

Golf Course Nature Tours Okatie Creek Back Nine Handout

Welcome to the Okatie Creek Golf Club, the first of three courses here in Sun City Hilton Head. Before Sun City this was farmland, growing cotton and indigo in the 1940's. In 1943 the Argent Cattle and Lumber Company purchased it for hardwood tree harvesting and cattle grazing. In 1958 Union Camp converted most into a **Loblolly pine** tree farm for paper. There were also several deer and wild pigs hunting camps. In 1993 SCDOT built U.S. 278 and the I-95 connector, and Beaufort-Jasper Water and Sewer built an \$11 million-dollar project to bring water to the Okatie area. The Del Webb ground-breaking was May 17th of 1994. Completed in 1995, this golf course has always been a lovely combination of rolling fairways, preserved woods and picturesque lagoon. In 2013, the course closed for 3 months while the greens, cart paths, and landscaping were updated. This tour gives you an opportunity to see Sun City in a new light - from the rear! You will lose your sense of direction as we twist and turn through the front 9 holes, but we will do our best to identify where you are as we go. We will not necessarily stop on every hole, but we will cruise through slowly and hope to see some of our local wildlife 'at play'. For safety reasons, please watch the cart ahead of you and try not to tailgate!

Hole #10: Views abound everywhere..... across the lagoon left of the Commons Building is the original model park. to is a slightly newer model park; homes now in Alexandria, Hampton, Stratford etc. were part of these designs. **Date Palms** lining the community entrance and the Commons Building, not native to this area, are at the farthest north that they will survive, but **Sabal Palms**, also known as Cabbage palms or **Palmettos**, **our state tree on our state flag**.

The nesting boxes were built especially for **Wood Ducks**, but unfortunately, we do not have the kind of habitat they like with pond lilies. There is often a very large **American Alligator** sunning on the banks, a rare success story, as they were once on the endangered species list. Due to state and federal regulations, habitat preservation, and decreased use of alligator products, they have made a big comeback and number at over one million. They live 35 to 50 years in the wild, can grow up to 15 feet in length, and weigh over 1000 pounds. One safety note about alligators - they can move very quickly, become aggressive during mating season, which is in the spring, also when they have been fed. Always be alert and aware around lagoons, especially with children or pets, as alligators live in all the lagoons here in Sun City. **Never feed an alligator!**

Hole #11 – Osprey often fish here. Not all lagoons in Sun City are considered fishing lagoons by the **Sun City Fishing and Hunting Club**. Lagoons that are accessible from common ground property can be freely fished. There are four ponds on Okatie Creek that are **designated for sustainability**, this and on #3, #11 and #17. The Club helps with maintenance of the lagoons by building and installing “**spider blocks**” made of cinder block, piping and concrete to improve fish health. These blocks become homes for small fish which serve as food for larger fish, maintaining a healthy, sustainable ecosystem. Fisherman are not to go on private property unless permission is given by the homeowner. Small areas of common ground adjacent to a pond is considered access for fishing. Residents should remember that **anything that ends up in the streets of Sun City eventually ends up in our ponds and wetlands and then rivers!**

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Next to the cart path, you will see one of our more familiar native plants, the **Live Oak** with **Spanish Moss** hanging from the branches.

Native plants are plants that have been growing in an area before it was settled by people from other parts of the world. They have co-evolved with other plants and animals specific to an area. Over long periods of time they have adapted to climatic conditions where they grow. They are drought tolerant, and therefore require less irrigation than many plants that have been introduced. Many **native plants** have developed defense systems which help protect them from insects and foraging by predators, provide wildlife habitat which is more beneficial than that provided by introduced species of plants, a much richer source of food for bees and birds, thus need to be preserved or planted in areas large enough to support communities of wildlife. Native plants on the golf course are **Live oak trees, Red oak trees, Sabal palm (our state tree), Saw palmetto, Sweet gum trees, Resurrection ferns, Spanish moss, Wax myrtle, and rushes and grasses, Pickerelweed, Blue flag iris**, and more that grow along the edge of ponds. Many of the plants we associate with the traditional South, such as Crepe Myrtle, Oleander and Camellias are not native. The **Sun City Bird Club website has a new section on native plants for your yard.**

Spanish Moss is a tropical and subtropical plant is in the bromeliad family, related to the pineapple and is not a parasite taking nutrients from the air and water from rain. It will not kill the tree, is home to many creatures, not chiggers, and has been used for insulation, mulch, and mattress and car seat stuffing. When the weather has been dry, the **resurrection fern** appears brown and dead and turn lush and green with rain.

Hole #12 – Bluebird boxes have recently been installed along the fairways of Hidden Cypress and Okatie Creek golf courses as a cooperative venture between the **Sun City Bird Club, Woodworkers, and Golf Services**. The Bird Club maintains **more than 180 boxes in Sun City**. If you see a bluebird building a nest in your lower mailbox, please discourage it by removing the nest materials, as nesting in these boxes is a certain death sentence for the baby birds, and possibly even the parent if it is sitting on the nest when someone shoves something into the box. Make sure not to breath in dust from the nesting material when you remove it.

