

a Tree

And Loving It

Ryan Krings trudges through the mud, stops on a ridge and stares out at the unfinished landscape that will soon be a fairway on the 18-hole ArborLinks Home Course in Nebraska City, Neb. A backhoe rumbles nearby while Krings cranes his head from side to side and scans the rough beginnings of the course against the horizon.

"I can see the course," Krings says, the exuberance evident in his voice. "As the holes develop, I'm really impressed."

On an overcast and drizzly day last summer, Krings and others were hard at work during construction of the much-publicized course. The 29-year-old Krings wore the look

of a joyous kid on Christmas morning. His excitement is understandable. ArborLinks, built under the auspices of the National Arbor Day Foundation, Landscapes Unlimited and Palmer Course Design Co., is Krings' first job as a head superintendent after spending seven years as assistant superintendent at Lincoln (Neb.) CC. It's also a notable gig. With ArborLinks, Krings is part of golf course design, construction and maintenance history.

ArborLinks, owned by Lincoln-based Landscapes Unlimited and Ponte Vedra Beach, Fla.-based Palmer Course Design, is one of the industry's most environmentally aspiring projects ever. Built on about 300 acres, the course

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aims to be a huge science project to benefit the industry. ArborLinks, opening in June, intends to enhance and sustain environmental stewardship through research, testing and documentation. "To the best of our knowledge, ArborLinks is the first golf course to partner the architect, contractor and a leading environmental organization," says Bill Kubly, CEO of Landscapes Unlimited.

Arnold Palmer, whose company waived its fee to design the course to be an ownership partner, says ArborLinks is about enlightenment. "Close monitoring of ArborLinks will allow us the opportunity to educate our industry and the public by providing factual data, as well as a golf course that is fun, beautiful and accessible to all golfers," he says.

Trees and golf

The National Arbor Day Foundation, which advocates tree planting, tree care and conservation, has more than 1 million members. Thousands visit its 260-acre educational Arbor Day Farm complex annually. In short, "environmental stewardship" is the foundation's middle name.

That's one reason why Kubly, Palmer and others associated with ArborLinks say it made sense to build an ecologically focused golf course on the complex. They realize that golf course developers and environmental advocates are often adversaries, but they knew such a project could bring the two groups together.

Soon after joining Landscapes Unlimited in the mid-1990s, Brad Schmidt, the golf



John Rosenow (left), president of the National Arbor Day Foundation, surveys the land of the future site of the ArborLinks Home Course. Dave Truttman (center), project manager of Landscapes Unlimited, and Erik Larsen, senior architect for Palmer Course Design Co., are with Rosenow.

course builder's former general manager, organized a meeting between Landscapes Unlimited and the National Arbor Day Foundation to discuss building a golf course. "I was convinced the two groups could make a difference," Schmidt says.

Before joining Landscapes Unlimited, Schmidt worked for a marketing company. In his role, he was responsible for National Arbor Day Foundation's direct-mail marketing. Schmidt knew the foundation's operations well and was acquainted with its president John Rosenow. "The foundation is pro-environment, but it's also pro-business," Schmidt says.

After hearing the details of the project, Rosenow says he was convinced a golf course would be a favorable addition to Arbor Day Farm. However, the project was delayed for a few years because it couldn't secure proper funding. But in 2000, Kubly decided to build the course under Landscape Unlimited's ownership division.

Looking back, Rosenow says ArborLinks was an easy sell.

"Like most human activities, there are more-beneficial and less-beneficial ways to do things," Rosenow says. "This is certainly true of golf course development. A properly constructed and maintained golf course can improve water quality and enhance biodiversity, as well as help prevent soil erosion."

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Conservation is a word that aptly describes ArborLinks. In this photo, silt fencing protects a stand of trees and a stream from potential runoff and erosion.



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"We like to refer to the [golf course] as a laboratory."

STEVE MERKEL
DIRECTOR OF AGRONOMY
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Rosenow says ArborLinks presents an educational opportunity for golfers who know little about the game's impact on the environment.

"For millions of people, golf is the interaction they have with the natural world," Rosenow says. "This is a great opportunity to provide an educational experience."

Education is what the National Arbor Day Foundation does best, and it will offer learning programs in conjunction with ArborLinks. The educational process involves several avenues — beginning on the golf course. Each hole, which is named after a tree, features a "conservation demonstration." Interpretive signs will explain the demonstrations.

