

# Is Your Course Certified?

## Tips for success in the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program.

BY PAUL DOTTI

*The Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program (ACSP) for golf courses was launched in 1991 by Audubon International and the United States Golf Association to promote environmental stewardship by protecting wildlife habitat and natural resources. Of the nearly 16,000 golf courses in the United States today, 13.5% are members of the ACSP and only 1.9% are Certified Sanctuaries.*

When Edgewood Country Club set out to become certified in the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program (ACSP), it was intimidating to think of what lay ahead. I was overwhelmed by what seemed like countless hours of paperwork associated with this program. My initial reaction was to put the certification packet on the shelf and forget about it altogether. We were already practicing several elements of

the program and I felt that the membership was not going to think any differently of the golf course or myself if Edgewood C.C. became a Certified Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary. After further consideration, I decided to jump right in and start from the beginning. This article describes the certification process and provides helpful hints toward achieving certification.

### GETTING STARTED

The first step is to become a member of the ACSP. New golf courses in the design or development phase join the Audubon Signature Program. To become a member golf course, contact:

**Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program**  
**Audubon International**  
**46 Rarick Road**  
**Selkirk, NY 12158**  
**Telephone: 518-767-9051, ext. 12**  
**E-Mail: [acss@audubonintl.org](mailto:acss@audubonintl.org)**  
**Website: [www.audubonintl.org](http://www.audubonintl.org)**



Successful environmental projects on the golf course begin with good planning and implementation in the early stages.



With the ACSP program, we are able to demonstrate to the public and our profession that we are doing the right thing for our environment and our future.



Wildflowers can provide a nice contrast to the golf course turf, and they served as a good selling point for the naturalization concept at Edgewood Country Club (New Jersey).

The annual \$150.00 membership fee (\$200.00 for international golf courses) covers the cost of educational materials and attaining and maintaining certification. New members receive an information packet that contains a step-by-step handbook for certification and a “how to” guide for completing various components of the program. Some topics include generating environmental plans, constructing nest boxes, creating a wildlife inventory, and developing outreach and education activities.

### KEY INGREDIENTS FOR CERTIFICATION

You will soon discover that your golf course is already implementing many of the practices required for certification. Regardless, the following tips are very helpful for achieving certification.

#### Delegate Responsibility

Although you may be the person primarily responsible for coordinating

the certification program, don't attempt to do everything alone. Assembling a Resource Advisory Group (RAG) helps spread out the workload by tapping the expertise of several individuals.

Forming a RAG is also one of the requirements for certification in the Outreach/Education component. Wildlife identification and management are important areas of expertise to have represented in the group. Consider an avid bird watcher or someone from a local nature center who is willing to help develop a wildlife inventory of the golf course. I recruited a friend of mine who is knowledgeable in the identification of wildlife and plant materials. Examples of other individuals to include on the team are your assistants or other interested crew members, Green Committee members, local school teachers or administrators, and Boy/Girl Scout troop leaders. The more resources available, the easier the process.

#### Record Keeping

Record keeping is absolutely essential for achieving certification. A 35mm camera can provide “before” and “after” photos. Written documentation of turf management and Integrated Pest Management (IPM) practices is required throughout the process. A detailed map of the golf course helps depict various landscape features and environmental management practices.

#### Training and Communication

Employee training is a component of certification, and both written and verbal communication with staff, customers, stakeholders, and the community is needed to relay information throughout the program.

### THE CERTIFICATION PROGRAM

The certification program consists of six component areas:

- Environmental Planning (must be completed first).
- Wildlife and Habitat Management.
- Chemical Use Reduction and Safety.
- Water Conservation.
- Water Quality and Management.
- Outreach and Education.

#### Environmental Planning

The Environmental Planning component consists of the site assessment and environmental plan for the six component areas. The site assessment is a six-page questionnaire to provide Audubon International with general information about your golf course, including the number of rounds per year and area of turf surfaces, gardens, natural plant communities, and water features. The Environmental Plan is divided into six sections, one for each component of the program. Each section consists of a series of goals and management practices that are required to achieve certification. In each section, you need to indicate whether a practice is *implemented*, *partially implemented*, or *not implemented*. For each management practice



marked *partially* or *not implemented*, you fill out the last column titled *Planned Efforts*. Write down start and expected completion dates, or why the practice may not be applicable to your golf course. Don't worry if you have marked *no* or *partially implemented* to many of the management practices. The Environmental Plan simply serves as a checklist of goals to work toward in obtaining certification.

### Wildlife and Habitat Management

The purpose of this component is to identify wildlife and enhance or protect existing habitats or create new ones if none exist. While naturalizing the golf course is an integral part of wildlife and habitat management, it is not going to be readily accepted at every golf course. Many golfers who are used to manicured turf may not like the look of naturalized areas, or they may be concerned about slow play, unwanted wildlife, or deer ticks. I was faced with all of these concerns at Edgewood Country Club, and educating the membership through newsletters and the course bulletin board led to general acceptance of naturalization. The use of wildflowers also helped to garner support by adding color and contrast to the golf course.

If naturalization is not feasible, wildlife enhancement can still be achieved by several other practices, including installation of nesting boxes or bird feeders on the course, planting native plant species that will attract butterflies or hummingbirds, or by leaving understory vegetation growing in woodland areas.

Certification in the Wildlife and Habitat Management component requires developing a wildlife inventory and submitting photos showing

examples of naturalized areas, nest boxes, water features, and signage for habitats or Environmentally Sensitive Zones. Be sure to include "before" and "after" photos of restored habitats, if applicable.

### Chemical Use Reduction and Safety

Integrated Pest Management (IPM) is already an integral part of many super-

spray for *Hyperodes* unless we find at least 5 to 10 adults per square foot. Choosing pesticides that have low use rates, low toxicity, and minimal potential for runoff or leaching is another part of environmental stewardship. We include biological control products when applicable.

