

THE EMERALD NECKLACE

The 19,000 acres of Cleveland's Metroparks System provide a challenge even for 350 peak-season workers.

by Carl Kovac

Keeping Greater Cleveland's "Emerald Necklace" sparkling is mostly a case of "if it ain't broke, don't fix it."

It's not an easy job, considering that the "necklace," known officially as the Cleveland Metroparks System, consists of almost 19,000 acres of rolling, wooded hills, valleys and open fields in 12 reservations draped around the eastern, southern and western fringes of Cuyahoga County.

Worked into this scenic strand are more than 100 miles of park roads providing access to wildlife management areas and waterfowl sanctuaries; picnic areas and playfields; hiking, bridle, all-purpose and physical fitness trails; six golf courses; swimming and boating areas; stables; tobogganing, sledding, skating and cross-country skiing areas and four nature centers.

"Our aim is to preserve and

enhance the natural environment," explains Mark Oesterle, superintendent of parks for the Cleveland Metroparks, who oversees some 150 full-time workers and approximately 200 seasonal employees.

Wanted: weeds

Weeds are left pretty much alone throughout most of the system. Some weeds, in fact, add to the necklace's glitter. For example, the July edition of *The Emerald Necklace*, the Metroparks' monthly newsletter, tells readers that "Joe-pye and common milkweed both unfold pale purple blossoms this week. Take time to smell a milkweed—a pleasant surprise!" and "Enjoy the summer woods as we search for wildflowers and weeds that bloom (this month)."

"We don't try to keep any of our grassy areas totally weed-free; we're not concerned with it," Oesterle reports. "We do some weed control, mostly around parking lot posts, road delineators and sign posts, and along bridle trails. String Trimmers have been such a big help. We use chemicals, like Roundup, only in areas where we need longer kill periods. About the only other chemicals we handle are in the swimming pools."

Oesterle explains that Metroparks uses Stihl string trimmers for the most part because "we have found them to be light and durable and easily used by inexperienced seasonal employees. We can drop off a couple of seasonal people, accompanied by a worker on a riding mower, and together they can clear a large area in a relatively short time. The mower cuts six-foot swaths and the String Trimmers trim around trees, picnic tables, buildings, signs, and so on."

Grassy areas are seeded



Last year almost 400,000 golfers played at the six Metropark Golf Courses, including this one, Big Met.

Carl Kovac is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.



Picnic tables are anchored on crusher-run gravel pads to facilitate mowing the surrounding grass.

periodically with Park mix: one-third bluegrass, one-third red fescue and one-third perennial rye. "Some heavily-used places, like picnic areas, wear down faster than others. What we've been doing over the past five years is choose three to five of these areas at a time and go in with special crews who rototill the ground and seed it.

"We've also been building table pads in picnic areas," he continues. "We strip the topsoil, then use crusher-run gravel to build a mound six inches above the surrounding grade. The mound is rolled and picnic tables and a grill are anchored in place. The grass around the pad is then brought to the edge. The advantage of this is that mowers can move around the pads, close to the tables, saving a tremendous amount of time."

In addition to approximately 80 string trimmers, the Metroparks also use riding mowers, most of them Cushman models with six-foot front-mounted cutting decks, for fine cutting in picnic and other grassy

areas. Ford tractors pull flail mowers over large fields. "Each reservation probably has 20 to 24 riding mowers plus a tractor," Oesterle says. "The tractors also are used for raking and other chores in the winter."

Busier than most

Maintenance personnel at the Metroparks golf courses also follow the "if-it-ain't-broke" philosophy. "We don't do anything different here than other courses do, except that we're probably busier," says Frank Blatnick, the system's superintendent of golf courses.

Last year, 389,607 players took on Big Met, Manakiki, Sleepy Hollow (all 18-hole courses); Little Met and Mastick Woods (each nine-hole); and Shawnee Hills (which has a par-27, nine-hole executive course, a regulation par-36 nine-hole course and a driving range). Interestingly, senior citizens accounted for 21.8 percent of total play at the Metroparks courses in 1985.

Construction of an additional nine holes at Shawnee Hills, at an

estimated cost of about \$100,000 per hole, was begun last fall. The project includes leveling hills and removing trees and brush. When completed in early 1988, Shawnee Hills will have an 18-hole, par-72 course approximately 6,316 yards long; the official length will be set by the Professional Golfers' Association (PGA). The 1,323-yard nine-hole executive course will remain unchanged.

"We keep the courses in as good shape as possible," says Blatnick. "We water fairways on the 18-hole courses, we fertilize the tees, fairways and greens on a regular basis, and we use chemicals to curb crabgrass and insects. We normally don't seed. But bent, the fescues and perennial ryegrasses are used when we have to." His crews use triplex and gang mowers to keep the courses trim.

Pre-emergence chemicals are used in the spring for crabgrass control; contact leaf herbicides are sprayed or applied with spreaders in the spring and fall; and fungicides are used as needed, Blatnick says. Insecticides to control white grubs and atanius beetles also are used.

Overlapping species

In addition to grasses, weeds and a wide variety of shrubs and wildflowers, the Emerald Necklace also boasts more than 100 species of trees, tended by a small forestry crew headed by natural resource specialist Joan Pfungsten.

"Because of our geography and climate, we're really in an interesting position here," she says. "Many of the species overlap geographically. We have boreal forest trees found in Canada, and we have flood plain forests in addition to beech, maple and oak trees native to this area."

Pfungsten says that "we do an awful lot of planting in the spring and fall. We have eight nurseries—well, actually 7½. The deer are working on one harder than I am.

"We employ selective release," she reports. "We feature certain trees along certain trails, for example, depending on the season. This way, we keep the park roads looking attractive. After all, it's the first thing people see; it's a first impression."

All of the people who keep the Emerald Necklace shimmering are apparently doing the right things. Last year, more than 21.5 million visitors took the opportunity to bask in the radiance of the necklace's gems. **WT&T**



Frank Blatnick, superintendent of Cleveland Metroparks' six golf courses.



Mark Oesterle, superintendent of the Cleveland Metroparks System.