

# Making a healthy golf course everyone's home and playground

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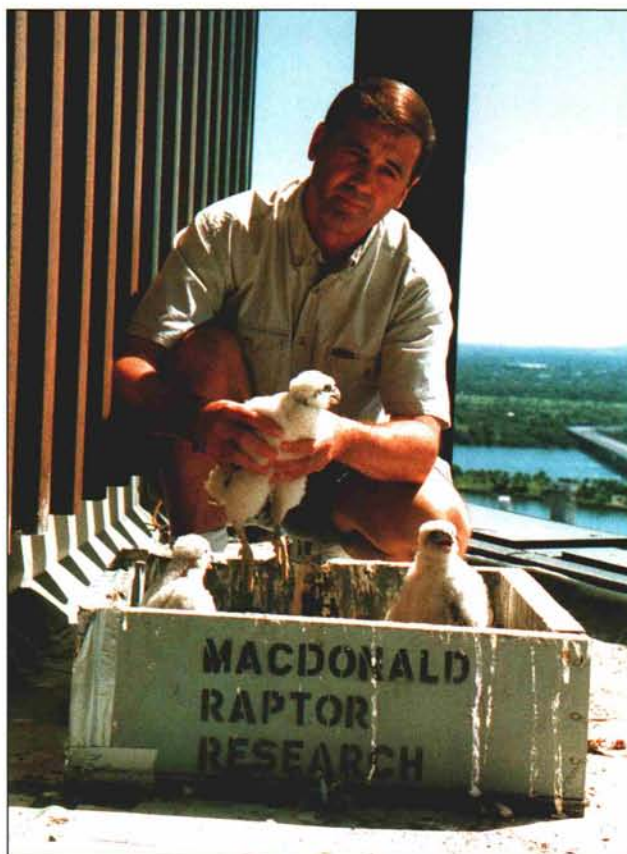
*By Dr. David Bird*

When my ornithological and golfing buddy and I prowl the links together, we are constantly on the alert for bird songs and sounds, calling out their names as we identify them. Indeed, as more people realize how bird-watching and golfing go hand-in-hand, golf courses are making great sanctuaries for birds, some more seriously so than others.

Cedarbrook Golf and Country Club, owned by ClubLink in Ste. Sophie, Quebec is a great example. The club is managed by Doug Meyer, an avid birder and a past president of the Canadian Golf Superintendents Association. He's always excited to tell me, "Hey, our bluebird boxes are doing great this year — we've

got babies in each one!"

Meyer is a serious environmentalist. He's aware that golf courses do carry a stigma of being depositories for various kinds of toxins. Traditionally, golf courses have never rated high on the list of environmentally healthy habitats for birds.



*The author with some very special little friends.*

Heavy uses of pesticides, fungicides, insecticides, and fertilizers as well as removal of unwanted plant life, not to mention wildlife, were often the order of the day for most courses. But that's an image people like Meyer are glad to see changing. Today's superintendents at golf courses all over North America are knocking themselves out to get their courses designated as Certified Audubon Cooperative Sanctuaries.

It's no simple task getting certified. After registering their course in the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf Courses, operated by the Audubon Sanctuary System of Canada (ACSS), superintendents have to provide written descriptions of their achievements in six categories: environmental planning; member/public involvement; wildlife and habitat management; integrated pest management; water conservation; and water quality management. Essentially, the superintendent must file a comprehensive plan of action as to what will be achieved in each certification category, by whom, and in what time frame.

Next, club members, regular golfers, and local resource people and/or organizations must be recruited to help the course gain recognition and support for the environmental programs, increase golfer understanding of wildlife



and environmental quality on the course, and inform the public that "golf courses can be valuable community assets." This project may include educational posters, newsletters, brochures, presentations and press releases. Members, schoolchildren, scouts and guides are to be encouraged to participate in nest box building and monitoring, planting projects, setting up nature trails, etc.