For example, hole No. 1, named Black Cherry Row, has an existing fencerow of black cherry trees that acts as a field windbreak. A sign explains a field windbreak's impact on the habitat.

Hole No. 2, called the National Tree Trail, features 40 species of oak trees. A sign explains the history behind the species' diversity.

Other conservation demonstrations, which will evolve with the course, focus on water conservation, wetland creation, native prairie grasses and multiple silt basins to protect lakes.

In two words

"Documentation" and "conservation" are two words that aptly describe ArborLinks — from its design and construction to its maintenance.

The idea is to document the defined environmental approaches taken in the building

and maintenance of ArborLinks for future reference in similar projects around the world. Krings and his staff will work closely with outside groups to conduct environmental tests on the course. ArborLinks recently teamed with Tetra Tech EM, a Pasadena, Calif.-based environmental consulting service, to help it monitor water quality as well as implement other environmental controls.

Erik Larsen, vice president and senior golf course architect for Palmer Course Design, was the lead designer for ArborLinks. In adhering to the project's philosophy, it was Larsen's intention to portray the existing ecosystems as part of the golf course — but as preserved habitats. Hence, pre-planning was vital in the design.

Larsen also had to design the course knowing that construction would be minimal. He focused on working with the land's natural features to minimize clearing and digging.

When Landscapes Unlimited began building the golf course in August 2000, it followed Larsen's plan that called for minimal moving and shaping of hills and mounds. Hand-clearing methods were used in some areas to avoid soil disturbance. Topsoil preservation and replacement after grading was also vital.

Proper drainage design was paramount. Discharge is routed to holding ponds and/or filtration basins to minimize bank erosion. The ponds also catch runoff and hold it for future irrigation needs. Filtering systems also screen water leaving the greens.

"We will monitor the impact the different design and construction techniques have on the environment over time," Larsen says. "Then we'll share the results so the industry can become more educated about what are the most sensitive and least destructive ways to design and construct a golf course."

The property comprises 310 acres, with the course taking up about 120 acres. There are large natural corridors between holes for plant and animal habitats, says Steve Merkel, director of agronomy for Landscapes Unlimited, who notes that native prairie grasses are used to create such habitats. The placement of holes, tees and fairways was carefully scrutinized during design and construction to prevent and limit tree damage.

Conservation was the prevailing theme dur-

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What They're Saying About ArborLinks

"The time is right to join forces to show that golf and the environment cannot only co-exist, but also complement each other."

Bill Kubly, CEO of Landscapes Unlimited

"The game of golf represents an important opportunity to enhance people's interest in the natural world and the environment."

John Rosenow, president of the National Arbor Day Foundation

"Environmental stewards do what is right for the health, safety and welfare of our natural resources. The golf industry deals exclusively with these issues, and that's why it's important to accurately monitor the impact golf courses have on the air, earth, water, plants and animals."

Arnold Palmer, president of Palmer Course Design Co.

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ing the course's design and construction and still is, Merkel says.

"What is there and what opportunities do we have in the future to recreate plant and animal habitats on the golf course?" Merkel asks, reciting the question that's top of mind for ArborLinks' staff.

Another key angle of ArborLinks is eco-

nomical golf, Larsen says. "The course is in the middle of a low-budget market, and we tried to build it for as low a price as possible," he says. "But we want to show that economical golf can be compatible with environmentally sensitive design."

The course cost \$5.5 million to build, and weekend green fees are in the \$40 range.

A start

Even though ArborLinks hasn't opened, it's already made an environmental name for itself. The fact that it's hosting The Fourth National Golf & the Environment Summit in June (*see sidebar*) has spurred the course's ecological image.

With the course and the conference, Rosenow says he's excited to show the world that golf can be a contributor to natural habitats, instead of a detractor. "We're also excited that it will add a dimension to the visitation of Arbor Day Farm," he says.

But everyone involved with ArborLinks stresses that the project is not the be-all and end-all model golf course for environmental integrity. "We like to refer to it as a laboratory," Merkel says.

"[ArborLinks] was put in place by people committed to golf and environmental stewardship," Schmidt adds. "But it's only a starting point."

