



Audubon Certification

By Andy Gruse

Monroe Country Club became only the third golf course in Wisconsin to achieve full certification in the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program this past October, a feat which should inspire all who consider the program. If anything, we proved that it doesn't matter what size budget you have to become certified. Most often in trade journals, we see articles proclaiming how great these Audubon Signature Courses are and think how intimidating it is. It was to me. Our budget is about an eighth of some of those courses and it appeared there was no way we could do the things necessary. One course spent more on a wash pad than we spend in a year on everything! Hardly seems fair; however, with a little determination and grit, a lot can get done.

After all is said and done, getting certified requires merely documenting what most of us already do and that is good, sound I.P.M. practices. The very same that Dr. Watschke preached to my class at Penn State. The very same we've heard Dr. Rossi talk and write about, and the very same we read about in *The Grass Roots* by Dr. Kussow and others. The fact that we're only the third fully certified Audubon course in this state amazes me because I know the quality of superintendents we have and the quality of their courses. This leads me to believe that perhaps we are intimidated by the Kiawah Islands, or perhaps we think it just doesn't fit at our golf course. I felt a little of both at first, particularly the intimidation because of the size of the clubs I had read about. In my mind, surely there was no way MCC could be on the same page as these high profile clubs in anything. But I was wrong. An interesting thing happened during the process. Audubon recognized the fact that not everyone is the

same in our industry. They stopped comparing courses that spend 1.2 million per year to us at MCC. And we realized that it doesn't require big bucks to do what we needed to do.

A brief history of the endeavor follows. The program began for us in 1993 with a committee of interested members and some non-club members, a prerequisite for one of the six categories necessary, Outreach and Education. By noting the existing qualities of the course, expanding naturalized areas, creating a wildflower area, creating birdhouses for bluebirds, tree swallows, house wrens and chickadees, and trying to lure purple martins to the site, (still unsuccessful to this date), the club was relatively



Overview of two areas planted and maintained as a wildflower area.

quickly certified in two more areas by the spring of 1995: Environmental Planning and Wildlife and Habitat Management. These first three categories required absolutely nothing of the grounds department and no change on management of the course outside of mowing a little less in out of play areas. Monroe may be unique in our dependence on donations and volunteering, but it has been very beneficial to date, particularly with the Audubon program.

I started in January 1995 straight from an assistant for Scott Schaller at South Hills in Fond du Lac. Of course 1995 was potentially the worst year to be a first year superintendent, as well as possibly the best year to be one. Early in February the Audubon committee approached me and presented a file to me and said we need certification in Water Conservation, Water Quality Management, and Integrated Pest Management. I replied with a simple, "what the heck are you talking about?" Along with trying to get a brand new irrigation system working, learning a new



Heavy rains and accompanying runoff and sewerage overflow hurt water quality on the MCC course.

job at a different golf course, and realizing by mid-June that we were not prepared for the summer of 1995 in the least possible way, the Audubon project became an afterthought. Two fairway applications of chlorothalonil that summer didn't give quite the residual effect necessary for decent summer long control that year. Consequently, Audubon objected when I told them I needed to at least double my chemical budget, but more on that later. On the bright side, the conditions were a great cultural control for annual bluegrass and a tremendous selling point for picking clippings off of fairways.

The new irrigation system, setting up "no-spray zones" and buffer areas around water features, and E.T. rates were asked about, as was the rate at which we replenish that what is lost. Reducing some areas from the frequent irrigation patterns and prioritizing the areas which we irrigate regularly was necessary. Describing the water sources and how the pond is replenished was required. Documenting the use of mulches and proper species and cultivars of turfgrasses for our area also played a vital role in achieving certification in Water Conservation. I learned more about what my irrigation system is capable of during this period than ever before. In hindsight, it was probably the best thing I could have done to learn the new LTC system we had installed in the fall of 1994.

Water Quality Management aligns closely with conservation. Our water sources include runoff from half the city, and whenever we have a two inch plus rain (which is often), a lift station on the course pumps excess sewerage into our ponds. Quality isn't a term often used when describing water tests that contain fecal matter. Regardless, we adopted a testing plan that costs a little but tests incoming sources at three spots and outgoing at two spots. Our tests showed the water was better on the way out than when entering the course. The 24-inch bass, pike, and huge bluegills,

bullfrogs and snappers along with a Great Blue Heron that gorges himself every morning suggest the water quality is all right. Tests merely confirmed what the true barometer, wildlife, indicated.

