

Tampa Bay National Wildlife Refuges



Egmont Key National Wildlife Refuge



Pinellas National Wildlife Refuge



Passage Key National Wildlife Refuge

“Our ability to perceive quality in nature begins, as in art, with the pretty. It expands through successive stages of the beautiful to values as yet uncaptured by language.”

— Aldo Leopold

Tampa Bay National Wildlife Refuges

The Tampa Bay Refuges – comprised of Egmont Key, Passage Key, and Pinellas National Wildlife Refuges – are located on Florida’s Gulf coast in Tampa Bay. Managed as part of the Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge Complex based out of Crystal River, FL, the Tampa Bay Refuges are part of the National Wildlife Refuge System, a network of lands and waters set aside for the protection of the nation’s fish and wildlife and their habitat.

The diverse coastal habitats of the Tampa Bay area host the state’s largest and most diverse colonies of wading and shorebirds along with 50,000 pairs of nesting seabirds (laughing gulls, royal, least, sandwich terns and black skimmers). Egmont Key NWR hosts the largest nesting colonies of laughing gulls and royal terns in the Tampa Bay area, exceeding over 30,000 nesting pairs, combined.

Consisting of islands amidst a sea of development, the Tampa Bay Refuges continue to provide vital habitat for colonies of birds and other wildlife that are threatened by human disturbance, loss of habitat, erosion, and predation. By maintaining these Refuges in the most natural conditions as possible, the continued survival of Tampa Bay’s most precious treasures will be assured.



Black skimmers flying near shore. Around 550 pairs of black skimmers have nested on Egmont Key.

How To Get To Egmont: Egmont Key is accessible by private boat, tour boat or ferry only. There are several ferry and tour boat operators available in the St. Petersburg area. Advanced kayakers sometimes risk crossing the 1.5 mile treacherous shipping channel between Fort Desoto and Egmont Key.

Egmont Key NWR

Located at the mouth of Tampa Bay, Egmont Key National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1974 to preserve its natural, cultural and historic significance for the benefit of present and future generations. Egmont Key is the only Refuge of the Tampa Bay Complex that is open to the public.

The U.S. Coast Guard owns approximately 35 acres at the north end of the island and the Tampa Bay Pilots Association occupies 10 acres in the middle of the island along the eastern side. The

rest of the island is owned by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. A cooperative agreement established Egmont Key National Wildlife Refuge and State Park in 1989.



photo: Joyce Kleen photo: USFWS photo: Ryan Maier
 Top (left): Brown pelican populations are thriving on the Gulf Coast. Over 1000 pairs of pelicans have nested in Egmont Key at one time during the summer. They also use the island to fish and loaf during the winter months. Brown pelican chicks are white, but turn brown in a few months. After a year, upon sexual maturity, they re-grow white feathers on their crown and neck.

Top (middle): A loggerhead sea turtle crawls ashore to dig a nest with its back flippers. Top (right): If the nest survives the impacts of wave-action-erosion, dozens of turtles will hatch in 60 days to begin their treacherous ocean journey. Only one in fifty will reach adult maturity.



photo: Keith Ramos
 Egmont Key provides excellent gopher tortoise habitat. Between 1000 and 1500 gopher tortoises roam the 280-acre island interior; but could also be found near the beach.

Wildlife

Egmont Key’s pristine habitats make it a safe haven that supports over 117 species of nesting, migratory, and wintering birds, provides nesting habitat to the threatened Atlantic loggerhead sea turtles, and protects an unusually large population of gopher tortoises and box turtles.

Two designated wildlife sanctuaries (see map on reverse side) are closed to the public year-round to protect nesting, wintering, and migrating birds and nesting sea turtles.

In recent years, brown pelicans, royal, sandwich, and least terns, laughing gulls, and black skimmers have nested successfully and most have dramatically increased in numbers, due to enforcement of these closed areas (sanctuaries). Still, disturbance by people and pets entering closed areas continues

to threaten nesting, migratory and wintering bird populations. Human disturbance in the summer months causes adult birds to fly from their nest which leads to chick predation or fatal exposure of eggs/chicks to the hot sun. Disturbance in the winter months may prevent birds from resting and gaining the body fat needed to complete long migrations.

