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Natural links: naturalistic golf courses as wildlife habitat

Max R. Terman

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Abstract

Worldwide, there are over 25,000 golf courses. In the United States, there are approximately 15,000, with developers building about 350 new courses each year. Japan, Taiwan, China, and other countries are experiencing a similar golf boom. Some developers regard golf course development as one of the fastest growing types of land development in the world. Typically considered by ecologists to be an environmental problem, scientists are now reexamining golf courses to assess their potential to be wildlife habitat. Can naturalistic courses (those with substantial amounts of native wildlife habitat) actually benefit wildlife populations, especially birds, and still be attractive to golfers? My ecological research with a well-known naturalized links-style golf course in Kansas suggests that a naturalistic golf course can support significant numbers of birds, including many threatened species. When compared to a nearby natural area, the golf course equaled the natural area in total bird species richness but not in the relative abundance of specific kinds of birds. Naturalistic golf courses, while not natural areas, can complement biological reserves, military reservations, greenbelts, parks, farms

complement biological reserves, military reservations, greenbelts, parks, farms, backyards and other units of the regional habitat mosaic. The large amount of habitat on naturalistic courses also reduces water runoff, irrigation, and chemical inputs. Furthermore, raising the profile of naturally landscaped golf courses can engage thousands of additional people in wildlife habitat preservation issues. Naturalistic courses are growing in popularity and the golfing community is responsive to aesthetic and environmental concerns. With the involvement of ecologists, this burgeoning interest in natural habitats on golf courses may significantly increase the amount of wildlife habitat, especially if designers build these kinds of courses in urban areas and on degraded landscapes such as landfills, quarries, and eroded lands.

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Keywords

Biodiversity; Habitat; Golf; Bird conservation

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