

Back to Nature

by LISA D. MICKEY // photos by PAUL PIERCE JR.

Twenty-nine courses in Virginia have earned the prestigious Audubon International certification.



Golf Course Superintendents Take Stewardship Seriously

THE NEXT TIME YOU ARE AT YOUR FAVORITE VIRGINIA GOLF COURSE, take a good look around.

Notice the blooming pollinator gardens that are buzzing with activity by bees, butterflies and hummingbirds. Pay attention to the songbirds, the raptors in the treetops, the foxes, wild turkeys and other wildlife stirring beyond the fairways.

Note how the grass is a little taller around the water hazards and how native plant areas have emerged in strategic areas throughout the course. Notice too, how the ponds and streams are clear, lacking the scummy surfaces of water bodies clogged and suffering from too many chemical inputs that fortify algae growth.

Finally, notice the care your golf course superintendent has taken to make your course a managed choreography of land and water, beauty and functionality, while the turf you play is showcased as a healthy, predictable surface on which your favorite hours are often spent.





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—David Norman, executive director of the Virginia Golf Course Superintendents Association

None of these things occur by coincidence. Rather, they are the result of careful planning and maintenance by golf course superintendents focused on sound stewardship practices on the properties they shepherd.

“Environmental stewardship is where we start,” said David Norman, executive director of the Virginia Golf Course Superintendents Association. “We can’t operate our business if we’re polluting, not taking care of our lands or not looking out for wildlife. Our job is about being good stewards of our natural resources.”

While golf courses throughout the state range from the mountains to the Tidewater region to metro Washington, D.C., one thing they all have in common is a new focus that courses can better coexist with their surrounding environments.

To encourage that effort, the VGCSA, working alongside other state and national agencies, has attempted to get all course superintendents on the same page with best management practices. One such initiative came when a nutrient management

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plan was established in July 2017 to help golf course superintendents prudently minimize chemical usage—cutting back on the use of herbicides, pesticides and fertilizers.

What was the result of that effort? Norman said 99 percent of all Virginia golf courses are currently using the plan.

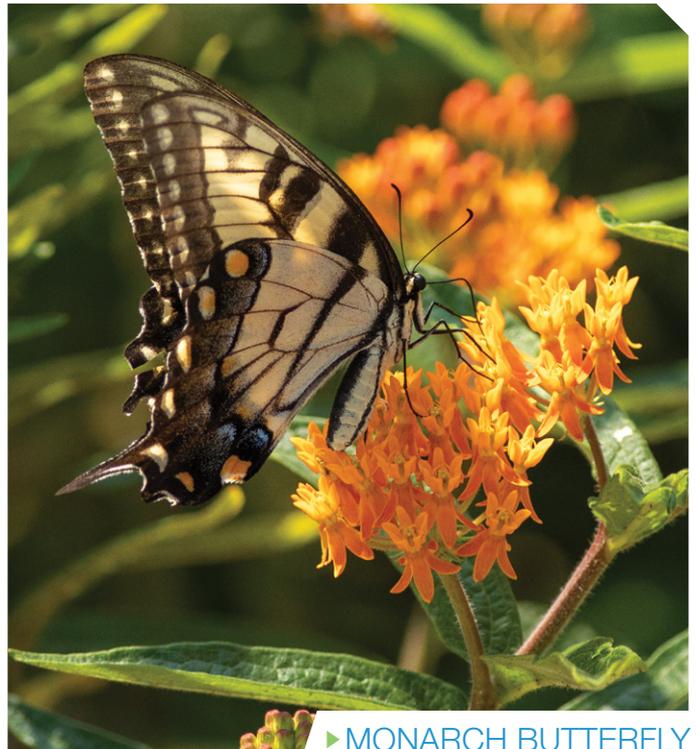
Most superintendents at those same courses are also using a comprehensive “Environmental Best Management Prac-

tics for Virginia’s Golf Courses” manual that outlines everything from irrigation, surface water management, water quality monitoring and nutrient management to reducing environmental impacts, improving turf quality and understanding native wildlife habitat.





► BUMBLEBEE



► MONARCH BUTTERFLY

That initiative, spearheaded by the national Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, is working to customize best management practices for every state by 2020—an ambitious effort to make stewardship as much a part of what superintendents do on a daily basis as grooming turf for the golfers who play their courses.

