

Teeing up conservation

Across the country, golf courses are converting acreage to monarch butterfly habitat

By Phil Kloer, Public Affairs Specialist

January 29, 2019

Most people view golf courses as swaths of perfectly cropped and contoured grass, closer to artifice than raw nature. As many golfers can attest, however, most of the golf course outside the boundaries of greens and fairways is wild and unruly, and can be a difficult place to locate an errant ball.

“About 70 percent of most golf course acreage is managed for out-of-play areas,” said Dr. Kimberly Erusha, managing director of the U.S. Golf Association’s Green Section, the department that helps courses with turf, environment and sustainability issues.

“That’s an ideal habitat area where we can contribute to [monarch butterfly and pollinator conservation](#),” she continued.

The beloved and easily identified monarch butterfly is in trouble. Habitat loss, pesticides and intensifying climate events have caused monarch populations to decrease significantly over the past 20 years, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service [is reviewing whether they should be protected under the Endangered Species Act](#). Many organizations agencies and individuals have stepped up to plant more monarch habitat such as milkweed, which will strengthen their population.



A monarch butterfly visits a monarch habitat at Wild Turkey Trace Golf Course in Lawrenceburg, Kentucky. Photo by USFWS.

The USGA helps fund Monarchs in the Rough, an Audubon International project to establish monarch habitats on American golf courses. Since kicking off at the beginning of 2018, the project has commitments from 250 courses so far to plant milkweed and other pollinator flowers on at least one acre per course. With additional funding from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, the goal for 2019 is 500 more courses, 50 in each of 10 states.

About 2.5 million acres of U.S. land is golf courses. Audubon International estimates at least 100,000 acres have the potential to become suitable pollinator habitat for butterflies and bees, if managed correctly.

Before Monarchs in the Rough launched, however, some courses were already stepping up to monarch conservation on their own. A partnership between the Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife and Valhalla Golf Club in Louisville, Kentucky, one of the premier private clubs in the country that has hosted a Ryder Cup and a PGA Championship, led to 5.5 acres of monarch habitat.



Valhalla Golf Club in Louisville, Kentucky, which has hosted a Ryder Cup and other major tournaments, dedicated 5.5. acres to a pollinator habitat to aid conservation of monarch butterflies. Photo by USFWS.

“My three daughters play golf competitively, and I’m on courses all the time, with all these green spaces,” said Brent Harrel, the Service’s Partners for Fish and Wildlife coordinator in Kentucky. “And Kentucky Fish and Wildlife Department had just launched their Monarch Conservation Plan, which called for lots of small sites for monarch habitat. It seemed like a perfect fit.”

“Golf courses are perfect for monarch habitat,” he continued. “Establishing these habitats lowers maintenance costs over the long term, adds color to the course, educates the public about conservation, and helps move courses toward green practices.”

Harrel called Roger Meier, superintendent of Valhalla, and already a forward-thinking conservationist who did not need to be convinced. “Valhalla is a really prestigious course, and my hopes were if Valhalla set the example, other courses would follow,” Harrel said.

"I can't believe you called me," Meier told Harrel. "I have been trying to find somebody to do this exact thing you are talking about." Meier even raised the stakes: He asked Partners for Fish and Wildlife to add special bat poles along a creek at Valhalla, structures that attract bats so they can roost in safety.

The monarch site preparation at Valhalla took about a year. "Everyone wants to hurry up and plant," said Harrel, "but that's always a disaster. It takes about three years to get a habitat going right."

But the acres of milkweed, which adult monarchs need to propagate, bloomed in 2018.

"Every time I've been out there there's been tons of monarchs, as well as bees and other pollinators," Harrel said.

To help educate golfers, Valhalla Golf Club and the Partners for Fish and Wildlife program put up signage explaining the purpose of the habitat. Photo by USFWS.

Both Valhalla projects — the monarch habitat and bat poles — totaled about \$8,000, with Partners for Fish and Wildlife kicking in \$2,775 for seed, the Forest Bat Conservation Fund adding \$2,300, and the golf course contributing almost \$3,000 in materials and labor.

Several other Kentucky golf courses have seen what Valhalla did and started their own monarch habitats.

To help educate golfers, Valhalla put up signs explaining the area is a monarch and pollinator habitat. Golfers are used to everything being nicely mowed and manicured, Harrel said, but

they see the sign, and “They say, oh, I get it.”

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