

ON COURSE WITH NATURE

But Can You Prove It?

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WHICH DO YOU PREFER: "Golf Courses Are Denounced as Health Hazards — To Environmentalists, Golf Courses Aren't All Fun and Games" or "Golf Courses Seek to Attract *Other Birdies*"? Both are recent headlines representing two attitudes toward golf and the environment. We know from what we read and hear that there are those who believe that new golf courses destroy acres of already dwindling habitat, and once built, use too much water and chemicals in maintaining the "manicured" appearance associated with golf courses.

We also know that there are others, both within and outside of the golf industry, who believe golf courses can provide excellent habitat for a variety of wildlife species. It has even been suggested that sometimes more wildlife is seen after a golf course is built than before it was there, and that water and chemical use is kept to a minimum not only because of a concern for the environment, but for economic reasons as well.

The first question we need to ask ourselves is, what exactly is the significance of wildlife on a golf course? The fact is that wildlife is a great indicator of environmental quality. The different types and numbers of wildlife seen on a property are a visible indicator that the golf course is a healthy and thriving habitat. The quantity and variety of wildlife also reflect our human commitment to take care of the land. But for those who believe in the value of golf course habitat, the critical question is, "Can you prove it?" How can you prove the *biological productivity* of an area? How can you assess the *environmental health* of wildlife found on the course? How do you prove the value of golf courses as productive wildlife areas? One way is to track wildlife environmentally and record what you see.

Your records should include a baseline inventory of the types of wildlife found on the course throughout the year. Those records will prove to be even more valuable if information is available about the property before the golf course was built. Once you have



These birds of feather (sandhill cranes) certainly stick together. That makes it all the easier when conducting your wildlife inventory of the golf course.

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established an inventory, record keeping on specific species can begin. Wildlife that use nesting boxes (bluebirds, swallows, or wrens, for example) may be of particular interest to your members or the public. Volunteers can regularly monitor the boxes during the nesting season to record the number of eggs in each box and the number of young birds that successfully leave the nest. If this simple process is completed on a yearly basis, over an extended period of time, population trends can be established. These trends then can be compared to other information, such as habitat changes on the course, or possible interactions between golfers and wildlife. Most important, from a golf perspective, information collected about these species can be compared to information that has already been gathered on other types of land, such as parks and wildlife refuges. This comparison not only helps determine the relative value of different types

of land management and uses, but leads to a more complete understanding of appropriate wildlife management techniques in the human-managed landscape.

When you're asked about the *environmental sensitivity* of your courses, can you prove it? Identification of species and the systematic process of keeping records will help document the value of golf courses as wildlife havens. Need help getting started? Participation in the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf Courses (ACSP) is one way for golf courses to gather and submit wildlife information. The ACSP serves as a national clearinghouse for information concerning golf, wildlife, and the environment. By participating in the record-keeping process and assessing the results, we will not only *believe* that golf courses are valuable as wildlife habitat, we will also be able to answer "Yes" to the question, "Can you prove it?"