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Whispering Firs attains "sustainable" status

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McChord Field -- Along the fairways and between tee boxes and greens, golfers at Whispering Firs Golf Course on McChord Field might notice animals on the course who don't mind those who play through.

The wildlife has choice gallery vantages, watching golfers play from their natural habitats of wetlands and forested areas around the Joint Base Lewis-McChord course.

The birds, deer and other animals are used to golfers and the golfers are used to the animals, said David Wienecke, environmental system manager for golf courses at the Directorate of Family and Morale, Welfare and Recreation.

"It's humans and wildlife being able to live together and thrive together," Wienecke said.

That coexistence is just one of the many reasons the course received certification from the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program last November, making Whispering Firs the third Air Force golf course to receive the recognition and sixth throughout the entire Department of Defense. Eagles Pride Golf Course outside JBLM also received the certification in August. JBLM is the only installation to have multiple golf courses recognized by ACSP.

"It just shows our commitment, in a tangible way, to environmental stewardship and to sustainable management," Wienecke said. "That we're really taking to heart the environmental management system in real terms — not just talk."

Just like Eagles Pride, Whispering Firs was evaluated under six categories for environmental sustainability — environmental planning, wildlife conservation and management, water conservation, water quality management, reduction in chemical use and outreach in education.

There is much more natural habitat within the 119 acres of Whispering Firs than that of Eagles Pride. In fact, only 25 percent of the golf course's land is played.

There are a variety of non-tidal marshes on McChord Field, ranging from small lakes with up to two or three feet of water to what are called prairie potholes and may dry out periodically.

Not only do all of them act as a habitat for the animals that call Whispering Firs home, but Wienecke also said that wetlands serve as natural septic systems that biofilters water and controls flooding.

In addition to nature working to improve the water quality around the course, JBLM EMS is currently digging to add test wells that will pump out contaminated water to be treated, assisting the course's groundwater treatment plant.

It's part of the water conservation and water quality management plans JBLM has to continue to both improve the quality of the golfing experience and maintaining not only the environmental sustainability of both golf courses, but also the economical sustainability.

"If we can't do both, we've missed the boat," Wienecke said.

Wienecke said there are plans to set up a weather station at Whispering Firs, which can measure how much water has evaporated from a plant and how much water has been applied.

In addition to water management, the golf course staff cleans up fallen tree limbs to be turned into natural mulch as one way of reducing the use of fertilizer and chemicals on the greens.

There are similar plans to conserve fuel and energy use that not only make a greener golf course, but also save green for JBLM's budget.

"We can do things better and we can try to work with the sustainable concept rather than try to control the environment," Wienecke said. "We can try to work with it more cost effectively."

There are some challenges for maintaining the natural habitats at Whispering Firs because the course is so close to the airfields of McChord and there have been concerns about birds interfering with takeoffs and landings.

Eagles Pride Golf Course sits just outside the the installation and is a short drive from the Nisqually Wildlife Refuge in Olympia.

But despite concerns of birds and planes, Wienecke said there is still a great focus on the installation taking environmental responsibility in conserving the natural wildlife at JBLM.

"Wetlands are viewed by the environment protection agency as a really valuable part for improving air and water quality in the environment," Wienecke said.

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