



PHOTO BY JEAN MILLER

A PAIR OF BALD EAGLES TOUCH DOWN ON THE GREENS AT TPC PRESTANCIA, WHICH IS AN AUDUBON INTERNATIONAL-CERTIFIED SANCTUARY.

# Golf as Sanctuary

## ENVIRONMENTAL AND CONSERVATION PRACTICES AT AREA GOLF COURSES

BY EMILY LEINFUSS

Scoring a double eagle – when a golfer shoots 3 under par on a hole – is a rare occurrence. But at TPC Prestancia a pair of eagles, and their baby eaglets, are often seen on and around the grounds.

That's because the courses here are routed around natural wetlands, cypress heads and numerous ponds and lagoons that are home to an abundance of wildlife. In addition to eagles there are deer, fox, otters, armadillos, alligators, egrets, storks, cranes, blue heron and more that inhabit the golf course.

TPC Prestancia, following the lead of the Palmer Ranch Master Association, was an early champion of the environmental sensitivity and planning that allows wildlife to thrive. Since 1998 the golf property has been certified by Audubon International's Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf Courses (ACSP), which guides golf courses to protect the environment, preserve the natural heri-

tage of the game of golf, and gain recognition for their efforts.

"We were one of the environmental pioneers, on a global platform, among the TPC properties and we are just one of three clubs in the area to be designated as an Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary," says TPC Prestancia General Manager Bob Holtzman.

"On any given day, you can see something amazing here," he says. Recently a new family of Sandhill cranes hatched and two colts were spotted, the next day an American Bald Eagle was spotted at Hole #14 of the Stadium Course. "The eagles have even been seen feeding fish to the eaglets," he says.

### Sanctuary Further South

As the crow (or the eagle) flies, the Venice Golf and Country Club, another of our area's Audubon International certified courses, is not far from TPC Prestancia – in distance and in environmental commitment. Here, "wildlife is plentiful and diverse, ranging from

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*"ON ANY GIVEN DAY, YOU CAN SEE SOMETHING AMAZING HERE," SAYS TPC PRESTANCIA GENERAL MANAGER BOB HOLTZMAN.*

birds of prey, turtles, gators, bobcats, rabbits, wading birds, frogs, bass, snakes, even the elusive Florida panther has been spotted on property on very rare occasions," says General Manager Jim Schell, CCM.

The VGCC became interested in protecting the environment in 2003, partly on the urging of club members, Schell explains. The property's initial efforts were centered on providing excellent habitat to encourage birds to frequent the grounds. "Our members enjoy the sights and sounds of nature, especially the birds: water fowl, cranes, ibis, and American bald eagle," he says.

In addition to earning Audubon International certification in 2004, VGCC is a Sarasota County Green Business Partner, and was recently named a GEO certified club by the Golf Environment Organization. The GEO Certified mark is widely endorsed as the most credible, comprehensive ecolabel for progressive properties that recognize the impact their golf courses have on the wider environment. "There are only a handful of clubs in the USA that have attained this Golf Standard Ecolabel," says Schell.



## More than Wildlife Preservation

There are many factors in the Audubon International and other environmental conservation programs and practices that go into making sure wildlife has the habitat it needs to thrive. That includes environmental planning, water quality management, conservation, chemical safety and reduction and education outreach.

"To maintain our good standing with Audubon, we are required to document our chemical use (fertilizer, weed killer, etc.) on the courses and we have to follow Audubon's environmental plans regarding chemical storage and handling," explains TPC Prestancia's membership and communications director Donna Hunter-Smith. "For the past few years we have minimized our pesticide and fertilizer use to playing areas only. The

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*VENICE GOLF & COUNTRY CLUB, AN AUDUBON INTERNATIONAL-CERTIFIED SANCTUARY, INTEGRATES ITS PLAYING COURSE INTO THE NATURAL SURROUNDINGS.*

non-playing areas of the course (the rough) receive no pesticide or fertilizer treatment. Our golf course head superintendent, Mike McNamara, GCSA, oversees this part of the recertification," she says

To do so, McNamara has attained 'Golf Best Management Practices (BMP)' certification. The program, administered by The Florida Golf Course Superintendents Association (FGCSA), is for industry professionals to understand and implement Golf BMPs for operation and maintenance of Florida golf courses. The FGCSA believes that Florida superintendents are truly 'environmental stewards' and by providing a certified program (they) will continue to demonstrate the industry's positive respect and impact on the environment.

For the VGCC, the environment is top of mind. "Our planning provides a framework for long-term environmental management,"

says Schell. This includes maintaining a balance between ecology, economics and members' interests. "Key components of the plan are training, communication, waste reduction and recycling, chemical use and safety, energy conservation, irrigation water management, storm water management, wildlife management, integrated pest management, geothermal heat sourcing, lake water quality, preserve management, and golf course integration into surrounding native flora and fauna," he explains.

## **Audubon International & Golf Courses**

The land, water and wildlife concerns in Florida are distinctive and golf communities like TPC Prestancia and the Venice Golf & Country Club are dedicated to environmental practices, notes Tara Donadio, Director of

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*AT VENICE GOLF & COUNTRY CLUB, GENERAL MANAGER JIM SCHELL, CCM ADHERES TO AUDUBON INTERNATIONAL CONSERVATION PRACTICES TO ENSURE WILDLIFE HAS THE HABITAT IT NEEDS TO THRIVE.*

Cooperative Sanctuary Programs at Audubon International in Troy, NY.

“Florida has an interesting demographic. There are a lot of golf communities in general and the homeowners and people surrounding the course are often very involved in the ecology of the place,” she observes.

For example, Florida has specific water issues, including lack of water and clean water. “It becomes crucial that courses in Florida use the proper turf, conserve water and limit chemical use,” says Donadio.

Donadio adds that another important element of the Audubon certification program is about engaging in outreach and education. As a result, both TPC Prestancia and VGCC are very interactive with their members, homeowners and the community at large. Each property has opportunities that include nature walks for members, events featuring ecology and wildlife experts presenting on a wide variety of topics and many other educational and participatory events.

In fact, Audubon International has held a BioBlitz the last three years at the VGCC, which is a worldwide challenge to identify

as many species of life as you can on the respective property. “The first two years we won this challenge hands down with almost double the species of the second place participant,” says Schell.

## A Safe Haven

It is no coincidence that the word ‘sanctuary’ has a double meaning. One, as a wildlife preserve, is alive and well here at TPC Prestancia and VGCC. The other meaning, as a place of refuge and safety, is also true – maybe even more so for the golfers playing the course.

“There is nothing quite as thrilling as experiencing wildlife and natural habitat as you golf, says Hunter-Smith. “Golf is a lifelong sport and a fantastic way of staying healthy, getting exercise and having fun. One of the best parts is spending time outside. When that outside space is not only beautiful and lush, but also safe and sustainable, golfing becomes extra enjoyable. It allows for a sense of calm and escape from people’s often hectic and busy lives,” she says. In other words, it works as a true sanctuary.