For Krings, who joined the course in April of last year, ArborLinks is the start of a new career. Krings, who has a degree in horticulture from the University of Nebraska, heard about the project almost six years ago and let his interest be known early in the course's planning.

Krings was accustomed to maintaining 105 acres of wall-to-wall turf while at Lincoln CC. But that's not the case at ArborLinks, where native grassland prairie dominates the property.

"We'll start off maintaining about 90 acres," Krings says. "But our plans are to reduce that to about 75 acres."

Krings says he's "passionate about doing things that are environmentally correct." ArborLinks is a perfect match for his environmental prowess.

"This has been exciting," Krings says. "It's been a great learning experience for me." ■

National Golf & Environment Summit Coming to Arbor Day Farm

Arnold Palmer, Christine Todd Whitman are keynote speakers

Environmentalism oozes from the National Arbor Day Foundation's Arbor Day Farm in Nebraska City, Neb. You can see it, smell it and almost taste it.

Hence, Arbor Day Farm, with its vista of trees, impressive Lied Conference Center and new ArborLinks Home Course, is an ideal setting for The Fourth National Golf & the Environment Summit, set for June 24-27. ArborLinks will celebrate its grand opening during the event.

The conference, sponsored by the Center for Resource Management, a Salt Lake City-based environmental stewardship group, features golf, environmental and government representatives gathering to discuss how to improve environmental stewardship on golf courses. The first conference was held at Pebble

Beach Resorts in 1995.

"In 1994, leaders of golf and the environment were at war. But fortunately, the leaders of both groups were big enough and smart enough to come together and discuss a partnership capable of finding solutions to their differences," said Brad Schmidt, former general manager of Landscapes Unlimited, who helped organize this year's event.

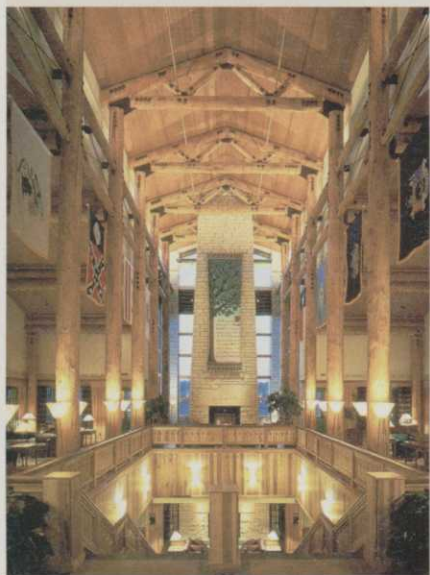
The conference has lined up two big-name speakers: Arnold Palmer, whose Palmer Course Design Co. designed the course, and Christine Todd Whitman, director of the EPA. "We have the King and the Queen," Schmidt said.

Paul Parker, executive vice president for the Center for Re-

source Management, says the golf industry's different segments, from the USGA to the PGA, need to band together for improved environmental stewardship. "There's a lot of concern about the growth of the game, but we need a strategy and commitment to environmental education," he says.

For more information about the conference, contact the Center for Resource Management at 801-466-3600.

— Larry Aylward, Editor



Inside the Lied Conference Center

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Aylward, the author of this story, can be reached at laylward@advanstar.com