Third, attracting and managing wildlife in any habitat can be achieved by providing four things: food, water, cover, and places to breed. For golf courses in the sanctuary program, this means leaving woodland understory and dead trees (when not dangerous); creating brush piles for small mammals; installing and maintaining bird feeders and nest boxes; planting food for wildlife (eg. flowers for butterflies and hummingbirds); naturalizing non-play areas with emphasis on native plants; and protecting special habitats for threatened or endangered species. Inventories of plant and wildlife species must also be maintained.

Fourth, wetland areas must be protected and water quality enhanced by planting aquatic vegetation to buffer shorelines around ponds and creeks, and by reducing erosion and pollution inputs. The latter means reducing pesticide use and mini-

mizing fertilizer run-off.

Fifth, water must be conserved by minimizing unnecessary irrigation through proper landscaping and choosing drought-tolerant plants and turf species well-suited to local climate and soils; installing appropriate irrigation systems when and where necessary; avoiding watering at peak evaporation times; and using mulches in gardens.

Sound like a lot of effort? It is.

Hillsdale Golf and Country Club of Mirabel, Quebec, which once hosted the first Birdies for Birdies annual golf tournament to raise funds for endangered birds, was the first to be so honoured in Quebec, the sixth in Canada, and the 104th in North America.

Robert Burrows, former superintendent of the club, said he was ecstatic about the club's certification. "The rigorous process of certification has been very

## *Birdies for Birdies*

For the last three Septembers, Cedarbrook has hosted the annual Birdies for Birdies benefit golf tournament. Aimed at giving golfers a good time while helping out the endangered bird program of the Avian Science and Conservation Centre (ASCC) of McGill University, numerous prizes were up for grabs, including framed artistic works by Robert Bateman, John Seery-Lester, and famed bird-watcher, the late Roger Tory Peterson.

The \$175 entry fee per golfer is partially tax-deductible and includes a continental breakfast, lunch and a banquet dinner with a raffle and silent auction. After watching a flight demonstration with some of the world's fastest birds, each foursome is usually photographed with a live eagle! If you'd like more information on this unique tournament, contact the author at (514) 398-7760 or [bird@nrs.mcgill.ca](mailto:bird@nrs.mcgill.ca)

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educational and ultimately rewarding," said Burrows. "Working together, the members of our club, the resource committee members, and staff have greatly enhanced our already beautiful property and everyone involved has thoroughly enjoyed the whole procedure."

More and more golf clubs are seeking certification from the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary System by finding ways to cut back on uses of chemicals and water and enhancing their courses as wildlife habitat. Rather than planting the rough with exotic grasses that require con-

stant mowing and watering, some golf clubs use native grasses. Instead of pumping water from deep wells for maintenance of plush greens, superintendents use runoff from rain and snow conserved in watershed recapture ponds. To keep the fairways and greens in decent shape to please their members, gentler substances like fertilizers made from manure and fungicides extracted from mushrooms are replacing traditional chemicals. And prescribed burning not only removes accumulated debris, but also stimulates the growth of wildflowers and other native plants in those areas where



golfers don't like to venture. A well-planned course allows corridors of trees and unmowed grassland serve as natural travel lanes for wildlife.

Strategically placed feeders and houses bring birds into the open to be enjoyed by passing golfers. One golf course fledged more than 400 bluebirds from its nestboxes in 1997! Bat houses installed at the edge of ponds provide sleeping quarters for bats, which feast heavily on pesky insects like mosquitoes.

But wildlife in abundance can be a pain, too. I have heard of crow-sized birds flying off with golf balls in their beaks. More common though, is the growing population of Canada Geese, attracted to the acres of succulent grass and water hazards providing safe haven from predators. Their droppings and aggressive behaviour during breeding do not endear them to golfers. One golf club resolved this problem by training a golden retriever to chase the geese away. With a little innovation, you can find a way to make a healthy golf course everyone's favourite home and playground.

If you'd like further information on the sustainable management of golf courses, or about the sanctuary system, contact the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary System of Canada, 115 First St., Suite 116, Collingwood, ON, L9Y 1A5; tel: (705) 429-2277; e-mail: [acss@cois.on.ca](mailto:acss@cois.on.ca); website: [www.cois.on.ca/~acss](http://www.cois.on.ca/~acss).

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