“Golfers and club members are starting to know the superintendents at their courses and appreciate the things that they do,” added Norman. “Now, when new people are hired to oversee courses, they are asked about their background in environmental stewardship.”

Of course, golf is big business in Virginia, said Norman. Nearly 37,000 acres of land is devoted to golf courses here with about 30,000 individuals in Virginia

earning a living in golf. Golf also has a nearly \$2.5 billion economic impact in the state, bringing members, vacationers and the general public to courses with more expectations than ever.

“Our profession is at a turning point where the public is starting to realize what the environment means to us,” said Tim Doran, head superintendent at Kingsmill Resort in Williamsburg. “The better we can maintain and promote the wildlife on our properties, the better our properties are received as a whole. It’s something we can be really proud of in our industry.”

Kingsmill’s high-profile Plantation and River courses renewed certification this spring as Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program courses. That means Kingsmill, like 28 other Virginia

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courses, have met the rigorous standards established by Audubon International to demonstrate environmental leadership in the golf industry.

Audubon-certified courses must meet specific standards in environmental planning, wildlife and habitat management, outreach and education, chemical use reduction and safety, water conservation and water-quality management. Courses are reevaluated and must undergo periodic recertification to assure that standards remain intact.

“To get the Audubon certification is the best thing I’ve done since I’ve been in this business,” said Lentz Wheeler, superintendent at Springfield Golf & Country Club, who has been a superintendent for nearly 40 years. “We work with the environment and our membership recognizes that, embraces it and are very proud of our Audubon certification.”

Wheeler’s course has 19 bluebird boxes, two working beehives and a half-acre wildflower garden adjacent to one hole on his course. Springfield has been home to nesting red-tail hawks for seven of the last eight years.

His club also participates in the national “Monarchs In The Rough” program

IN VIRGINIA...



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\$2.5 BILLION

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► DAYLILY



designed to promote monarch butterfly habitats by planting milkweed, on which the insects feed.

“There is more wildlife on this golf course now than when I started here 22 years ago,” Wheeler said.

Kingsmill has cooperated with the Virginia Bluebird Society to create a Bluebird Trail. By mid-July this year on its three golf courses, a total of 200 bluebird chicks fledged from the bird houses, along with

six house wrens and two Carolina wrens. Four resident Kingsmill members monitored the bird boxes, performed weekly checks and collected data.

“That’s something we’re very proud of and that speaks to how we’re managing these golf courses and how great this property is for wildlife to flourish,” Doran said.

Belle Haven Country Club in Alexandria now has six on-course beehives that produce honey sold in the club’s pro shop. Members delight in the different-colored honeys that result from the different flowering plants used by bees throughout the course.

“The hives help with pollination and some of the environmental things we’re doing has created additional excitement with the membership,” said Mike Augustin, Belle Haven’s superintendent and recipient of the VGCSA’s 2018 Environmental Stewardship Award.

While Augustin’s course is not yet Audubon-certified, the veteran superintendent has worked with his crew to constantly reduce managed turf, introduce more native-grass areas, and to create

buffer zones using higher grasses around lakes to minimize nutrients seeping into water bodies. His course borders the Potomac River, so Augustin understands the importance of conscientious management of land and water.

“We’re always under the microscope being so close to Washington and the Potomac River and any wrong move we make could be a blemish on the club or our membership,” he said. “We always want to be good environmental stewards while also producing a quality product that our members and their guests can enjoy.”

Located adjacent to the James River, Kingsmill also utilizes buffer zones around the creeks, ponds, lakes and wetland areas on its courses.

“We have very minimal [chemical] input to begin with, but these are no-spray and no-fertilizer zones and extra precautions are taken around the buffer zones surrounding every body of water, whether it’s a small holding pond or a creek feeding into the James River,” Doran added.

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► WILDFLOWERS



► RED SQUIRREL

Water conservation has also been a key concern. Many Virginia courses have replaced antiquated irrigation systems in recent years with more efficient systems that both save water and allow for more targeted irrigation.

