

Egmont Key National Wildlife Refuge

2024 Hurricane Season Update

What is Egmont Key NWR's colonial history and how is USFWS involved?

- 1757** First documented European contact when Spanish explorer Don Francisco Maria Celi charted the island.
- 1763** Formally named after John Perceval, the second Earl of Egmont.
- 1848** First lighthouse was constructed. At the time, it was the only lighthouse between St. Marks and Key West.
- 1858** After hurricanes in 1848 and 1852, the lighthouse was rebuilt due to excessive damage. This rebuilt lighthouse remains operational today, making it one of the oldest active lighthouses in Florida.
- 1850s** During the Civil War and Seminole Indian War, Egmont Key was used by both Confederate and Union forces as a strategic military outpost and military prison.
- 1898** Fort Dade, a US Army coastal defense station, was constructed during the Spanish-American War. Fort Dade was a small, self-sustaining military community with over 70 buildings, brick streets, and a narrow-gauge railroad.
- 1920s** Fort Dade was deactivated after World War I but was briefly reactivated during World War II as a harbor patrol station and ammunition storage site.
- 1974** Egmont Key designated a National Wildlife Refuge to protect its unique barrier island habitat and historic structures. Currently, Egmont Key is managed in partnership with the Florida State Park Service.

How is Egmont Key culturally significant?

- The interior of Egmont Key may accurately be described as containing "ruins". The remains of many Fort Dade buildings, including the storehouse, gun batteries, and power plant can be seen from the brick road. The iconic guardhouse remains intact and offers an outdoor interpretive experience.
- The Egmont Key lighthouse and nearby cemetery, both accessible via trail, offer visitors a glimpse into Civil War era history.
- Archaeological discoveries on the island have revealed artifacts dating back 2000 years, suggesting significance to Seminole Indians. Artifacts indicate hunting, fishing and crabbing uses. In 2019, a dugout canoe from the 15-1600s was discovered and sent away for restoration.



Royal Tern with Chick

Credit: Alex Arrow / USFWS

How is Egmont Key ecologically significant?

- Supports thousands of nesting seabirds, including brown pelicans, royal terns, black skimmers, and least terns.
- Critical habitat for both the rufa red knot and piping plover.
- The endangered Atlantic Loggerhead sea turtle establishes ~120 nests on the island each year.
- Hosts a dense population of gopher tortoises.
- Surrounding seagrass beds are critical for the threatened West Indian manatee, which feeds and rests in the area.

Ecological challenges are significant. Egmont Key suffers from severe beach erosion, which threatens nesting habitat. Invasive plants may crowd out beneficial native vegetation. Animal invaders, such as raccoons, can wreak havoc on defenseless eggs. There are ongoing management actions by USFWS to address these issues.



Lighthouse at Egmont Key

Credit: USFWS

(continued from front)

Impacts of Recent Hurricanes

- Large sections of sandy beach, including within nesting bird sanctuaries, were eroded.
- Any active bird nests at the time of impact were likely destroyed and eggs/chicks were lost.
- Many gopher tortoise burrows were flooded, resulting in significant losses.
- Debris and garbage, including from Tampa, were scattered throughout the island.
- Maintenance and service equipment, such as tractors and ATVs, were destroyed.
- Park ranger living facilities were flooded and rendered uninhabitable.
- Boat docks, lifts and landing facilities were destroyed.



Sailboat washed ashore Egmont Key

Credit: Stan Garner/ USFWS



Destroyed support facility

Credit: Stan Garner/ USFWS



Bird sanctuary sign posting on southern end

Credit: Pat Mundus/USFWS

Restoration Work Completed and Ongoing

Thus far, staff have worked to:

- Remove hazardous materials with the assistance of USFWS fire crews.
- Mitigate electrical concerns by securing downed power lines.
- Transport technicians to restore power to the island.
- Recover salvageable equipment for off-island repair.
- Remove downed vegetation and limbs from hiking trails.
- Remove island beach debris.
- Re-post regulatory signage and buoys protecting the wildlife sanctuaries for bird nesting season.

Upcoming Restoration

Recovery funding has been allocated by Congress and contracting efforts are underway for:

- large scale debris removal from refuge beaches.
- clearing and restoration of interior trails.
- replacement of the access dock and Service work facility.
- repairing the historic Guardhouse.



Sunset over west beach of Egmont Key

Credit: Alex Arrow/ USFWS



American Oystercatcher pair

Credit: Alex Arrow/ USFWS

Current Status

The Refuge is open for visitation while repair and cleanup efforts continue. Visitors are encouraged to follow posted warnings and exercise caution while visiting. Notices are posted on <https://www.fws.gov/refuge/egmont-key>

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

<https://www.fws.gov>

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