Bye-bye Golf Courses, Hello Nature Preserves

*The Great Recession had at least one silver lining for wildlife: Golf courses are being turned into natural protected places.*

By Susan Cosier
September-October 2013

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**At the Ocean Meadows** Golf Club in Goleta, California, the *ping* of an iron hitting a dimpled ball is gradually but inexorably fading from the fairway. Taking its place will be the whistles of white-tailed kites, the chirps of snowy plovers, and the warbles of tree swallows as the University of California-Santa Barbara transforms
the 64-acre, nine-hole course into a nature preserve during the next two years.

Even as golfers played the course last summer, Lisa Stratton, who’s consulting on the project through the university’s Cheadle Center for Biodiversity and Ecological Restoration, zipped around in a cart with a graduate student. They stopped every so often to drill soil cores—dodging golf balls in the process. In a lab, native plants were grown in the sampled dirt to determine which species to plant during the ongoing restoration. University researchers are also looking at how water will move through the ecosystem to see how quickly flooded areas will drain after rainstorms, and conducting bird surveys to see which species have already taken up residence on the property.

See this article's accompanying photo gallery

When the project is completed, the course will become part of 228 acres of conserved habitat on the university’s campus, which abuts the tract. The newly restored coastal wetland will connect with existing ones, including the Devereux Slough Important Bird Area, home to the state-listed Belding’s savannah sparrow. With less than 10 percent of California’s wetlands left, any land that can be restored is valuable, especially for endangered species like the tidewater goby, a small fish that lives in coastal lagoons, estuaries, and marshes. “It is an amazing opportunity,” says Stratton, who is working with scientists and the Santa Barbara Chapter of the Audubon Society, which will lead bird tours on the site, and the nonprofit Trust for Public Land. “You so rarely get the chance to turn back the clock.”
By lowering land prices and decreasing disposable income, the Great Recession created a windfall for conservationists seeking to bring nature back to urban and suburban areas. At least half a dozen courses across the country are being converted to nature preserves or parks. From New Orleans, Louisiana, to Portland, Oregon, wildlife advocates are funding this work in a variety of ways, including private donations and federal grants.

Although golf has enjoyed explosive global popularity in recent decades, the number of golfers in the United States actually fell by some 16 per-cent between 2003 and 2011, from more than 30 million to fewer than 26 million, says the National Golf Foundation. The number of rounds played per course decreased by 2.5 percent between 2010 and 2011. Golf memberships are down, too, by a million since the early 1990s. As a result, fewer courses can afford to stay open.

Reimagining golf courses pays off well beyond a park’s boundaries. Maintaining fairways and greens typically requires heavy applications of pesticides and fertilizers—which can run off and pollute local waterways—not to mention enormous quantities of water. (Audubon-certified courses are not affiliated with the National Audubon Society.) A study published in 2006 in the journal Sport in Society reported that although the amount of chemicals sprayed on courses varies, an average of 1.5 tons of agrochemicals—some of them known carcinogens—is used on golf courses every year. What’s more, 90 percent of those substances, when sprayed, end up in the air, where people inhale them. Building golf courses also destroys habitat and muddies streams to the detriment of aquatic life.

Back in 2006 the owner of Florida’s Wildflower Golf Club, an 18-hole course between Sarasota and Fort Myers, had been preparing to sell the unprofitable private course to a developer. Then the Lemon Bay Conservancy stepped in. The group secured $750,000 in 15 months from private donations—more money than it had ever raised before—to take on what would be its biggest project yet. “Over the years we’ve acquired some small properties,” says Eva Furner, a conservancy director. “We had never taken on anything like trying to buy an 80-acre golf
course and turn it into a preserve.”

The first step in the restoration involved murder—of the invasive Brazilian pepper. The plant had quickly overrun the course, tucked between cul-de-sacs and tennis courts near the coast, after it closed in 2006. “It was a jungle, completely impenetrable,” says Bill Dunson, a Penn State biology professor emeritus who is assisting with the restoration. Armed with a machete, Dunson did battle with the plant, and soon he and his colleagues could see some of what the tangle of vegetation had hidden. Surveyors were surprised to find that many migratory songbirds, including purple martins, nest in the area. For other species, including painted buntings, the site offers critical stopover habitat.

The conservancy is slowly turning the property, now called the Wildflower Preserve, into a protected oasis by cutting trails, putting up signs, conducting bird surveys, and offering bird walks. There are echoes of its former identity, such as an area of lawn and a few manmade ponds, but after three years of work the site is starting to resemble a park more than a golf course.

