

From Doubt to Certification

One superintendent's story on Audubon certification.

by STEVE EHRBAR, CGCS

WHEN I WAS FIRST introduced to the rigorous criteria for certification with the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program (ACSP), it was not a program I embraced with great enthusiasm. Initially, I did not see where I could find the time to develop, implement, monitor, and document all of the components necessary to achieve certification. We all know that the workload of managing a golf course in South Florida is demanding enough in itself without adding extra projects.

I attended several seminars during the past four to five years on the ACSP and acquired information and insight into what other golf course superintendents were doing to achieve certification status. After leaving these meetings, I would reflect on the positive aspects of the program: protecting the environment for future generations, enhancing wildlife habitats, and educating the staff along with golfers, school children, and the general public. I was still hesitant to embark on the program and could not make the commitment even when the benefits were so compelling.

One day, with the encouragement of the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary staff, who convinced me that every golf course is different and that what some courses have done I may not be able to do, or even want to do, I decided to go forward with the program.

Old Marsh Golf Club is a unique project and it was a high priority to keep the integrity of the club intact. After notifying our Members' Advisory Board of my decision to proceed with the program, I was pleased to encounter an enthusiastic response from the membership for participation in the program.

Old Marsh has a great opportunity to be an outstanding Audubon cooperative sanctuary. We have 450 acres, with more than 120 acres preserved as natural wetlands. More than 35 acres of aquatic plants were planted and new wetlands created in the development



Old Marsh Golf Club in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, has unique maintenance challenges as the golf course winds its way through 120 acres of natural wetlands.

of the golf course, which led to several environmental awards for the course design. Our reverse-crested fairways keep irrigation runoff from entering the sensitive marsh habitats. A 30-mile underground drainage system recycles irrigation water to special holding ponds for reuse. This system is an integrated component of our water conservation methods.

As part of the ACSP, we have enhanced our thriving birdlife and wildlife population with feeding and nesting boxes. The endangered woodstork, the rare red-shouldered hawk, Everglades kite, and threatened sandhill crane are all residents at Old Marsh and serve as a testament to our balanced ecosystem.

We have initiated several educational programs for our residents, members, and school children. Many tours have been conducted through the property,

and we've even taken one overnight field trip to Everglades National Park. These programs have been instructional and we are planning several more for next year.

I can now look back with a great sense of accomplishment on our progress with the ACSP. My original perceptions were almost unfounded. It was actually fairly easy to incorporate additional integrated pest management ideas since it is an important element of our course management practices already. In addition, we test irrigation water as a common practice, so the accurate documentation within the water management category did not create an extra workload problem.

I can see how the wildlife criteria could be a real challenge to some golf courses, but at Old Marsh we are blessed with abundant wildlife, a thriving ecosystem, and incredible birdlife. We have enjoyed helping Mother Nature with feeding boxes and nesting areas.

As a result, Old Marsh has now obtained certification in three categories, leaving us with three to go before fully certified status is achieved. We are well on our way with great momentum to work toward full certification in the program. I now realize Old Marsh, along with many other courses in the nation, is already doing many of the things the ACSP requires. It's really just a matter of documenting and learning a little more about the ACSP for golf courses. For myself and everyone at Old Marsh Golf Club, the program has been a very rewarding experience.

STEVE EHRBAR is a certified golf course superintendent with more than 14 years of professional experience at several clubs, including Lost Tree, Cypress Links, and now Old Marsh Golf Club in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida. He is a graduate of Ohio State with an AA in Applied Science and Turfgrass Management, and in addition is a single-digit handicap golfer.