By the end of 1996, we only had one category to fulfill left, IPM. Staff Ecologist Joellen Zeh said in a recent article in *Golf Course Management* that superintendents wait until the winter, our down time, to turn in all the paperwork. This creates a logjam and explains why it took nearly two more years to complete the process. From March through late December, my time is better spent on the course and with only one other full time year round employee, down time is kind of a misnomer. IPM documentation required getting very stringent about grass clippings, washing off equipment, loading and washing our sprayers, dealing with waste oil, the toxicity of the chemicals I choose. It also included monitoring hot spots, training employees, and properly using cultural methods. ACSP asked me what I do with my leftover spray mixture. I had to laugh. I barely have enough to spray what I need to, nevermind any leftover product!

The use of natural organics versus synthetic fertilizers comes under fire. The Audubon argument essentially is synthetics=bad and organics=good. My argument is, going over budget=bad and keeping job=good. For some odd reason, despite mountains of research, it is generally believed that synthetic fertilizers pollute the ground water and runoff pollutes surface water as well. Attempting to sway someone's opinion on that is like pulling teeth! I think that Audubon aligning themselves with Nature Safe indicates their position on synthetics. The curative versus preventive applications is a point that also gets serious scrutiny. It, in fact, was the stalling point for our certification in IPM. Anybody who has read articles by Ron Dodson knows that ACSP believes that a preventive spray is a wasteful spray. He believes that with properly set threshold levels, one can curatively treat any pest problems and still maintain excellent turf with reduced fungicide usage.

I may open myself up for a lot of criticism here, but I think that is bunk. I argued that point repeatedly with the staff ecologists and a professor they utilize. A healthy turf is more resistant to disease infestations and to me, that means one that doesn't have any active disease. Using an ounce per thousand of a fungicide every 21 to 28 days seems to me to be more environmentally sound than using 4 to 8 ounces every seven to ten days, regardless of any LD50's. It was a battle on that issue from the start. I was told that many of the top level courses that are certified spray only curatively because of their properly set thresholds and are in optimum condition. Finally, they said just try to use a "more curative approach since it is a



An area returned to native conditions and seeded to wildflowers; this is the first year.

minimum requirement of the program.” Obviously, you can tell how I feel about it, but waiting for anthracnose to strike before I treat it, when everyone in the state knows it is coming doesn’t seem logical to me. Plus, I enjoy being employed.

Honestly, I think going through the certification process like we did, particularly the last three categories which I consider the bread and butter of the program, really helped me learn about what I do on the course. It required an intense, introspective look at literally everything we do here and then documenting it. And the fact that it took three years allowed me to really look at how things were working and not working, and to change programs accordingly. Whether being certified improved the course, I don’t know. When we started mowing our rough with a rotary mower in 1995, our course was immediately improved. The board told me when I started that they wanted tight fairways and fast greens. The greens were already fast but the fairways were shaggy and thin. We dropped the height which certainly helped the demise of the KBG, especially in 1995. Dropping the height of cut is generally frowned upon by Audubon, and for good reason. But who am I to argue with the person who signs my checks? Like I said before, getting certified is full of compromises for both parties.

On Audubon’s behalf, they did listen to me and change their point of view, at least for my course. I can’t speak highly enough about Joellen Zeh and Marla Briggs, who since has changed positions within Audubon International. Despite my cynicism and sarcasm, they worked hard with me and for me. Joellen made the final certification official, perhaps to get me out of her hair. But it showed to me that they will bend but not break to help you achieve the final goal.

A lot of work? Well, yes and no. It was a lot of work on the computer and on the phone with

Audubon. Work on the course? In our case it wasn’t. We did create three additional wildflower areas since I’ve been here. But two were waste areas created by a pond dredging. It was only logical to spread some seed and let it go. Another was so far out of play that it was pointless to mow it. So we tore it up and spread more seed. None of the new wildflower areas were as intensely planted as the original meadow area planted before I got here, which was written about in *The Grass Roots* a few years back, but they all look the same now. Areas like that created wildlife corridors, eliminated maintenance, added color to break up the green monotony. With the help of the committee and volunteers, very little other work was cast upon the grounds department. Also, almost no additional money was spent on the projects and with the exception of the annual \$100 membership fee and the water testing costs; there are almost no recurring expenses.

So will more courses in this state become certified? I think so. Having the golf course name in the same sentence with Audubon creates an internal peace for anti-golfers, bird watchers and environmentalists everywhere. It is a good program and people do respond to it, particularly when they don’t have a clue about golf course management. And as we all know, our biggest critics often don’t have a clue.

Suggestions? If you haven’t already, contact Audubon International, specifically Joellen Zeh and tell her you want to get started. They have enough information and questionnaires to walk you through the entire process very easily. Besides, Wisconsin has a reputation for being a conservation and wildlife oriented state. What better way to show it on a golf course? ♻️



Pond dredging seeded to wildflowers two years ago.