The change comes just in time for marine life. “The watershed was directly emptying right out into Lemon Bay, and it was a huge source of pollutants,” says Alex Size, who worked on the Florida conversion and now manages the Ocean Meadows project in California. Fertilizers and pesticides no longer drain into the water. Working with Mote Marine Laboratory, the conservancy found that a saltwater creek—part of a series of interconnected wetlands—is a nursery for tarpon, a popular sport fish. Named “silver kings” by anglers because sunlight reflects brilliantly off of their large scales, these fish usually inhabit warm coastal waters. Females can top eight feet and reach 350 pounds. A graduate student is tagging the tarpon, which are losing critical natal habitat to development and pollution, to study their habits.

“In the 80 acres, which is really a postage stamp, we just have this diversity of habitat,” from wetlands to forest, says Dunson. “You can rarely make it what it used to be,” he adds, but you can still create places where species from sportfish to tropical birds can thrive.
The only trace of the Squires Golf Course at Forest Beach Migratory Preserve on Lake Michigan is the large clubhouse a few yards from the road. Where closely cropped greens and sand traps once dotted rolling hills, long grasses and stands of saplings now thrive. Birds whistle, chirp, and cackle in this Port Washington, Wisconsin, oasis established especially for them. According to *Golf Digest*, the state ranks fifth in the United States for number of top-rated public golf courses per capita—71 for 5.7 million people—after Hawaii, South Carolina, Nevada, and Michigan.

Shawn Graff and Noel Cutright climb into a leftover golf cart for a tour. “We started to realize that it was critical stopover habitat that would have the ability to attract native as well as migratory birds,” such as upland sandpipers, Wilson’s phalaropes, and red-throated loons, says Graff, executive director of the *Ozaukee Washington Land Trust*. The group purchased the land for $2.54 million with funds from the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund and private donations. In addition, the trust received $454,000 in 2010 federal stimulus grant money earmarked for restoration in the Great Lakes region.

Driving the cart down to the shoreline, Graff allows that this success might only slightly improve Lake Michigan’s water quality. Still, every little bit helps. Last year algal blooms arrived earlier than usual because of a warm spring and an abundance of phosphorus and nitrogen. When the site was a golf course managers pumped about 15 million gallons of water a year on the property to keep the grasses lush, and applied six tons of fertilizer. Today’s property managers eschew chemicals, and water as little as possible, says Graff. He receives a dozen calls a year, from New York homeowners to golf course owners in Alabama, seeking advice about how to buy and convert developed properties into habitat.

The Ozaukee Washington Land Trust followed Cutright’s suggestion not to try to restore the property to its original habitat. A renowned birder in the Midwest who has been leading bird walks for 50 years, Cutright took into account that half of the wetlands and 60 percent of the forested areas in the Great Lakes region have been lost. So to attract avian species, he proposed a mix of those habitats alongside open areas and shrublands.

So far a hardwood forest, grasslands, and ephemeral ponds are spread over 142
acres, and Cutright and others have identified more than 220 different species in just over two years. “We’ve got to provide these places for them,” he says, steering a golf cart toward an oak savannah. “The more you string them together, the more that will come. It’s prime real estate, and there are not too many opportunities to buy a piece of property like this.” In the distance a turkey runs across a grass path, as if accentuating his point.

Meanwhile, Forster’s terns sit on nests in the wetlands, their orange legs tucked beneath deeply forked tails. Eastern meadowlarks, unmistakable with their vibrant yellow chests marked with a black V, sing their melodic songs on forest edges. Lapland longspurs forage for seeds and insects in the meadows. In the summer they’ll migrate to the Arctic to mate and breed, returning to the preserve with their young in the fall.

The property is even winning some surprising converts. Bruce Bloemer, who owned the course for nearly 16 years and says things like “golf is in my blood,” stops by, too. “I’ll tell you what,” he says. “I’m a nature person, and I love the outdoors and the wildlife and clean lakes and rivers and streams and woods.”

As the economy recovers and development pressures resume, the uptick in efforts to turn golf courses into preserves may slow. Even so, at least hundreds of acres of newly restored natural areas will endure, providing pockets of habitat that may become even more ecologically priceless as other wild spaces disappear.

This story originally ran in the September-October 2013 issue as "Run Its Course."

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