Hole #13 – Runs parallel to Rt. 170. Okatie Creek and Hidden Cypress are **Audubon International Certified Wildlife Sanctuaries**. Audubon International, not part of the Audubon associated with birds, is an organization that works with golf courses, communities and others to help them implement environmental management practices that ensure natural resources are sustainably used and conserved. To keep this certification, Golf Maintenance staff have the difficult task of balancing the ideal golf course playability and implementing conservation measures, and are working with Audubon International to increase “no mow” areas to help expand habitat and provide possible food sources for wildlife; maintain buffered areas around certain lagoons to provide shelter for wildlife and nesting birds; mow lagoon buffers over the winter to keep them under control, letting them grow in the warmer months for nesting; reduce the number of pesticide applications and use only in affected areas; and plant areas of **wildflowers beginning on #4 at Okatie Creek**.

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Hole #15 – In winter **Hooded Mergansers**. A **Cormorant** loves the dead tree in the lagoon, and a large American **alligator** loves the opposite bank and sometimes the ladies' tee. **Loblolly pines** around these next two holes were planted in straight lines for the plantation and is less noticeable as new pines growing naturally are filling in.

Across the lagoon near the practice area, is **mistletoe**, a parasitic plant that, once attached to a host tree, obtains its moisture and nutrients from the tree. This can cause slowing of growth, and death of some limbs. If the infestation is heavy enough, it can kill the tree. **Snakes** perform an important role in our environment by helping to keep rodents and other pests under control. South Carolina has 42 species of snakes, only 6 of which are venomous. The most common venomous snake we see is the **copperhead**, which also has the least toxic venom. If you encounter a snake, *simply back away*.

Hole #17 – We have the **American Crow**, which is the one we normally think of when we think of crows, with its signature “Caw Caw” sound, and the **Fish Crow**, a little smaller and has shorter legs, its call sounds more like a laugh. Another **sustainable fishing pond with Bald Cypress**. Because cypress knees grow up through the water perpendicular to the roots to “buttress” or help support the tree in the wet, soft mud.

Duckweed is a small floating water plant eaten by ducks that often transport it into different ponds and must be managed, as it can become aggressive. If it is allowed to cover a pond, it blocks sunlight to underwater plants and can cause depleted oxygen levels in the water, leading to fish kills.

Freshwater mussels are an indicator of water quality, as they play a role in water filtration as they breath and feed, improving water quality by filtering out bacteria, algae, and pollutants. They are culturally significant, as they were harvested by the American Indians and pioneers for food, jewelry and tools. They used to make buttons from the shells, as well.

Sun City has **260 lagoons or ponds**. Only a small number of these lagoons are configured to have water levels managed by staff. All others are subject to Mother Nature's whims. They add beauty to our surroundings, **and were designed to prevent flooding, hold and clean water, and support natural habitats**. The Lowcountry is very close to sea level, thus the water table is high. Wetlands act as a sponge, and development covered precious acreage that was used to soak up rainwater leaving the area prone to flooding. The lagoon system allows the water to flow down the street drains and off the roads into the lagoons, then eventually into the wetlands and local rivers, which include the **New River and the Okatie River**, allows Sun City to utilize the water for irrigating common areas and golf courses, saving money for residents. Sun City receives a **credit each year from Beaufort County for use of Best Practices** in caring for and monitoring our run-off.

Native plants holding the soil at the edges of the ponds, absorb excess nutrients that wash off lawns and roads when it rains, sequester chemicals, fertilizers and pesticides, and act as a buffer to prevent chemicals from entering the lagoons. Without them, the oxygen levels in the ponds would drop and cause algae blooms- not good for aquatic ecosystems (and not too attractive, either...). The plants also provide habitat for native

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wildlife, such as **dragonflies, fish, alligators, and wading birds such as herons and egrets**. The ditches here and on the nature trail were dug during the time this land was a pine plantation to drain water from the swamp away from the roots of the pine trees.

There are some things that residents can do to help make sure our lagoons, wetlands and, therefore, our rivers, stay clean and healthy.

1. Leave a **vegetated buffer** 1' high and 1' wide along your lagoon edge. **Do not remove any plantings** that have been installed on the edge of lagoons.
2. Take your car to a commercial car wash. Golf carts should be **washed over a grassy area to filter the water**. If you need to wash at home, choose a **biodegradable soap** available in auto stores and on-line.
3. **Reduce pesticide and fertilizer** use in your yards and on plants. Our centipede grass, the most common lawn grass in Sun City, does not need or like fertilizer. If you must use fertilizer, liquid is recommended.
4. **Do not place foreign objects, fish or plants** from a home fish tank, into any lagoon.

Hole #18 - Several years ago, the lagoon on our left had the beginnings of a rookery with a couple of **Great Blue Heron** nests here, but they only nested here for two seasons. It is not clear why they didn't continue, as most Great Blues will continue to nest in the same trees until the trees fall down. We sometimes spot a **Belted Kingfisher** using this lagoon for fishing. We have many **Wood Storks**, an endangered species, in the winter and it is not clear if they are nesting here, or if they move further south for nesting.

Fox squirrels are related to gray squirrels but have more variable coloring including a facial mask with white patches on the nose, paws and ear tips, and they are larger than gray squirrels, about twice the size. Their coloring may be either gray, black or brown, with gray accounting for 74%, black 24% and only 2% brown.

Look up and we may see **vultures** on their way to #3. where that took to burying the round plastic ball tee markers. The prime difference is the red head of the **Vulture** and the black head of the **Black Vulture**. They keep our Sun City streets clean of dead creatures and remove other carrion before it can spread illness.

We didn't see them on this course, but **Okatie Farmers** have helped us and have a total of 320 plots and its own bee hives. The club strongly discourages products with the pesticide **neonicotinoid** since they will affect bees and other pollinators.