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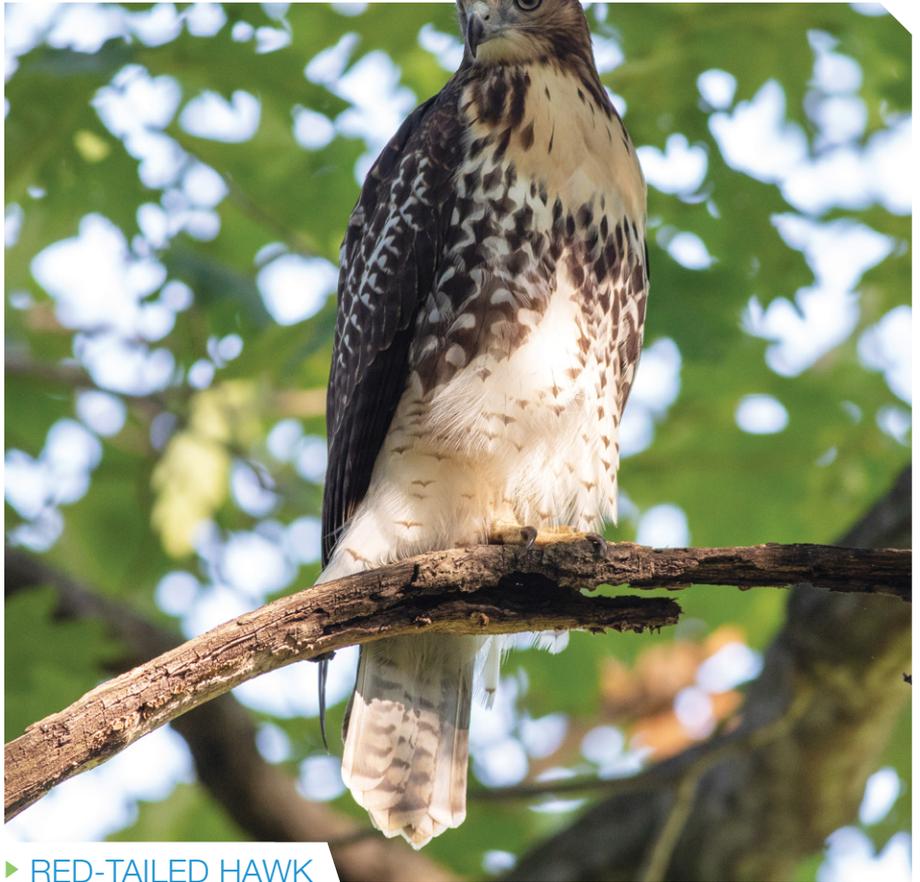
Kingsmill has incorporated more drought-tolerant grasses and moved away from the annual practice of rye-grass over-seeding, which required considerable water and nutrient usage. The resort also uses moisture meters on its courses to provide a metric reading on the amount of moisture available in the soil.

“There is never a time when we are adding more moisture than we need to add,” Doran said. “Very seldom do we have to add extra water throughout the day to our tees, fairways and roughs.”

Located within the 100-year flood plain of the Potomac River, Augustin’s team pays close attention to water quality at Belle Haven, regularly testing water at six different sites on the course. Water is tested at its point of origin as it enters the course, in ponds, in a retention pond in the clubhouse parking lot, in an adjacent creek and as it exits the course.

“One thing we’re really happy to see is that as the water goes through our property, it’s cleaner when it leaves than it was when it came in,” Augustin said.

While the industry has been able to offer superintendents more tools and greater education to align their course management practices with the environment, superintendents have also become



► RED-TAILED HAWK



► BLUEBIRD EGGS

more savvy in informing members and players about maintenance activities at their courses.

Chris Harriman, superintendent at Hermitage Country Club, writes a regular blog updating his members on such events as grass sprigging, aeration and irrigation issues. In one blog, he advised members that aeration keeps the turf “healthy and consistent for the rest of the season” and that it also “keeps the surfaces firm and playable.”

Other superintendent blogs discuss water usage and the merits of water con-

servation, helping golfers understand the changes they often see.

“I think golf course superintendents believe we’re all good stewards of the environment,” said Augustin. “We want to have a great golf course, but we also want to have an active ecosystem.

“And I think our membership wants an environmentally sound property,” he added. “It goes all the way from the clubhouse recycling program to how we apply pesticides and fertilizers around the property. We always want to do the right thing.” 