Rough diamond awaits golfers going off course at Ryder Cup

Conservation gem at heart of Perthshire golf centre kept out of bounds for championship

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WHEN the stars of the golfing world descend on Gleneagles next month for the 40th Ryder Cup, security will be intense. But some of the fiercest protection at the five-star golf resort in Perthshire is given to what looks like a pond on the King’s course near the fifth hole.

The White Water basin mine is the Gleneagles estate’s environmental “jewel in the crown” – a triple Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) protected by law.

Golfers are kept away from the highly unusual basin fen – a rare completely enclosed wetland – covered in bog moss or sphagnum and home to a host of insects and birds.

Of great interest to conservationists is the sphagnum which contains plants such as the carnivorous round-leaved sundew (Drosera rotundifolia) and cotton grass (Eriophorum angustifolium). Other plants at the site include cranberries and bottle or beaked sedge (Garru rostrata).

The prestigious protected status is awarded by government agency Scottish Natural Heritage to areas of land and water considered to best represent Scotland’s wild heritage.

With 40,000 visitors a day expected from 26-28 September, protecting the venue’s three courses including the PGA course where curlew and oystercatchers have been known to nest, it is more important than ever.

Scott Fenwick, estate and course manager at Gleneagles, said the estate was at the forefront of “greening” golf courses in the early 1990s.

“Back then it was a lot harder to push the environmental line, there wasn’t the buzz around it that there is now with college courses including the environmental impact. My boss at that time was Jimmy Kidd started the project and who brought in experts to look at and evaluate the area.

“Having a triple SSSI does mean that we can’t do anything around it without prior approval.

“A golf course can be quite sterile. But here the plants and wildlife such as deer, red squirrels, red kites, curlews and oystercatchers make the courses much more attractive retreat for people to get away from the hustle and bustle.”

Fenwick, who manages a team of 80 greenkeepers to maintain the courses which are 70 per cent natural or semi-natural habitats of heather, lochs, burns and marshes, added: “What we’re doing is challenging and might help to attract more people to golf. We take the ‘you build it and they will come’ approach.

“This way of working has now been taken up by a number of golf courses and there are companies who look at your environmental history to see if they want to do business with you.”

Gleneagles has implemented a host of measures to achieve GEO (Golf Environment Organisation) certified status, the golf industry eco-label. These include zero waste to landfill and generating 74 per cent of energy from a biomass boiler.

Bryce Ritchie, editor of Glasgow-based bunkered golf magazine, said knowing about their surroundings would enhance the game for golfers.

“The first thing Americans do when they are out on our golf courses is to say how impressed they are by the views and countryside.

“People like Fenwick are very well-versed about the ground they work with.

“It’s not just cutting the grass, there’s a real talent to bringing different types of agricultural land to work as golf courses.

“Golf courses should promote these things as long as they are also aware of how to protect them.”

Chic Brodie, SNP MSP for South Scotland, who has campaigned to improve golfing standards in Scotland, said: “People are much more aware of their physical environment these days and it certainly does not inhibit the golf.

“The human and natural elements can coalesce quite easily.

“The Ryder Cup will showcase not just the wonderful golf at Gleneagles but also the natural environment.”