Welcome to the Florida Keys National Wildlife Refuges - National Key Deer, Key West, Great White Heron National Wildlife Refuges.

These four refuges are located in an extraordinary and seemingly endless expanse of sea, islands and sky. These refuges are part of a vast subtropical ecosystem. This distinct chain of islands stretches almost 150 miles from the southeastern tip of Florida, curving gently westward dividing the aqua-green waters of the Gulf of Mexico from the distant deep blue Atlantic.

The four refuges include more than 416,000 acres of land and open water. Most keys are fringed along the shoreline by red and black mangroves. On larger keys, this gives way to a wide variety of tropical and subtropical trees and shrubs on slightly higher ground. These lands maintain a unique biodiversity by protecting and preserving important marine water, freshwater wetlands, mangroves, tropical hardwood forests (hammocks), and pine rockland forests. Together, these habitats provide the four basic components of a habitat - food, water, shelter, and open space, necessary for the survival of 24 federally listed threatened or endangered species and other native wildlife.

As commercial and residential development in the Keys increases, pressure on limited land and water resources become more crucial to the survival of this fragile ecosystem.

This blue goose, created by J.N. “Ding” Darling, is the symbol for the National Wildlife Refuge System.

National Key Deer, Key West and Great White Heron National Wildlife Refuges

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National Key Deer Refuge
The 84,351 acre National Key Deer Refuge is located in the Lower Keys on 25 islands and consists of a patchwork of small and large tracts of pine forest, mangrove forest, hardwood hammocks, freshwater wetlands and marine waters. Key deer are found on these 25 islands. The Key deer is the smallest sub-species of the Virginia white-tailed deer found throughout most of North America. Because the Key deer population is low and remains under threat of extinction from human interaction, the subspecies is federally listed as endangered. The current population is estimated at over 800. Key deer can best be seen at dawn or dusk throughout Big Pine and sometimes on other islands between Big Pine and Cudjoe/Sugarloaf Keys. Please help keep the Key deer wild by not feeding them. Not only is it illegal, it’s bad for their health.

The refuge has a visitor center on Big Pine Key and offers the Blue Hole site, the Jack Watson Wildlife Trail and the Fred Mannillo Wildlife Trail. Refer to the map for their location. Also, visitors are welcome to hike refuge fire roads that are open for access. There are additional hiking trails on Cudjoe Key, Upper Sugarloaf Key, and Lower Sugarloaf Key. Big Pine Key has extensive growths of Florida slash pine, silver palmtch, thatch palm, and poisonwood. Poisonwood produces an oil which can cause a rash to humans similar to poison ivy. To identify it, look for telltale “burn” marks on the leaves.

The refuge is the largest continuous tract of hardwood forest remaining in the nation. These areas were set aside for the primary purpose of maintaining a preserve and breeding ground for native birds. In contrast to the “main” Keys (linked by the Overseas Highway/US 1), the Backcountry, with a few exceptions, is a pristine, uninhabited area of islands scattered amidst the biologically rich waters of the Florida Bay and the Gulf of Mexico. In 1975, Congress recognized the special qualities of these refuges by designating many of the islands as part of the National Wilderness Preservation System, providing them with additional protection.

Both refuges are of great interest scenically and scientifically, exemplifying a subtropical region unlike any other part of the United States.

Key West and Great White Heron National Wildlife Refuge
Encompassing numerous islands known locally as the Biscayne Bay, these two refuges are among the oldest refuges in the nation. These areas were set aside for the primary purpose of protecting habitat for a wide variety of birds, the endangered Atlantic green and loggerhead turtles and is one of the only breeding sites in the U.S. for the endangered Great White Heron. Both refuges are of great interest scenically and scientifically, exemplifying a subtropical region unlike any other part of the United States.

Key West National Wildlife Refuge was established by Theodore Roosevelt in 1908 to curtail the slaughter of birds whose feathers were highly valued in the hat industry. Great White Heron National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1938 to protect habitat for the great white heron and other migratory birds. Wading birds were threatened with extinction before this refuge began providing a safe haven for them and other threatened plant and animal species. These two refuges encompass more than 200,000 acres of open water and over 8,000 acres of land on 49 islands, protecting habitat for a wide variety of birds, the endangered Atlantic green and loggerhead turtles and is one of the only breeding sites in the U.S. for the endangered hawkshill turtle. The Marquesas represents a truly unique area within this refuge and needs added protection. Campers are not allowed in these refuges and access is restricted as not to disturb birds and other wildlife.