

Golf Courses and Wildlife Sites

English Nature has recently issued a report on the state of its 'Sites of Special Scientific Interest'. Tom Tew, General Manager for the national SSSI programme, Regional Director for the South East of England and a lifelong golfer, looks at the important relationship between these sites and the nation's golf courses.

The perception that golf courses and wildlife do not mix, and that golf courses are artificially manicured playgrounds for humans alone, is changing. The benefits that golf courses provide for wildlife are much more widely appreciated these days, as are the advantages that a 'biodiverse' course brings to its members. Increasingly, we can all recognise that the "good walk spoiled" is actually a better walk, rather less spoiled (by our poor shots) if we can look away from our ball buried in the bunker to see the wild flowers and hear the birds. The quality of the natural environment we play in is important to our enjoyment of the day.

The golf course industry is certainly taking its environmental responsibilities more seriously these days, through voluntary Club participation in schemes such as the BIGGA green awards and the new (English Nature/EGU funded) Environmental Advisory Service, and also through general measures such as better pesticide, water and composting management.

The very best wildlife sites in England are designated as 'Sites of Special Scientific Interest' (SSSIs). There are 4100 in England and they cover over one million hectares, ranging from inter-tidal sandflats, through lowland heaths and woods, to desolate upland moorland. Significantly, nearly 100 of these wildlife sites cover all or parts of golf courses, and 6300 hectares of land is both an SSSI and golf course. In other words, one in every 20 golf courses in England is a nationally important wildlife site. That statistic alone tells us that golf courses are often good for wildlife.

Importantly, English Nature recognises that these courses have usually been designated as special wildlife sites *because* they have historically been managed as golf courses, and not *despite* this fact. Indeed, on links land in particular, nearly all the remaining areas of that fantastic natural habitat are now golf courses – the rest having largely been developed as caravan parks or agricultural land.

Sometimes Golf Clubs can feel threatened by designation of their land as an SSSI, especially as there has been a view that English Nature has been unsympathetic, or unknowledgeable, about the game and the course. Over the last couple of years we have sent all our Conservation Officers who have involvement with golf courses on a specially-designed in-house training course that has covered these issues. We have separately visited both links and heathland courses and had expert tuition from Club Secretaries, Head Greenkeepers and professional agronomists.

Some Clubs have also feared the statutory process that designation brings. The law these days is certainly very strong and, in the past, the legalistic language that English Nature (or its predecessors) has used has, frankly, been unhelpful. In fact, an SSSI designation brings with it the strong desire from English Nature to work *with* the Club to improve the wildlife habitat and, importantly, the possibility of English Nature (or other Government) funding. Good wildlife management, like good course management, can sometimes be expensive. Therefore, funding from English Nature can help Clubs improve their courses for the wildlife (and consequently for the members!). This improvement is not just aesthetic – a flower-rich patch of semi-natural grassland not only looks more attractive than an over-watered and over-fertilised patch of deep, thick green grass, but it is also quicker to find the ball and easier to play out!

Over the last six years, English Nature has been conducting an assessment of England's SSSIs. In April this year, we finished this for the whole country – the first time that this has ever been done in the world. The following statistics, taken from this survey, are therefore important and revealing. In general, across the whole of the SSSI network, only 57% of the series, by area, is in favourable condition. The Government has set a challenging national target to get this figure up to 95% by the year 2010.

For golf course SSSIs, however, the figure is significantly better as 66% is in favourable condition. For me, this gives further support to the belief that golf courses are generally managed well for the wildlife. English Nature would now like to work with Clubs to get to favourable condition on **all** golf course SSSIs – it would be a real feather in golf's cap if it could continue to improve ahead of the national average.

The spread of golf course SSSIs throughout England is unsurprising – two areas in the South-East have the largest representation (the Kentish links and the Sussex/Surrey heaths), with a good smattering also of links land courses in the Cheshire/Lancashire belt and on the North Devon coastline.

Whilst it would be inappropriate to pick out individual Clubs where there are problems, there are some interesting and consistent differences in the condition of the various habitat types on golf courses. Of the six biggest habitat types, three (lowland heathland, lowland chalk grassland and lowland broadleaved woodland) are doing pretty well (80-90% favourable), whereas three (sand dunes, neutral grassland and marshland) are doing poorly (only 40-50% favourable). In area terms, by far the biggest habitat in poor condition is sand dunes. Why are some habitats doing well and others not?

At every single site, English Nature officers will have noted not only the condition of the site, but also the reasons why we believe the site is in unfavourable condition, and the requirements for management if it is to recover. From this information on our national database, we know that on the coastal sand dune and inland grassland courses, it is likely to be a lack of scrub control and/or lack of grazing that is causing these sites to 'scrub up'. Whilst it may no longer be acceptable to have sheep wandering over the course, there are alternative types of scrub control that can suffice – and keeping courses open retains their natural golfing character as well as the natural

wildlife. In many circumstances, English Nature will pay for these works as part of a management agreement.

In wetter areas, changes in drainage or water management are often implicated – either over-abstracted (too dry) or over-watered (too wet). It may well be that factors beyond the control of the Clubs themselves, such as coastal erosion or groundwater quality, are causing the problem. English Nature looks closely at every site on a case-by-case basis – we do not blame Clubs for what they cannot control! Indeed, because such changes in water table are likely to be recent, English Nature and the Golf Club are invariably on the same side in wanting changes to be made to allow the ‘natural’ habitat to flourish - changes in turf and grass quality are just as noticeable to a golfer as they are a field botanist.

English Nature is greatly encouraged by the positive attitude that most Golf Clubs have towards the environment in general and, for the top 100 or so, to SSSIs in particular. It would be wrong to pretend that we have always had perfect relations at these Clubs, but by and large we get on well and the new facts and figures above prove the point in terms of the condition of the land. Where there is potential for disagreement, I would strongly urge Clubs to engage in early discussion with their local English Nature office – nearly always, the feared conflict can be easily avoided. Finally, there are now many examples of good practice to act as beacons for us all. At *Notts GC* in Hollinwell, the Club has an excellent forward-looking programme of heathland recreation and restoration, even though it is not an SSSI. On designated sites, we can look to *Royal St. George's* as first among equals, a site **internationally** important for wildlife, which last year successfully staged the world's biggest and most important golf tournament *and* conserved its wildlife.

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