Cultural practices are a big part of IPM. Controlling thatch is one way to grow healthier turf and reduce the potential for pest invasion. Core aeration, verticutting, and topdressing are all beneficial practices for managing thatch and ultimately reducing pesticide usage.

Certification in Chemical Use Reduction and Safety requires photos of chemical storage/ mixing and loading areas as well as equipment storage and wash areas. Also required is documentation of your IPM practices, including pest scouting, threshold levels, cultural practices, and choice of pesticides and fertilizer.

### Water Conservation

Water conservation begins with making sure your

irrigation system runs as efficiently as possible. Repair all leaks as soon as they are detected and make sure irrigation heads apply proper coverage. Replace full-circle heads with part circles along hard-surface areas, woodland edges, naturalized areas, and water features. Make every effort not to irrigate during the peak times for evapotranspiration (ET), and install or rely upon quick-coupler valves to hand water chronic dry spots instead of operating irrigation heads. Last, but not least, mulch all flower beds and new plantings to retain soil moisture and improve plant health. This also will reduce weed growth and pesticide applications.

Certification in Water Conservation requires documentation of a properly



Signage is one way to demonstrate your involvement in environmental stewardship and the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program.

intendents' management programs. With this component, however, the key is to document everything regarding pest populations, and chemical and cultural control practices. For example, I keep records of past occurrences of localized dry spots, crabgrass, *Hyperodes*, and white grubs. Prior to my involvement in the ACSP, I used to apply nearly all pesticides on a preventative basis. Now, pests are controlled on a curative or as-needed basis, except for some of the more potentially devastating diseases on greens.

Scouting and monitoring pest activity are important elements in IPM. Pest or damage thresholds should be established before making a pesticide application. For example, we do not



functioning irrigation system, use of ET or weather data to schedule irrigation, and quantification of daily, monthly, and annual water use, preferably before and after your participation in the ACSP.

### Water Quality Management

This is perhaps the most intimidating component of the certification process because water quality testing is required. Although some golf courses may be sensitive to disclosing test results, testing is necessary to determine water quality before and after implementation of environmental management practices. Water quality testing is required for representative water features throughout the golf course. Testing parameters include pH, temperature, and concentrations of nitrogen and phosphorus.

Another phase of this component is the implementation of Best Management Practices (BMPs) to protect water quality, such as establishing vegetative buffer areas adjacent to water features. Vegetative buffers can be created by planting aquatic plants around pond edges or letting the existing vegetation grow naturally. Mowing equipment and application of pesticides and fertilizer should be kept away from these buffer areas to reduce the risk of surface water contamination.

Certification in Water Quality Management requires photos showing areas where chemicals or fuel are stored or used, and documentation of water quality test results and management of water features, including aquatic weed/pest control records.

### Outreach and Education

This is probably the most rewarding component in the whole program. Here we have the opportunity to get people involved in the program and provide education about the environmental benefits of golf courses. I started spreading the news by writing a monthly newsletter and established a bulletin board in the clubhouse. Also, we have adopted two local schools,

hosted two class field trips to the golf course, and installed a butterfly and hummingbird garden, bird boxes, and feeders for the children to maintain.

Certification in Outreach and Education requires photos of your environmental sanctuary display and people involved in stewardship projects. Also, you will need to provide samples of written materials such as a newsletter, newspaper article, signs, or letters that document your education and outreach efforts.

### ENVIRONMENTAL CASE STUDY

Another requirement of the certification program is that you must complete an Environmental Case Study form to provide more detailed information about any one of the projects that you've implemented. Our case study on Wildlife and Habitat Management was featured in Audubon International's *Stewardship News*, and we received numerous phone calls from across the country. It is rewarding to know that other people can benefit from your work in this program.

### ACHIEVING CERTIFICATION

Once the goals of each program component are met and documented, you are ready to apply for certification. You will receive a Certificate of Achievement for each component completed in the program. Upon completion of all six components, your golf course will be designated as a Certified Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary, and you will receive an art print for display at your facility, a camera-ready logo, and a press release.

Certification lasts for two years. After that time the golf course completes a re-certification packet to update the progress of each component. Obviously, you have worked very hard to become a certified sanctuary in the program. Don't let all that hard work go by the wayside by not renewing your annual membership or not maintaining up-to-date records of program components.

### SUMMARY

Hopefully this article will serve as a catalyst for those of you who have not yet joined the ACSP or are new members who are a bit overwhelmed by what lies ahead. Initially, I felt intimidated by the amount of work I thought might be involved in this program, but I managed to live to tell about it through hard work and surrounding myself with dedicated resources.

Maybe you're skeptical about the whole idea of certification. Does having a certificate on the wall make you any more of a steward to the environment than golf courses without one? Like most certification programs of its kind, becoming a certified sanctuary can mean as little or as much as the time and effort you put into it.

With the ACSP, we have the opportunity to demonstrate to the public our commitment to the environment. Take full advantage of making your certificates or press releases available to the public, or spread the word by hosting tours of the golf course. I know that students and teachers alike were amazed at how different the golf course looks from "inside the fence." Not only do I feel satisfied seeing the results at our golf course, but also at other certified golf courses as well. In some regions of the country, golf courses represent some of the last remaining open spaces. With the ACSP program, we are able to demonstrate to the public and our profession that we are doing the right thing for our environment and our future.

*PAUL DOTTI is the golf course superintendent at Edgewood Country Club in River Vale, New Jersey. His course was designated as a Certified Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary in August 2000. He also is a member of the Audubon Steward Network, a group of dedicated Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary members who use their knowledge and experience within the ACSP to provide information and assistance to others who are interested in the ACSP.*