Approximately 30-70 Atlantic loggerhead sea turtles nest on Egmont Key each year. Due to recent habitat loss, fewer nests are being documented. The main threat that sea turtles face on Egmont Key is the erosion of the shoreline leading to habitat loss, which means less space to lay eggs. Often, sea turtles nest too close to the vanishing shore and their nests end up washing away.



photo: Joyce Kleen
 A nesting colony of royal terns (orange beaks) and sandwich terns (black beak/yellow tip) share a nesting sandy spot on the southern bird sanctuary in the early summer. Over 7000 pairs of royal terns have nested on Egmont Key - one of the highest nesting royal tern colonies in the entire State.



photos: Joyce Kleen

Top (right): The storm pounded gulf side of Egmont suffers the destruction of a loggerhead sea turtle nest. Egmont Key is the fastest disappearing island in the St. Petersburg area victimized by wave action, caused by storms, the shipping channel and sea level rise. Only beach re-nourishment (sand addition) can save Egmont Key NWR.

Land dwelling gopher tortoises and box turtles also inhabit Egmont Key. Gopher tortoises are notable for their ability to dig sandy burrows, which they use to avoid the heat of the day. They can be found scattered around open areas on the island feeding on grass, sea grape, and prickly pear cactus. Gopher tortoises are protected in the state of Florida and should not be

disturbed. Box turtles are also found on the island and prefer the shaded forested areas. Their main diet in Egmont Key consists of roaches and sea grapes.

Recreation

Well over 150,000 people visit Egmont Key annually. The highest number of visitors come during the spring and summer months, coinciding with the critical nesting period for birds



photo: Keith Ramos photo: Joyce Kleen photo: Keith Ramos
 A black skimmer skims the surface looking for fish. A royal tern tends to its chick at the southern bird sanctuary. Florida box turtles dwell inland, including the trails.

and sea turtles. Visitors can minimize their impact by following refuge and state park regulations (see reverse side for list of regulations). Recreation opportunities in Egmont include shelling, hiking, birdwatching, fishing, swimming/snorkeling, nature photography, and visiting historical sites. To learn more about Egmont Key’s natural and cultural resources, visit the Egmont Key website at: www.fws.gov/egmontkey.

Unique and Rich Cultural Past

Egmont Key was named by the English in honor of John Perceval, the second Earl of Egmont in 1763. Egmont’s first historical structure was built in 1847, when U.S. Congress



photo: Ivan Vicente photo: Joyce Kleen
 Wildlife observation and photography are year-round popular activities on Egmont Key. Visitors may view over 200 documented species of resident and migratory birds on Egmont Key.

authorized the construction of a lighthouse, which was used by the U.S. Army through the Seminole Indian War in 1854 and the Civil War in the 1860’s. Most of Egmont Key’s historical structures were constructed during the Spanish-American War in 1898, when Egmont Key became the Fort Dade Military reservation. Fort Dade was a small military garrison of some 300 residents, until 1929, when it was deactivated. Remnants of a carriage brick road, several gun batteries and guard house remain today to remind visitors of this island’s unique historical past.



Gun-Battery McIntosh 1898 and Lighthouse-Rebuilt 1858 photos: Keith Ramos

Key Conservation Partners

- Florida Park Service
- National Audubon Society
- The Friends of Tampa Bay National Wildlife Refuges
- Egmont Key Alliance
- Tampa Bay Watch
- Eckerd College
- Pinellas County Environmental Fund
- National Fish and Wildlife Foundation
- Shell Marine Habitat Program
- St. Petersburg, Clearwater, and Manatee Audubon Societies
- Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

Pinellas National Wildlife Refuge

Pinellas NWR was established in 1951 to protect colonial water birds. The refuge originally consisted of Indian and Tarpon Keys - two large mangrove islands located in Boca Ciega Bay, Pinellas County, within the St. Petersburg city limits. In 1981, Listen Key, Little Bird Key, Mule Key, Jackass Key and a portion of Whale Island were added to the refuge. In 1994, the remaining half of Whale Island was added bringing the number of mangrove islands administered by the refuge to seven. Pinellas NWR provides densely vegetated mangrove island habitat for a variety of bird species including brown pelicans, cormorants, anhingas, herons, egrets, ibis, frigatebirds and spoonbills. These species are highly dependent on these undeveloped, uninhabited, natural mangrove islands for resting and nesting. If these island habitats are unavailable, the birds have few alternatives. All the islands that comprise the Pinellas NWR are closed to public use year-round to prevent disturbance to nesting, wintering, and migrating birds.

