

Desecheo

National Wildlife Refuge

Island Conservation



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Photos (top to bottom):

Desecheo National Wildlife Refuge.

Endangered Puerto Rican endemic cactus, the higo chumbo.

Endemic Desecheo anole climbing the higo chumbo cactus' spines.

Refuge Facts

The significance of the seabird nesting on the island led to its designation as a preserve and seabird breeding ground by President Taft in 1912. In 1937, President Franklin Roosevelt transferred Desecheo to Puerto Rico to be managed as a forest and bird preserve. From 1940 until 1964, Desecheo was used for military training activities. In July 1966, management jurisdiction was acquired by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, and the island became a facility for raising a colony of rhesus monkeys for medical research. In December 1976, Desecheo was transferred to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) to be managed as a National Wildlife Refuge (NWR).

- Acres: 358 acre dry forest island.
- Location: the island is located 13 miles off the west coast of Puerto Rico.
- Administration of Desecheo NWR is accomplished by the Caribbean Islands NWR Complex. The headquarters of the complex is located in Cabo Rojo, Puerto Rico.

Natural History

- Desecheo Island supports important populations of animals found nowhere else in the world, such as the Desecheo anole, Desecheo ground lizard, and Desecheo dwarf gecko.
- The island once hosted large colonies of breeding seabirds, including the world's largest Brown Booby colony and a significant Red-footed Booby colony. Previous human use as well as the presence of invasive animal species resulted

in the disappearance of nesting seabirds from the island.

- Desecheo Island is one of the few places where the federally-listed higo chumbo cactus is found.
- Removal of goats, monkeys and rats from the island has been initiated through cooperative efforts with the non-governmental organization Island Conservation to promote the recovery of nesting seabirds and native plants and reptiles. This project also offers a rare opportunity to inform restoration efforts on other islands in the Caribbean.
- The coral reefs around the island are part of the Desecheo Natural Reserve managed by the Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources (PRDNER).
- The island supports subtropical dry forest, an important habitat type that is endangered on the mainland of Puerto Rico and in other subtropical areas.

Refuge Objectives

The refuge is managed to restore, protect, and conserve fish and wildlife resources and habitats, migratory birds, endemic species, and forest communities, with a special emphasis on seabirds.

Management Tools

- Law enforcement, collaboration with PRDNER.
- Wildlife monitoring.
- Habitat restoration.

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Photos (top to bottom):

Endemic Desecheo ground lizard.

Subtropical dry forest habitat on the island of Desecheo.

Brown Booby.

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Questions and Answers

Is the refuge open to the public?

No, this island refuge is closed to the public due to the presence of unexploded military ordnance. Future access will be limited and will be contingent on cleanup of ordnance and certification that the area is safe for use.

If the refuge is closed to the public, why do dive boat operators take customers there?

The refuge is not open to public access and use. Trespass on the refuge itself would be handled by Federal law enforcement officers and other cooperating agencies. Since the surrounding waters are designated as a Marine Reserve by the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico and are not part of the refuge, visitation to the waters surrounding this small island refuge is regulated by the PRDNER.

Why was the refuge established?

Desecheo Island became a National Wildlife Refuge in 1976 to protect seabird colonies. Historically, Desecheo was a major seabird rookery and it may have had the largest Brown Booby colony in the world, with estimates of up to 15,000 breeding birds in the early 1900s. The loss of nesting seabirds on the island has been linked to past military bombing, illegal hunting, fires, and the introduction of goats, rats and nest-predating rhesus monkeys. The Service and Island Conservation are restoring the Island by removing invasive species. With the island free of invasive predators, native plants and animals will once again be able to thrive in their natural habitat.