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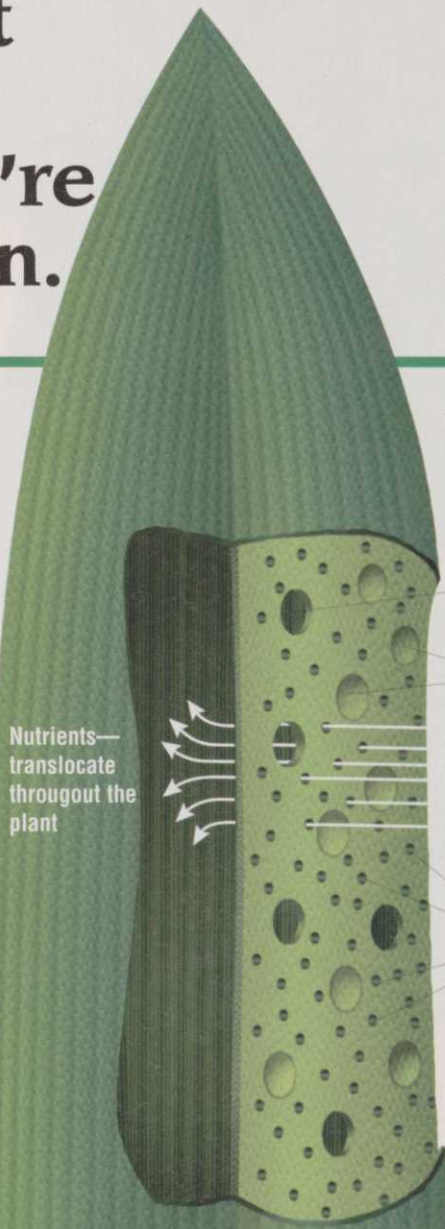
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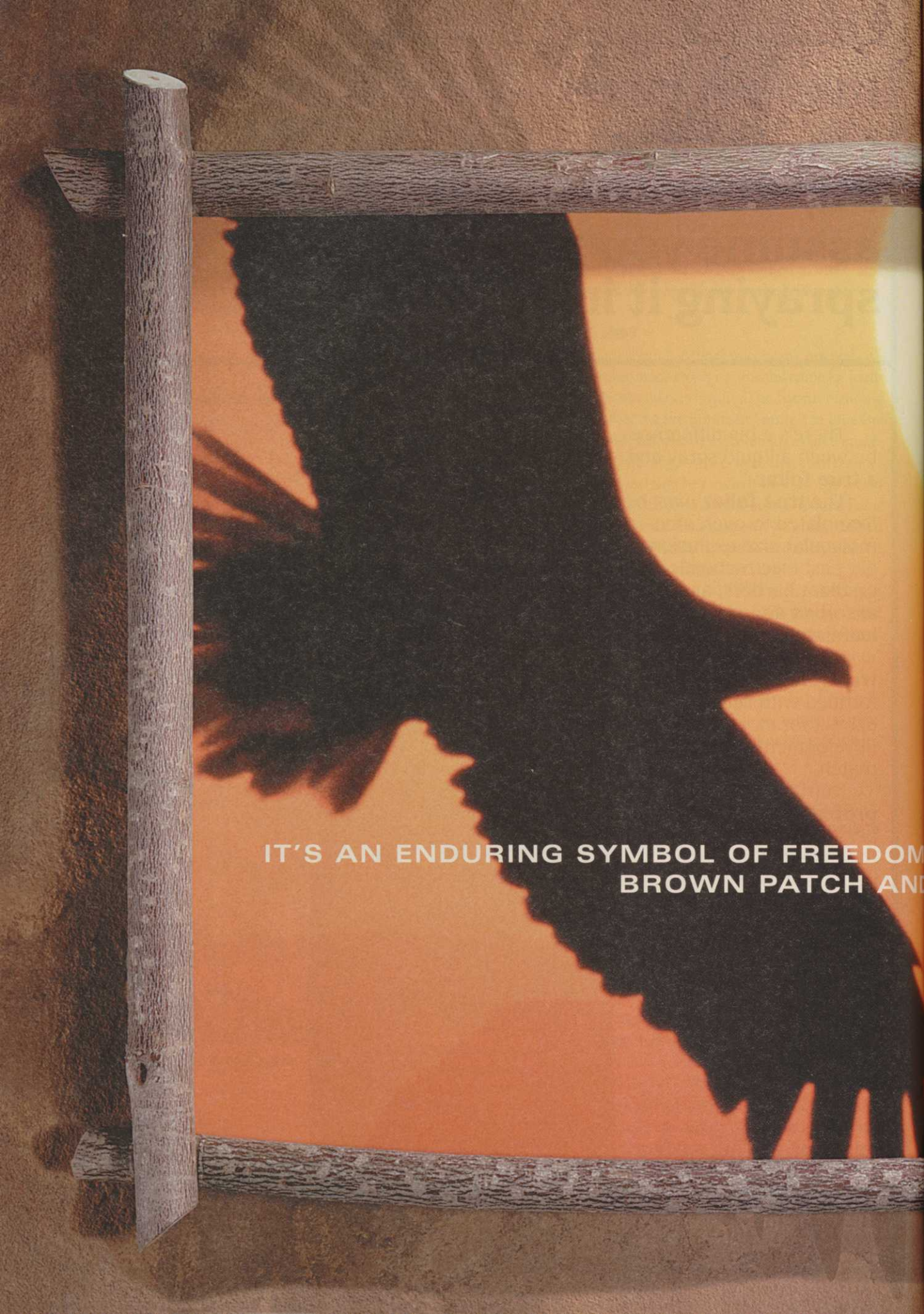