In the early 1880’s, the nesting colony on Indian Key was the largest single colony in the southeastern United States, as described by Princeton University ornithologist E.D. Scott, during his observations on a trip to Florida. However, less than ten years later, Scott documented that this colony had been completely exterminated by plume hunters. Tarpon Key is a donut-shaped mangrove island with a large central lagoon vegetated with a thick sea grass



Top (left): A snowy egret watches over its chicks at Little Bird Key, Top (right): Tarpon Key (Bush Key), Bottom (left): Indian Key, Bottom (right): In cooperation with Tampa Bay Watch, oyster shell bags are placed to protect the islands from erosion.

meadow. Tarpon Key and the adjacent Whale Island once had the third largest pelican rookery in the nation and were used annually as a nesting site by as many as 693 pairs of pelicans in 1995, but by 2005 birds cease to nest in these islands due to the presence of raccoons. Fortunately, continued trapping of raccoons has recently promoted some nesting activity. Hundreds of magnificent frigate birds also use Tarpon Key, Whale Island and Little Bird Key as roost sites in the summer and fall. In recent years, Little Bird Key NWR has provided locally important nesting habitat for pelicans, cormorants, herons, egrets, and spoonbills.

The other keys of the Pinellas NWR serve as significant feeding and roosting sites for colonial water birds. These keys are densely vegetated mangrove islands and are surrounded by shallow sea grass flats. Today, the Pinellas NWR protects these fragile islands from the ravages of hunting and trespass. Reduction of raccoons, rats and crows has increased population of birds found nesting on Pinellas NWR islands. Through careful management initiatives, restoration activities,



Little Bird Key currently holds the highest bird nesting colonies among all the Pinellas National Wildlife Refuge islands. Left: Roseate spoonbill adult and juveniles. Right: Great blue heron nest photos: David Kandz

erosion control projects, and the protection of these islands, Pinellas NWR will continue to provide critical habitat for some of Tampa Bay's rarest and most sensitive bird species.

Passage Key NWR

Passage Key is located at the mouth of Tampa Bay in Manatee County between Egmont Key and Anna Maria Island. One of the oldest refuges in the nation, Passage Key NWR was designated by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1905 to



2009 2004

preserve nesting colonies of native seabirds and wading birds. In 1970, the refuge received additional protection when Congress designated the Passage Key Wilderness; the island is one of seven wilderness areas on Florida's Gulf coast, and one of the smallest wilderness areas in the country.

Over time, storm events have significantly altered the size and shape of the refuge. In the early 1900s, Passage Key was a 60-acre island with a freshwater lake, but after a category three hurricane in 1921, it lost much of its mangrove vegetation and was substantially reduced in size. Almost 80 years after that storm, within a few weeks after its centennial celebration in 2005, Hurricane Wilma once again devastated the island. Its vulnerable shores took a final hit by hurricane Alberto in June 2006, and the island was submerged underwater from 2007-2013. Passage Key began to re-emerge in the spring of 2014 and today the island is a few acres in size with a limited amount of vegetation.

Prior to its disappearance, over 3,000 pairs of nesting birds used the refuge, including American oystercatchers, black skimmers, royal and sandwich terns, and laughing gulls. Now that the island has re-emerged, birds have once again begun to nest on the island; and for the first time since 1995, sea turtles started to nest again in Passage Key in the summer of 2016. Due to its past and current value to resting and nesting seabirds, shorebirds, wading birds and sea turtles, Passage Key NWR is closed to public use year-round.

Human and Natural Threats to the Tampa Bay Refuge Islands

Erosion poses a threat to all Tampa Bay Refuge islands. The catastrophic combination of storm surge, wave action from the shipping channel and sea level rise are continuously reducing the size of all refuge islands while destroying historical structures and the critical nesting habitat of colonial birds and sea turtles. Passage Key has been destroyed by hurricanes in the past, but when it reemerges, provides essential habitat for nesting birds and sea turtles. Egmont Key has lost approximately 259 acres since its original survey in 1877. Of the 539 acres originally surveyed in 1877, approximately 280 acres of dry land remain.

Exotics and nuisance wildlife pose a threat to most refuge islands. Brazilian pepper and Australian pines are being eradicated as they have vastly displaced native vegetation on

Egmont Key and Pinellas. Thousands of rats were eradicated in 2008 from Egmont Key. The raccoon and rat population is being controlled at the Pinellas refuge islands to prevent predation of nesting birds.

Discarded monofilament not only leads to entanglement of marine life but also entangles and kills many birds. Please dispose fishing line properly.



photo: Mike Fite

Trespassing into the sanctuaries by pets and humans causes serious disturbance of nesting colonies, causing adults to leave their nests while exposing the eggs to the detrimental heat of the sun. Please be aware of where you are to prevent disturbing wildlife in the designated sanctuaries.

Egmont Key Regulations

Egmont Key is open from sunrise to sunset.

