

Cedar Keys

National Wildlife Refuge

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Refuge Facts

- Established: 1929.
- Acres: approximately 760.
- Located in Levy County, FL.
- Location: the refuge is comprised of 12 offshore islands, around the town of Cedar Key, ranging in size from a few acres up to 120 acres. Access is by boat only.
- Administered by Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge.

Natural History

- Four of the islands, Snake, Deadman's, Seahorse, and North are designated as Wilderness areas.
- One of the largest colonial bird nesting sites in north Florida is located on the refuge.
- White ibis, brown pelican, great blue heron, little blue heron, tricolored heron, night heron, snowy egret, great egret, and cormorant nest on the refuge, as do bald eagle and osprey.

Financial Impact

- Important part of eco-tourism in Cedar Key.
- Protects water quality for important shell fishing and aquaculture industry.
- No staff or funding. Personnel from Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge have responsibility for Cedar Keys NWR.
- 65,000 visitors annually.

Refuge Goals

- Manage and conserve the natural diversity, abundance, and ecological function of refuge flora and fauna, with an emphasis on protecting the colonial wading bird rookery of Seahorse Key, threatened and endangered species, and species of special concern in the State of Florida.

- Protect refuge natural, cultural and wilderness resources to ensure their integrity and to fulfill the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.
- Provide opportunities for environmental education, interpretation and wildlife-dependent recreation when compatible with the purpose, mission and vision of the refuge and that will not negatively impact critical or sensitive habitats.
- Promote collaboration and partnerships with private citizens and other agencies to increase research and environmental education opportunities and to protect the coastal ecosystem.

Management Tools

- Education/Interpretation.
- Law enforcement.
- Biological monitoring.
- Partnerships.
- The University of Florida utilizes the lighthouse and associated facilities as a Marine Science Laboratory for research and education.

Public Use Opportunities

- Because of its small size and importance to wildlife, Cedar Keys Refuge can support only limited public use.
- Walking trail and interpretive kiosk on Atsena Otie Key.
- Birdwatching and scenic, natural vistas.
- Saltwater fishing from beach and the dock on Atsena Otie Key.
- In order to protect the nesting birds on Seahorse Key, public entry and use is prohibited from March 1 to June 30. The closed area includes all of Seahorse Key and a 300-foot buffer zone around the island.

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Calendar of Events:

January: Wintering waterfowl abundant in Gulf.

February: Ospreys begin nesting.

March 1 - June 30: Seahorse Key and 300 foot buffer zone around the island CLOSED to protect colonial nesting birds.

March: Spring bird migration begins.

April: Peak of Spring migration, Naturefest - late March, early April, annually, Cedar Keys Arts Festival - third weekend in April.

May: International Migratory Bird Day.

June - August: Great time to explore the islands and Gulf of Mexico by boat.

August 15 - September 15: Peak fall migration of shore birds.

October: National Wildlife Refuge Week, Open House at Seahorse Key Lighthouse, Cedar Keys Seafood Festival-third weekend in October.

December: Audubon Christmas Bird Count.

Questions and Answers

How do I get to Cedar Keys NWR?

Cedar Keys NWR consists of 12 islands off shore from the town of Cedar Key, Florida. The refuge is only accessible by boat. In the town of Cedar Key there are private enterprises that rent boats or offer tour boat rides that will take you to the islands.

Can any boat go to these islands?

Yes, you can take your own boat to the islands. However, it is important to pay attention to the weather and tide conditions. All the islands are surrounded by shallow mud flats. During low tides the islands are relatively inaccessible. Also, if you beach your boat on the islands during high tide your boat will be out of the water during low tide. This will leave you stranded until the tide returns.

Are we allowed to walk where ever we want on Cedar Keys NWR?

Atsena Otie Key has walking trails through the interior of the island. For public safety and to protect the vegetation, the interior of the other islands is closed. These islands have thick undergrowth vegetation along with poisonous rattlesnakes and cottonmouth snakes. Visitors are welcome to explore the beach areas of all the islands, except Seahorse Key, during the bird nesting period.

When can we visit Seahorse Key?

Seahorse Key supports one of the largest colonial bird rookeries in north Florida. During the nesting period, March 1 through June 30, the island is closed to all public entry. This includes a 300-foot buffer zone in the Gulf of Mexico, around the island.

Are we allowed to visit the lighthouse on Seahorse Key?

The lighthouse and other facilities around it are utilized by the University of Florida as a marine laboratory and classroom. In order to protect the university's equipment and the students that stay there, the lighthouse is not open to the public. When the university is not using the lighthouse, other schools (elementary school through college) and organizations are allowed to utilize the marine lab for environmental education. Twice a year the refuge holds an open house on Seahorse Key. During this time, refuge staff are stationed on the island and the public is permitted to visit the lighthouse.