

IN TOUCH WITH NATURE

Blacklick Woods Metro Golf Course is visited regularly by wildlife from the surrounding metropark. The superintendent, however, would be a little happier without the added animal traffic.

by Jeff Sobul, assistant editor

Kerry Ortmeyer could probably use some help from the late Marlin Perkins of TV's "Wild Kingdom." His course, 36-hole Blacklick Woods Metro Golf Course near Columbus, Ohio, gets regular visits from the local wildlife. But it's no party.

"We're right next door to the park," he notes. Deer make an almost daily trek across the course. "What-

ever gets in their way, they just go right across it."

By land...

A number of holes get deer tracks on the greens and in the sand traps. (Ortmeyer speculates that the deer like the way the sand feels on their hoofs.) He says that if the deer walk across the course the damage is usually minimal. But if they run, and the course



Despite an ongoing program to plant trees over the past 10 to 15 years, Blacklick Woods Golf Course remains relatively wide open, to the delight of most weekend golfers.

happens to be a bit moist, then there are problems with tracks. The deer also ate a wildflower area he was attempting to establish, as well as some other flower beds.

Ortmeyer says, however, that deer problems are not that serious, merely annoying. Besides, he adds, "we're not allowed to do anything because all park lands are open to wildlife. The course is part of the park. The deer have more right to be there than we do."

Wildlife problems don't stop there. "We are vastly overpopulated with racoons and skunks," Ortmeyer says. When grubs invade the fairways, immediate roughs and green banks in September and October, skunks and racoons follow shortly thereafter, tearing up the ground in search of the tasty little morsels.

Part of the problem, Ortmeyer notes, is that the park is "landlocked," surrounded on all four sides by either interstate highways or housing developments. "(The animals) don't have anywhere else to go," he says. "They've literally torn up whole areas looking for grubs."

Ortmeyer estimates that he and his crew spend three to six hours per day repairing damage done by the little furballs. Sometimes it involves removing and reseeding the damaged area, other times it only involves rolling a piece of sod displaced by a racoon back in place.

This year and last year the problems have been mostly with masked chafer grubs. However, seven or eight years ago, the city of Reynoldsberg, the closest town to the park, suffered a Japanese beetle invasion. These were taken out just in time for the masked chafers to arrive. "If it's not one thing, it's another," Ortmeyer laments.

The grubs like to take up residence on green banks shielded from the wind. "We get mostly west winds so grubs infest the east-facing green banks where they have shelter from the wind," Ortmeyer says. "When the winds are from the east, the grubs are on the west side."

For four years he had been using Oftanol to control the grubs, with some success. Now, however, the Oftanol seems to no longer be effective. Therefore, Ortmeyer has switched to using Sevin and Mocap.

The insecticides got an early test this year. In the spring, grubs started surfacing on the fairway near the creek on the par five 4th hole, and the 'coons and skunks started feasting. Ortmeyer came in with an application of Sevin and Mocap, watered them in well and effectively got rid of the grubs.

...and by air

Geese also cause problems at Blacklick Woods, as they seem to do at many courses. Ortmeyer says they overwinter near the course and in spring they congregate on course ponds.

They eat turf on greens and fairways and then leave their deposits on the same. Luckily (for the golfers), there are only a few ponds on the course so the problem is not a major one. It did become enough of an inconvenience to get the Ohio Department of Natural Resources out to trap and transplant a number of the foul fowl. "We've had a few others come in," notes Ortmeyer, "but they don't seem to be hanging around."

The geese are probably fortunate they aren't

hanging around. The two courses, one championship length and one executive length, handle about 75,000 rounds each year, about 60 percent on the championship course. That's a lot of errant golf balls for the geese to dodge.

Year-round job

The course is open year-round so those rounds are spaced out somewhat over the course of an entire year. Ortmeyer stresses that being open year-round does not put any added pressure on him or the course. "The weather is what puts pressure on me.

"If we're going to have problems, we don't let it get out of hand," he says. "If our tees and greens aren't playable, we won't open."

Ortmeyer terms this past winter as extraordinary. "There was much play during the winter," but, he adds, "we weren't open more than 45 days over a three-month period (December-February)."

"We open when conditions are suitable," adds course general manager Joe Hoover. "We'll close the course even in the summer. It's a day-to-day decision."

Working in traffic

Maintaining a high level of playability around all those golfers is a difficult task for Ortmeyer's six full-time staffers and six or seven additional summer help.

Because of the traffic, Ortmeyer notes, "we can't do everything we want. We have to get in and get out fast." To conserve time and keep disruption of play to a minimum, the staff works on only one nine-hole section at a time. Aerifying and top-dressing are done on a limited basis at best, but he says they have "plenty of chemicals

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doing a good job."

His biggest cultural problem has been anthracnose on *Poa annua* in poa/bluegrass fairways. A fungicide program has kept that in control. The greens are bentgrass. "We don't have the irrigation or budget to maintain bent fairways," he notes. "but our budget is enough so that we don't have to cut corners either."

The course is funded by Franklin County though it is actually a sub-division of the state. A board of directors is appointed by a state probate judge to run the course. The course submits its own budget to the county and, according to Ortmeyer, has had sufficient funding in each of the 19 years he has been superintendent.

Keeping in shape

One of the most successful methods the course has had for keeping costs down has been to hire a staff mechanic. "We do a pretty good job of maintaining our old equipment," he says proudly. That equipment includes 20-year-old tractors and a 15-year-old Cushman Truckster.

"Any 18-hole facility should have a mechanic who understands the equipment," he advises. "A mechanic can pay for himself by keeping a machine running."

And with some careful driving, none of those machines will hit any deer, flatten any skunks, run through any goose. . . .

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