The following activities are prohibited:

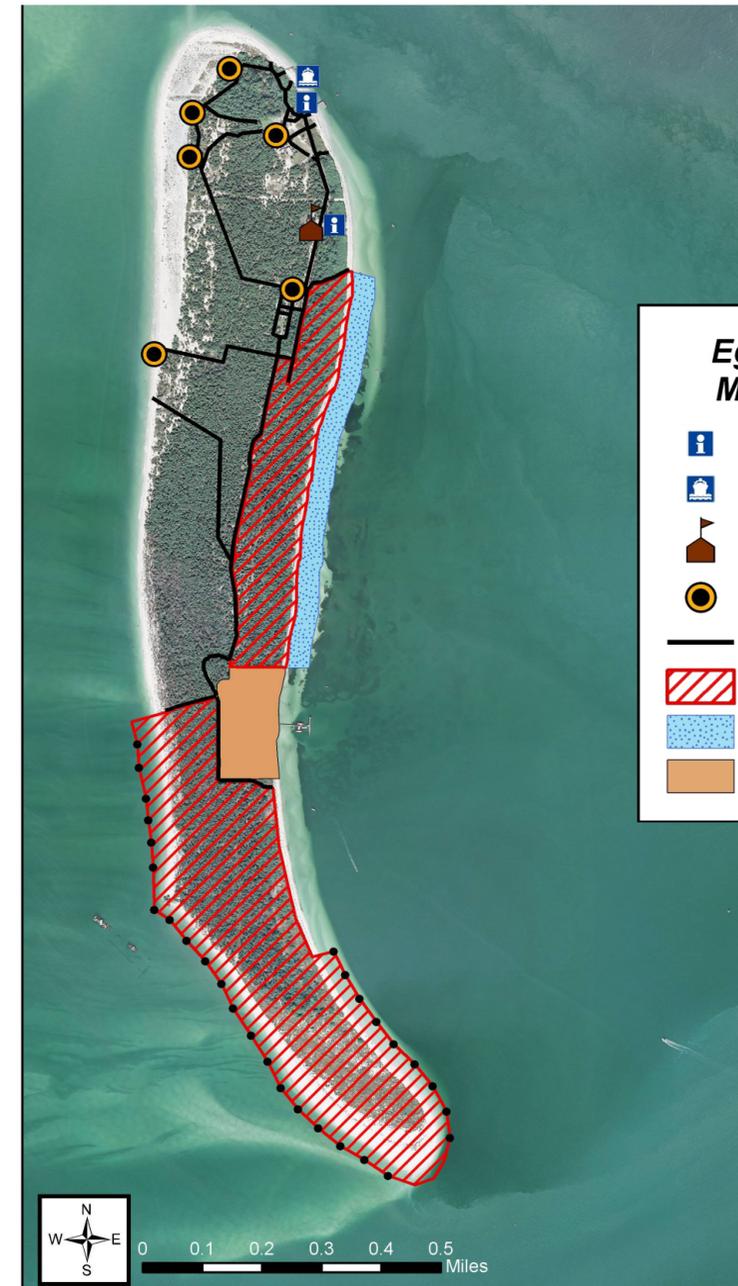
- Pets
- Littering (Pack It In, Pack It Out)
- Camping
- Open fires
- Feeding and/or disturbing wildlife
- Entering wildlife sanctuaries and/or posted closed areas (*periodic closure of areas on Egmont Key prevents disturbance to vital wildlife habitat.*)
- Collection of live shells/artifacts
- Kites, parasailing and kite-surfing (mimics avian predators)
- Take or disturbance of wildlife, plants and cultural resources
- Metal detectors
- Shovels or probing equipment
- Unreasonable disturbance by audio
- Construction of permanent structures (forts, survival shelters)
- Intoxicants (alcohol, drugs).
- Glass
- Fireworks
- Possession of firearms is in compliance with State Law.

A USFWS Special Use Permit is required to conduct research on the Tampa Bay refuges, and a USFWS Commercial Use Permit is required to conduct commercial operations.

Passage Key NWR and Pinellas NWR are closed to all public use year-round. Do not enter these refuge areas.

Tampa Bay National Wildlife Refuges

1502 SE Kings Bay Dr
Crystal River, FL 34429
352/563 2088
<http://www.fws.gov/egmontkey>



Egmont Key Map Legend

- Information
- Ferry Landing
- Guardhouse
- Historic Landmark
- Hiking Trails
- Area/Beach Closed
- No Vessel Entry
- Private - No Entry



Egmont Key NWR (Est. 1974)

- National Wildlife Refuges of Tampa Bay
- Non-refuge Lands