

Because of this varied habitat and concomitant variety of wildlife species, many incidents involving wildlife on golf courses stand out in my mind. Crows seem to be ubiquitous on golf courses, and, though generally ignored, they're well worth watching. Once while my son and I were golfing at the St. Johnsbury (Vt.) Country Club, we encountered two crows facing each other, with a golf ball between them. One would pick up the ball and quickly drop it. Immediately its companion would do likewise. We watched these back-and-forth antics for at least five minutes before finally moving on.

We've seen majestic great blue herons at water hazards, but the oddest encounter with a wading bird occurred at the Barton (Vt.) Golf Club. While on a tee, we looked to our left and there, on a nearby green, stood a bittern. It was posing in its usual camouflage mode, neck and beak pointing straight up in the air.

That works well in the bird's reedy habitat, but it's totally ineffective on a golf green. The bittern, however, apparently couldn't comprehend this fact.

The well-drained soil that's common along golf courses is attractive to mammals that dig dens. I've often enjoyed watching woodchucks munching grass on golf courses, and laughed to see the portly marmots running back to their dens — and my only encounter with prairie dogs was beside a green on a western golf course.

Foxes with dens adjoining fairways are even more fun. I've known of at least four golf courses where foxes would run out of the woods, seize a golf ball, and run back to their den. In every case, the people I've spoken with have been so charmed by this that

they never objected to the loss of a ball.

Birds and mammals aren't the only denizens of golf courses, either, for water hazards attract reptiles and amphibians, such as turtles, salamanders and frogs. Once, at Carter Country Club in Lebanon, N.H., my son and I passed a water hazard where nothing was happening. When we passed this little pond again an hour later, we were astonished to find it alive with croaking, mating frogs.

These incidents are indicative of the added attraction that helps draw golfers to a course. With this in mind, there are a variety of ways that course managers can improve wildlife habitat.

One way, of course, is to minimize the use of chemicals that can harm wildlife, and many courses are now striving to do exactly that. This may be particularly important in regard to amphibians and other aquatic dwellers.

Regarding birds, there are two ways of attracting them: nesting boxes and plantings of shrubs and trees that provide food.

Nesting boxes immediately bring bluebirds to mind (see *Turfgrass Trends*, September 2010) but many other cavity nesters will also benefit from nesting boxes of the appropriate size for their species. Among those are kestrels; house wrens; barn, barred and screech owls; nuthatches; tufted titmice; chickadees; wood ducks; and tree swallows. Audubon societies, both the national and local, will provide information about where to purchase or how to construct nesting boxes. Good resources

include the Cornell Lab of Ornithology at <http://www.allaboutbirds.org/NetCommunity/Page.aspx?pid=1139>, or Google "Woodcrafting for Wildlife." Some state wildlife agencies also supply information and plans for nesting boxes.

Speaking of houses, there are also bat houses. Bats, though they're normally only seen from dusk to dawn, are also an asset that should be encouraged around golf courses because of the vast number of mosquitoes and other biting insects that they devour.

With the dreaded white-nose syndrome decimating eastern bat populations in caves where they hibernate, bat houses may assume an increasing importance in maintaining bat populations. Plans for bat houses can be obtained from Bat Conservation International at 1-800-538-BATS, or at www.batcom.org.

Back to birds: with the sole exception of Canada geese, birds are desirable because of the interest that they provide for golfers. Geese, of course, love to graze on lush grass, and their soft, greasy droppings are a real detriment on a golf course, especially on greens. Geese aside, plantings of fruit-bearing shrubs at appropriate locations can attract and hold birds on and close to golf courses.

There are many sources of information about shrubs and small trees that attract birds and can be planted on golf courses. For one good source, Google "Shrubs That Attract Birds." Next click on "Trees and Shrubs that Attract Birds." Then use the Selection Guide and scroll down to a long list of shrubs and trees. One omission in this list is noteworthy: in our area of New England, red-berried elders, *Sambucus pubens*, attract handsome cedar waxwings in droves.

Many golf courses put up bluebird nesting boxes, but there is obviously so much more that can be done at your course. All it takes is some thought, careful planning, and the assistance of some expert advice to turn your course into a haven for wildlife and an added attraction for golfers.

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Even the most serious golfers are typically charmed by the sight of wildlife on the course.

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