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COLLIER'S CENTENNIAL

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Driving with Purpose

Naples is home to the most golf clubs with Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program certifications in the country—proof of the city's commitment to exalt our natural setting.



The Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf (ACSP) rewards golf courses for their efforts in protecting the environment and promoting sustainability. Florida is home to more courses that have earned this certification than any other state in the country, and Naples leads the way with 21 certified clubs.

Naples' oldest, privately owned club, Hole-in-the-Wall, set a good example when it earned its ACSP in 1994, followed closely by Olde Florida Golf Club in 1995. Back then, Darren Davis, the long-time superintendent, says courses were not seen as positive environmental forces, which they can be—when built and managed properly. “Golf courses are a safe haven—a greenway that allows habitat to still flourish in an area that’s growing at an extreme pace,” he says. Local superintendents, like

Darren, Matt Taylor of the 36-hole Royal Poinciana and local sustainable golf legend Tim Hiers, were motivated to change the narrative and make good on the promise of golf courses as refuges in the unofficial Golf Capital of the world.

Clubs started placing greater emphasis on sustainability, redesigning layouts to make more room for wildlife habitat, restoring broken lands, reducing the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, using electric golf carts, increasing native vegetation and technologies to reduce irrigation and energy needs, replacing turf with more resilient varieties, creating built structures with recycled material and amplifying recycling standards. Olde Florida protected 120 of its 220 acres as thriving woodland and wetland habitats, supporting as many



Courtesy Old Collier Golf Club, Old Florida Golf Club (3)

as 75 bird species. “We can offer several hundred green acres, which have become a safe haven for all the wildlife that’s being displaced,” Darren says. Within the next five years, six other courses, including Hole-in-the-Wall, Royal Poinciana and Wilderness Country Club, joined the sanctioned ranks.

Golf course architect legend Arthur Hills’ firm is behind many of the ACSP-sanctioned courses in town—including Wilderness, Foxfire, three of the Bonita Bay courses, Club Pelican Bay and Quail Creek—the most recent to be inducted in 2022. His designs abound with native trees, wetlands and cart paths that meander around the vegetation rather than through it.

Clubs like Bonita Bay, The Club at Mediterra and Collier’s Reserve take things a step further as Audubon Signature and

Classic Sanctuaries, the most elite environmental certifications. In 1994, Old Collier—which preserves 53 acres of mangrove and wetlands along the Cocohatchee River and 109 adjacent acres of continuous native habitat corridors—was the first in the world to receive the apex Gold Signature Sanctuary status. The club, opened by Miles C. Collier in 2001, irrigates exclusively with brackish water and pioneered the use of salt-tolerant seashore paspalum turf from tee to green.

Collier’s Reserve, another Gold Signature Sanctuary, signed their agreement with Audubon before the first shovel was turned. Golfers there enjoy spotting any of the 400-plus resident species, including endangered gopher tortoises, roseate spoonbills and eagles. And, at Bonita Bay—where about half of



The invitation-only Royal Poinciana (left) is certified as an Audubon International Cooperative Sanctuary for its ample wildlife habitat and natural beauty. Old Collier (right) was the first in the world to receive Audubon's Gold Signature Sanctuary status, with its use of brackish water for irrigation and pioneering salt-tolerant turf.

the 2,400 acres are protected and all five golf courses follow the same strict environmental standards—the grounds team is said to consist of arborists, certified horticultural professionals and a wildlife handler.

Tiburón Golf Club—one of the most popular courses in town—allows golfers to see the efforts in action through the 20 acres of protected native lands, 40 built birdhouses, buffered lakes and repurposed coquina shells used for waste bunkers. Courses like Olde Florida and Quail Creek have also built nesting structures, created reintroduction programs for native wildlife and partnered with environmental groups. Wilderness Country Club, for instance, collaborates with the Conservancy of Southwest Florida to monitor wildlife.

Initiatives such as these capture members' interest. At Olde Florida, members go to the club with their kids and grandkids

in tow for golf cart tours to see alligators sunning on the banks, eagles perched in nearby pines and osprey flying overhead. "They're proud of what we've carved out of this natural environment," Darren says.

As part of the ACSP certification process—and recertification, which is done every three years—golf clubs and their staff must demonstrate a commitment to outreach and education. It's an aspect of the program that Davis especially values. He points to Tim Hiers, the former director of agronomy at The Old Collier Golf Club, as someone who championed the cause decades ago and inspired Darren to be more involved. "He heightened my passion to not only do the right thing for the environment but to talk about it and showcase it," Darren says. "As Tim did that for me, I'm doing that for others, and others are doing it for others. A rising tide lifts all ships." ■