

# A 'natural' success

*Superintendent Robert K. Ellis works with Indian River Club golf and residential community to preserve and enhance native coastal Florida environment.*

By RON HALL/ Managing Editor

**T**here's a hole at Indian River Club golf course known as "Temptation." It's named that for good reason. Even a high handicapper might be tempted to think, "hey, let's go for it." The ribbon of turf-grass winding to the green is inviting. Too inviting, never mind the water and bunkers.

All 18 holes at Indian River Club have names appropriate to their personalities. "Patience" is an undulating Par 5; and "Scrub Jay", a challenging combination of golf hole and wildlife preserve where you'll find Florida scrub jays, now legally protected as a Threatened Species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Golf Course Superintendent Robert K. Ellis says the descriptive names are just a tiny part of the uniqueness of Indian River Club.

More significant, says Ellis, is the marriage of this relatively new golf and residential community with

its native Florida environment. He describes this relationship (and his part in it) as a continuing experiment in stewardship.

"It's a learning experience," explains Ellis. "Everything we do here is."

The 300-acre Club gets its name because it's located on the southern boundary of Indian River County just outside Vero Beach. Indian River County is best known for its citrus, but golf has become pretty important here too. The county of 90,000 people boasts 17 golf courses, 11 of which are private. Construction on the Indian River Club course began January 1994, and it was ready for play in February 1995.

The developer of Indian River Club is Jeff Reynolds, a former cable television company owner. He and several limited partners initiated the development convinced that preserving and enhancing the natural environment would improve the quality of life for home owners and club members. This commitment—at least to the extent they've dedicated themselves—sets their club apart from other similar communities, they believe.

In 1996 Audubon International honored Indian River Club with its highest recognition, designating it

This wooden cart bridge forms a design element on this hole. Note the grass stabilizing the bank of the waterway.





as an Audubon Signature Sanctuary. It was only the third new golf and residential community so honored. Even so, Robert K. Ellis, golf course superintendent, sees the Club as a work in progress.

*Always in progress.*

### The design works

Ellis joined the Club early in the golf course's development. He was delighted at the opportunity, he says, particularly as he learned more of the developer's commitment to "doing the right thing." He was selected, he believes, in part, because of his experience with three other golf course construction projects. Ellis is a graduate of Lake City Community College (Golf Course Operations) in northern Florida, and a native of Lakeland, Fla.

He says he sought suggestions from fellow Florida superintendent Tim Hiers. Hiers' experiences at Colliers Reserve Country Club in Naples, Fla., has inspired other superintendents to become involved with the Audubon program, says Ellis.

The Indian River Club superintendent also praised golf course architect Ron Garl, Lakeland, Fla., for the care he took in blending his design into the property's unique characteristics.

"The architect and I were friends before we came here," says Ellis.

"I thought it was wonderful that they got a Florida architect that knows native Florida."

Garl adopted a cooperative approach laying out the course. In a sense, the project called for that. Four distinct landscapes—a mature pine forest, an oak hammock, a Carolina-style savannah, and an ancient elevated coastal sand dune—comprise the terrain on which the Indian River Club is built.

So conscientiously did Garl, with input from Ellis, shape the holes that, golfers can still easily identify and experience all four landscapes, with much of their native charm. Equally important, from Ellis's viewpoint, the course is manageable with a well-thought-out IPM program.

### Wise use of turf

Just 85 acres of turfgrass cover the Indian River Club course which also contains more than 50 acres of lakes, marshes and wetlands (both natural and man-made).

The tees, fairways and roughs are Tifway 419; the greens and collars are Tifdwarf bermudagrass. Both are overseeded during winter. Emerald zoysiagrass is used on several shaded tee complexes, while St. Augustine is the preferred grass for homeowner lawns.

Ellis says native grasses such as sand cordgrass, seashore dropseed, fakahatchee grass and muhly grass minimize maintenance on hard-to-maintain areas such as steep lake banks and tee slopes, and out-of-play areas not needing supplement irrigation.

The superintendent manages a golf course maintenance staff of 13, in addition to Assistant Superintendent Jeff Rennert, two mechanics and an office assistant. The Club's landscape supervisor is Barry Wade. He manages a six-person staff.

**Hole 5, looking back to 6 is built along an ancient coastal dune, and is a habitat for the threatened Florida scrub jay.**



**Superintendent Robert Ellis, above, collaborated with Architect Ron Garl in preserving a uniquely Florida environment.**



As beautiful as the golf course is, it's just part of the total Indian River Club experience. All of the community's homes border the golf course, and many are tucked into locations screened from play by native vegetation. The mature plant material also provides them with a surprising amount of privacy.

"We're trying to get the homeowners involved with our programs by minimizing the amount of turf. By using the natural flora we're able to keep these areas native with low maintenance," says Ellis. "It saves a lot of costs, and look what it does for conservation efforts."

Indeed, much of the vegetation surrounding some of the holes on the golf course came from areas cleared for construction. Crews relocated about 700 native sabal palms, 100 small oaks, 12 specimen oaks (some upwards of 75 feet tall), and numerous amounts of palmetto stands and other various native plantings.

While this work continues, it's not always successful, admits Ellis. Generally, about 75% of the relocated native material survives. "That's pretty good. It's certainly better than stripping and clearing sawy this good material."

At Indian River Club, they don't discard what's unique about the coastal Florida environment. They find a way to preserve and enjoy it. □