

Saving the Small Sundrop

Making an opportunity out of an obstacle.

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For many developers, the discovery of an endangered or threatened species on site is the last thing one hopes to encounter during construction. Thoughts of abruptly halting a project or of expensive mitigation measures can easily override goodwill toward the environment. Yet when ThunderHawk Golf Club discovered more than 2,000 small sundrops (*Oenothera perennis*), a state-threatened plant species, during construction, the project's developer, Lake County Forest Preserve, took it as an opportunity to save Illinois' largest known population of this native flower.

Opened for play in 1999, ThunderHawk Golf Club in Beach Park, Illinois, is set on 243 acres of rolling terrain and features more than 32 acres of wetlands (15 restored and 17 created), 74 acres of woodland (17 of which were created with new or transplanted trees),



and more than 57 native prairie acres. As a member of the Audubon Signature Program, ThunderHawk Golf Club committed to the highest level of environmental stewardship, starting in the design and development phase of the project. Central to its management approach is providing top-quality playing conditions while adhering to practices that conserve wildlife, enhance

habitats, conserve water and energy, and minimize chemical use.

When the small sundrop was first discovered, we called upon a number of professionals on staff who could quickly address issues of threatened species protection. This enabled us to develop and implement a conservation plan while resuming construction. Following recommendations from the Illinois Division of Natural Resources and with assistance



from Audubon International, we took steps to ensure that the population of this species would continue to thrive for future generations to enjoy.

THE RIGHT COMBINATION: PROTECTION ZONES, MANAGEMENT PLANNING, AND EDUCATION

Our first defense to ensure long-term survivability of the sundrop was to transplant more than 300 plants from construction areas into zoned protection areas. The goal of the *protection zone* is to safeguard and expand the population of the small sundrop and sustain its habitat, while allowing for proper maintenance of the golf course.

Next, we instituted a natural area management and monitoring plan that includes prescribed burning, exotic species removal, and other natural resource management measures. For instance, mowing, pesticide, and fertilizer use are modified or eliminated in buffer

zones around protected areas. A 20-year monitoring program also has been started.

Equally important, we began a public awareness and education campaign, using informational publications, text on scorecards, photos in the clubhouse and throughout the course, and signs around protection zones. These measures provide information not only about the sundrop, but also about the site's natural resources.

Golfer awareness and interest have been overwhelming. Golfers are excited to learn about the small sundrop and readily ask questions about the plant after reading information provided on site. They often look for the sundrop while playing.

PROTECTION EFFORTS TRIPLE SMALL SUNDROP POPULATION

Our efforts are paying off. Overall, the population of small sundrops has tripled

since construction started in 1997. Our monitoring process has shown that the entire population seems to be stable throughout the protection zones. The annual cost of monitoring the small sundrop at ThunderHawk has been around \$1,500. And, while no economic savings are anticipated, the intangible savings in terms of ecological value and golfer satisfaction are well worth it.

Opened in 1999, the ThunderHawk Golf Club achieved designation as a certified Audubon Signature Sanctuary in May 2001. ThunderHawk Golf Club's marketing coordinator MARY LONGYHORE, golf course superintendent MARK PETITGOUE, and superintendent for the Lake County Forest Preserve TOM MORGENSEN collaborated with Jean Mackay, director of educational services for Audubon International, to produce this article. Address inquiries to Mary Longyshore at mlongyshore@co.lake.il.us or Mark Petitgoue at mepetitg@wans.net.