

National Key Deer Refuge
Visitor Center
175 Key Deer Blvd
Big Pine Key Plaza
Big Pine Key, FL 33043
Phone: 305/872-0774
Fax: 305/872-2154

<http://www.fws.gov/nationalkeydeer>
keydeer@fws.gov

News Release



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Contacts: James Bell 305-872-0774

A REFUGE 73 YEARS YOUNG

Seventy three years ago this month, the then President Franklin D. Roosevelt established the second National Wildlife Refuge in the Florida Keys - Great White Heron National Wildlife Refuge on October 27, 1938.

The refuge encompasses over 117,000 acres of lands and waters off shore of the main keys in the Gulf, from Key West to the middle of the Seven Mile Bridge, an area locally known as the Backcountry. The refuge was established to protect the great white heron and other migratory birds from the plume and meat trade that decimated bird populations in the early 1900's. The refuge protects approximately 50 islands and island groups, most of them comprised of just mangrove trees. Over 250 bird species use the refuge islands. Many of the islands are inaccessible and are truly wilderness. For this reason, 1,900 acres of islands have been established as wilderness areas.

The refuge, along with three other National Wildlife Refuges in the Florida Keys, protects critical habitat for 21 federally listed as endangered species. The refuge also protects nesting habitat for endangered loggerhead, hawksbill, and green turtles. These turtles emerge from sea at night to return to the beach that they hatched from years ago. They are returning to lay eggs for the next generation of marine turtles. The marine waters are also used by other federally protected mammals such as dolphins and whales.

The north end of Mud Key and Snipe Point are the only land areas open to the general public. Other refuge islands that contain Key deer are open to public access. Those islands are Little Pine, Johnson, Water (off Little Pine), Mayo, Annette, Howell, Water (west of Howe), and Knockemdown Keys. Refuge hours for accessing the islands are ½ hour before sunrise to ½ hour after sunset. Snorkeling is another way of exploring the marine environment. Also, The Backcountry is a prime sport fishing area for tarpon, bonefish, and permit and other game fish.

The refuge islands are open for four wildlife-dependent public uses – fishing, photography, wildlife and wildlands observations, and environmental education. To protect the wildlife and habitat, the following are not permitted on the refuge managed islands: open fires on the ground as they can start wildfires or destroy turtle nests, pets on the islands as they can dig up turtle nests and leave unhealthy waste, firearms and other weapons as hunting is not permitted, disturbing or

removing plants and shells as these are natural items used by wildlife, storing equipment, searching for items of antiquity as these items belong to the American people and not just one individual, introducing exotic plants or animals as they compete with native plants and animals for resources, camping as there are no services available to accommodate campers, and commercial activity without a permit. Refuge management partners with other agencies such as the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission to protect your wildlife resources.

For more information about Great White Heron National Wildlife Refuge or the other three National Wildlife Refuges in the Florida Keys, contact the National Key Deer Refuge visitor center at 179 Key Deer Blvd. Big Pine Key Plaza, Big Pine Key, FL 33043, or call us at 305-872-0774. Our email address is Keydeer@fws.gov

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 544 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 63 fish and wildlife management offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to State fish and wildlife agencies.

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