

Birnamwood Golf Course Becomes Smallest Golf Course Worldwide To Achieve Full Certification in Audubon Program

By DAN HILL

Superintendent, Birnamwood Golf Course

Birnamwood has become the smallest course in the world to achieve full certification in the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program. Owned and operated by the City of Burnsville, Birnamwood is the only nine-hole golf facility in the state to become fully certified.

Birnamwood, a nine-hole, par three course, is 1,267 yards long and sits on 21 fi acres of land. It was built in 1968 and was acquired by the City of Burnsville in the fall of 1988. The course has approximately 31 to 32,000 rounds per year.

I came to Birnamwood in January of 1999 from Minnesota Valley Country Club where I was Assistant Superintendent to Larry Mueller. He taught me a lot about the turf industry. Larry is a great teacher and I was privileged to have had an opportunity to work with him. I grew and learned more in that time than any other schooling or work experience in my career.

One area in particular that Larry got me interested in was his involvement in the Audubon International. He was the first superintendent in Minnesota and the 16th in the nation to get his course fully certified as an Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary.

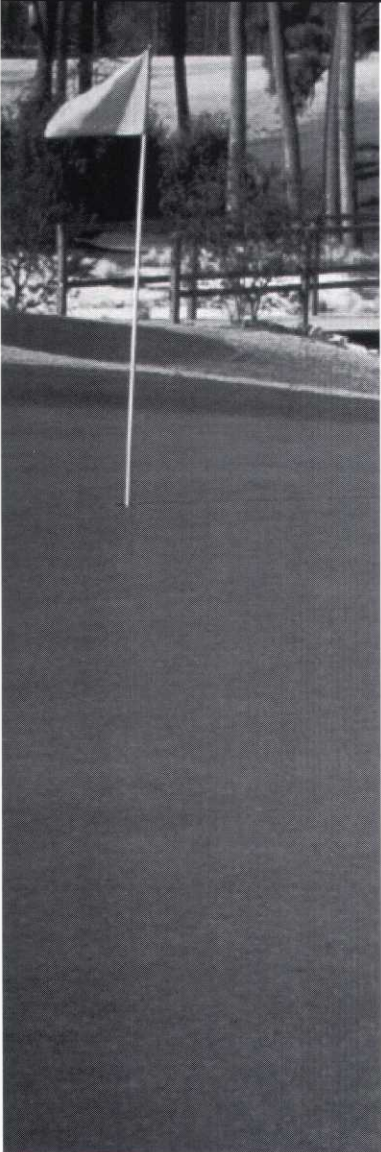
When I left Minnesota Valley and took this position I saw a great opportunity to transform Birnamwood into an Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary. It became my goal to show people that you do not need to be an exclusive 18-hole course with a huge budget to become certified. Even though Birnamwood is only the 14th golf course in the state to become fully certified, I believe that any course, if they put the effort into it, could become certified. If you have the desire to improve the environmental quality of your course and the \$150.00 for your annual dues, you can begin the process to become an Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary.

There are five categories that you have to pass in order to achieve full certification into the Audubon. The categories are:

- + Wildlife habitat management
- + Chemical use reduction and safety
- + Water conservation
- + Water quality management
- + Outreach and education

Many of the things that the Audubon asks applicants to do are things that most superintendents are

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Birnamwood—

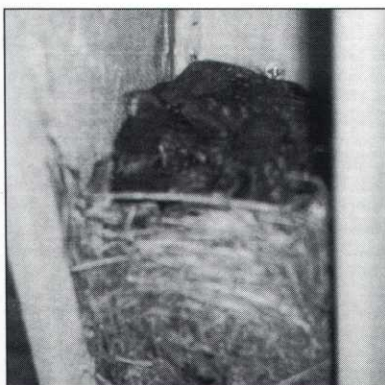
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already doing. Documentation is probably the most essential part of the Audubon program. Although the amount of paper work seemed overwhelming at first, I grew to enjoy the process. Being forced to look at some details of the course, that I previously paid little attention, has proven beneficial to me and my operation. I now know my course on a closer level. It seems that most superintendents know all the details about their greens, tees and fairways, but spend little time thinking about their woods, wetlands, wild areas and ponds. This is where the Audubon can help.

Some of our projects included installing 28 bluebird houses, establishing a buffer area around our pond with wild flowers and a wetland restoration project in a low area on the course that holds water. One of our feature projects was the construction of a 900-square foot butterfly garden. This was done with the help of a Burnsville High School senior class and an Eagle Scout project. It was a great way to involve the community in our golf course.

There are more innovations that we are planning in the future and ongoing projects that will always be there like monitoring water quality, which is done three times per year, and monitoring bluebird houses which is done every

other week. I have found that the monitoring of the blue bird houses is the most time-consuming task involved with the Audubon, but also the most gratifying. Surprisingly, when the date comes to monitor the bird boxes I find myself reluctant to do it. I look around and see all the other things on the course that should be done. Yet every time I go out and monitor the



Baby bluebirds in nest box on the course.

boxes I come out of it feeling very refreshed and in a great mood. It gives me a whole new perspective of what this little course in the middle of Burnsville means to wildlife, and the difference we have made. The first two years I was at Birnamwood we had no bluebird sightings. So far this year we have had 11 blue birds hatch in 3 different boxes.

Being involved in the Audubon does not cost very much and in many cases saves money. Even though we only have 21 fi acres to work with, we were still able to find over 1 fi acres to turn into natural area. Our natural area saves on mowing, irrigation water, fertilizer and herbicides use. Not only is it maintenance free, but it dramatically improves the esthetics of the course.



Eagle Scout group planting butterfly garden.

At a course like Birnamwood with limited staff and a small budget we had to proceed in the certification process in small steps. But once those steps were completed we were left with a beautiful creation. Since we are a small golf course we had a lot of challenges that larger courses would not have to deal with. In my position I am not only maintaining a golf course but also managing the clubhouse. My limited staff does not even cover the daily tasks of running a golf course, not to mention the added tasks of the Audubon. The added hours of the Audubon was something I put on myself. Nobody asked me to join. I wanted to do it, and I had the blessing of the City of Burnsville to pursue it. These factors only made becoming fully certified all the more rewarding.

One thing that I found very interesting was how much the staff enjoyed the process. Their involvement in the Audubon gave their job more meaning. They had a goal to achieve and worked together to reach it. They took as much pride in passing each of the five Audubon categories as I did.

In our industry it is hard to find time to spend with our families. I have found that the Audubon is a great way to involve your family in your work. My oldest son Payton, who is 4, helped me build the 28 bluebird houses during the winter. I know he enjoyed it, and it is a time that I will remember forever. He likes to see the bluebird houses on the course knowing that he helped build them. When his brother Graden gets old enough, I will involve him also. My wife and I are already planning on joining the "My Backyard" program which is offered through the Audubon International for homeowners.

I am very proud of what my staff and I have done with Birnamwood. It has been the most gratifying accomplishment in my professional career.

If you are interested in joining the Audubon International you can contact them at (518) 767-9051.