

The other Audubon: The one that allows golf courses to kill birds

By Rachael Bale and Tom Knudson, Reveal

The long, emerald-green fairways of the Dairy Creek Golf Course double as a serene nature haven where birds are celebrated and protected. The course, in the California coastal town of San Luis Obispo, even has the credentials to prove it: Audubon International has certified it as a sanctuary.

But golfers and bird-watchers beware: It's not what you think. When American coots do the things American coots do, like pull up grass and poop, they get shot and killed.

Data from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service show that Dairy Creek Golf Course has intentionally killed more than 1,000 of the small, black duck-like birds over the past three years, making it one of the most deadly golf courses for birds in the country.

And Audubon International, as it turns out, is not affiliated with the venerable, bird-friendly National Audubon Society. It is something else entirely – a third-party certification organization funded by the entities it certifies: golf courses.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service data show that Dairy Creek Golf Course in San Luis Obispo has intentionally killed hundreds of migratory birds over the past three years. Credit: Stuart Palley for Reveal

Audubon International has certified as environmentally friendly more than a dozen golf courses that have killed nuisance birds. Those golf courses, mostly in California, have

killed nearly 4,000 birds from 2011 through 2013, according to data from the Fish and Wildlife Service.

In all, more than 30,000 birds – most of them coots and Canada geese, but a handful of double-crested cormorants, too – were killed on golf courses during that time.

While that's no threat to coot, goose or cormorant populations, killing birds is only supposed to be a short-term, last-ditch option for golf courses under an international treaty designed to protect migratory birds.

But the data show that many golf courses rely on lethal methods year after year. In addition, some biologists say the killing doesn't accomplish anything because more birds will rush in to occupy real estate – full of big open spaces and ponds – that's perfect for birds.

"You're not reducing the population. You're just moving them temporarily," said Brooke Maslo, a wildlife specialist at Rutgers University's Cooperative Extension program.

More than a dozen golf courses – certified as environmentally friendly by Audubon International – killed nearly 4,000 nuisance birds, including American coots, from 2011 through 2013. Credit: Tom Knudson/Reveal

For years, the National Audubon Society and its local chapters have been fighting against the confusion the Audubon International name causes. Often, they say, they oppose the very developments that the golf course group blesses.

"Audubon International is one of the worst examples of somebody trading on a name that is disingenuous," said Bob Sallinger of the Audubon Society of Portland. "From my perspective, it's a golf course industry front organization to some degree."

Much of Audubon International's financial support does come from the golf industry. Funders include the U.S. Golf

Association as well as turf, irrigation and landscaping companies, according to their online list of sponsors. But most of the funding comes from the golf courses themselves – they pay anywhere from a few hundred dollars for an annual membership to upwards of \$7,000 to get certified.

Audubon International was founded in 1987 by Ronald Dodson, a former regional vice president of the National Audubon Society in the 1980s. After he was laid off at the National Audubon Society, he launched Audubon International and its programs for golf courses.

In 1991, the National Audubon Society sued Audubon International over the name. Audubon International often certifies golf developments the National Audubon Society opposes, and the similar names cause confusion. The National Audubon Society's suit was not successful.

Audubon International's stated mission is promoting good stewardship of the environment. It requires golf courses to implement plans for water and chemical use as well as for biodiversity. This includes encouraging courses not to irrigate in the middle of the day when water can be lost to evaporation, limiting pesticide use and landscaping low-traffic areas with native plants to create wildlife habitat.

To award the highest level of certification, known as a Signature Sanctuary, the organization sends a representative to survey the golf course. For the Cooperative Sanctuary level, it relies on the course's word.

One of the main elements of its certification process is helping golf courses create good habitats for wildlife. But when those habitats attract wildlife the golf courses don't want, Audubon International doesn't require them to have a plan.

In fact, asking about nuisance wildlife management isn't part of the certification or recertification process at all, said

Audubon International's Tara Pepperman, who runs the Cooperative Sanctuaries program for golf courses.

"We don't really touch that topic," Pepperman said.

Audubon International's executive director, Doug Bechtel, said the organization does have educational materials on how to deal with nuisance wildlife but that the final decision on how to handle problem birds to protect their property is up to the golf courses.

"If they need to protect that investment," Bechtel said, "it's not our best interest as a third-party independent organization to deny them their private property decisions."

The killings are sanctioned by the federal government. The 96-year-old Migratory Bird Treaty Act, a landmark international agreement that prohibited killing many species of native migratory birds, allows birds to be intentionally killed under certain circumstances. If those birds are damaging property or pose a threat to human safety, anyone from a golf course to a vineyard to an airport can get a depredation permit to kill the birds.

More than a dozen golf courses – certified as environmentally friendly by Audubon International – killed nearly 4,000 nuisance birds, including Canadian geese, from 2011 through 2013. Credit: Tom Knudson/Reveal

More than 1.6 million native migratory birds have been killed under depredation permits from 2011 through 2013, a Reveal analysis of Fish and Wildlife Service permit data found. Conservationists and some biologists have criticized the permit system for allowing needless killing of migratory birds and weak enforcement of Fish and Wildlife Service's own policies to ensure lethal methods aren't overused.

Dairy Creek Golf Course's superintendent, Josh Heptig, said shooting the birds is a last resort. His course has tried remote-controlled boats, laser pointers, dogs and fences. But

the course is on a migration path. And there are ponds next to the course that it doesn't own, so there are always coots around.

Heptig said the coots do up to \$10,000 in damage to the grass and expose more than 50,000 golfers to feces annually. Bird feces can carry certain infectious diseases, but public health experts say the risk to golfers isn't great.

"The hypothetical risk is there, but we've never documented that it's a major problem," said Dr. Kirk Smith, a public health expert and veterinarian who co-chaired a 2013 project about preventing human-transmittable diseases from animals in public places.

Still, the economic damage and health concerns have allowed Dairy Creek to continue renewing their permit to shoot coots.

Heptig acknowledged that the lethal method doesn't solve the problem, either. When the shots ring out, Heptig said, many of the coots temporarily relocate to other ponds. Once it quiets down, they return.

The coot killings at Dairy Creek Golf Course came as a surprise to Michael Stiles, the outgoing president of the nearby Morro Coast Audubon Society. Stiles said the golf course attracts them.

"They put ponds in. They have green open space," he said. "They attract the birds and then (kill) them. It's not good."

Collette Adkins, a biologist and lawyer with the Center for Biological Diversity, said it's great that the golf courses set up an environment that attracts wildlife, but that doesn't mean they're environmentally friendly.

"Use of nonlethal methods of controlling nuisance birds – and showing some tolerance – would reflect a true commitment to the environment," she said.