

Great White Heron

National Wildlife Refuge



photo: USFWS



photo: USFWS



photo: Bill Keogh ©

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Refuge Facts

- Established: 1938.
- Acres: 123,980 owned (1,900 are designated Wilderness), 186,287 acres of marine waters managed with the state of Florida.
- Located in Monroe County, FL.
- The uplands portion of GWHNWR are all on unpopulated islands, on the north side of the lower Florida Keys bordering the Gulf of Mexico, in an area called “the Backcountry.” It stretches from north of Marathon (90 miles SW of Miami) to north of Key West, FL (130 miles SW of Miami).
- Accessible only by boat.
- Administered by National Key Deer Refuge.

Natural History

- Refuge includes mostly mangrove islands and wetlands, with a few sandy beaches and dunes that are critical nesting habitat for endangered sea turtles.
- Refuge, along with the Key West NWR, represents the last of the off-shore (and raccoon free) islands in the Lower Florida Keys available as critical nesting, roosting, wading, and loafing habitat for over 250 avian species — particularly wading birds.
- The area managed is overwhelmingly (96 percent) marine environment including large sand flats surrounding the islands that are used extensively by foraging wading birds, significant seagrass meadows, patch coral reefs, and coastal mangrove communities.

Financial Impact of Refuge

- Refuge has no dedicated personnel. It is managed as a satellite of NKDR.

- Analyses of generated income for the Florida Keys Refuges only take into account the number of people that visit the headquarters on Big Pine Key — a fraction of the people that cross into the boundaries of all four refuges. Current estimate is: resident and non-resident visitors generated \$2.1 million in expenditures in FY 94.
- No quantitative data is available for public use on the refuge. It is estimated that 12,000 people use the managed waters of the GWHNWR each year.

Refuge Objectives

- To manage as a refuge and breeding ground for great white herons, other migratory birds and other wildlife.
- To manage as an inviolate sanctuary, or other management purpose, for migratory birds.
- Provide habitat and protection for endangered and threatened fish, wildlife, plants, and migratory birds.
- Protect the character of the designated wilderness.
- Provide opportunities for environmental education and public viewing of refuge wildlife and habitats.

Management Tools

- Mechanical and chemical control of invasive exotic plants.
- Interpretation/education.
- Routine wildlife monitoring.
- Law enforcement.
- Partnerships.

Public Use Opportunities

- Fishing.
- Wildlife observation.
- Photography.
- Environmental education.

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Calendar of Events

April: Volunteer Recognition Ceremony, National Wildlife Week.

May: Migratory Bird Day.

October: National Wildlife Refuge Week, refuge birthday.

Questions and Answers

Where is the GWHNWR?

The refuge consists of a 300 square mile area of water and unpopulated islands that lie on the north side of the main chain of the Lower Florida Keys, between Marathon and Key West. Additional refuge lands are found on the main chain of Lower Keys.

How do I get to the GWHNWR?

There are no bridges to the offshore islands. Access to most of the refuge is by boat only—personal, rental or guided. The refuge's establishing authority prohibits access to most back country islands although some refuge managed and state owned/refuge managed islands are open for public access during daylight hours. Camping is not permitted on the islands. Also, the refuge manages lands on Upper Sugarloaf and Lower Sugarloaf Keys and can be driven to. Access onto the refuge lands is by foot on old access roads.

What islands are open for public use?

All of the refuge managed islands within the GWHNWR are closed in accordance with the Executive Order that established it in 1938. There are some state-owned lands that are managed by the FWS where public use is allowed during daylight hours.