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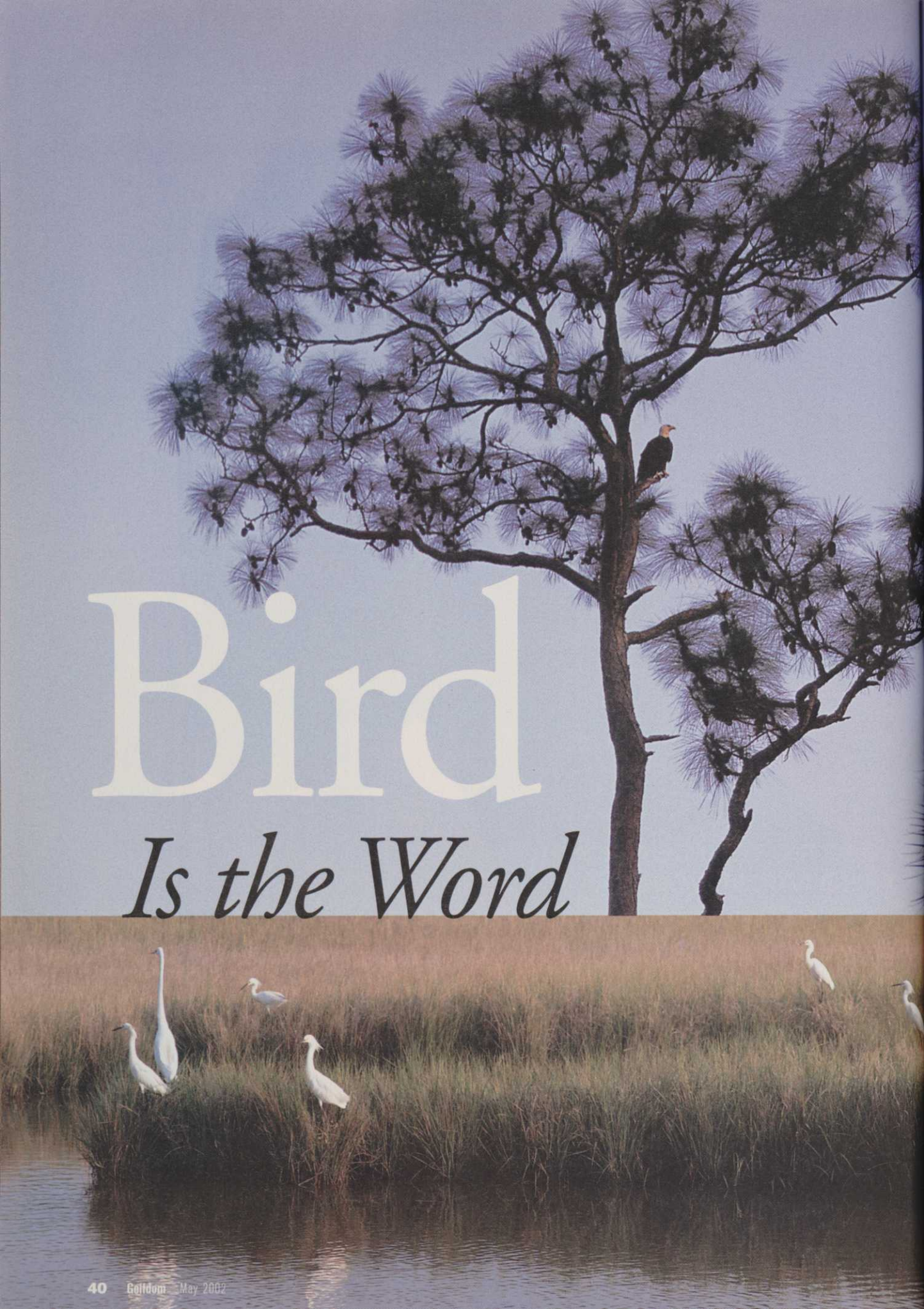
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