

# U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

## History of the Islands

The refuge has a rich and interesting history that began with the Native Indians who occupied the “keys” for at least 1,000 years, from 450 to 1,800 years ago. The islands were named “Cedar Keys” by two American explorers who, in 1885, were searching for cedar timber near the Suwannee River. Seahorse Key received its name due to the island’s contours, which resemble a seahorse.

In the past, Seahorse Key was used as a military hospital, and it served as a detention camp for Indians during the Second Seminole War (1835-1842). As trade expanded in the port of Cedar Key, a lighthouse was built on Seahorse Key in 1851. It was later used during the Civil War as a military prison by the Union Army. The lighthouse was abandoned in 1915. In 1952, the University of Florida leased the lighthouse, and under their direction, it now serves as a center for marine research and environmental education.



photo: Ken Litzzenburger

From 1839 to 1842, Atsena Otie Key was the site of a military depot. It later became the location for the town of Cedar Key, with a population of 200-300 people. The town was destroyed by a hurricane in 1896.

## Management and Visitor Opportunities

Because of its small size and importance to wildlife, Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuge can support only limited public use. This is imperative if it is to meet the objectives for which it was established and to preserve its unspoiled character.

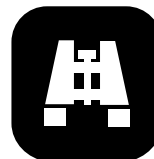
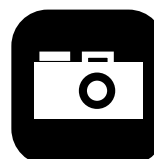
Access to the refuge is by boat only. The beaches of all the islands, except Seahorse Key, are open year-round for public use. Atsena Otie Key is the easiest island to access and provides

photo: Bruce Collin

the best opportunities for use by visitors. It has an interpretive walking trail through the interior of the island. All of the islands are surrounded by shallow sand, mud and grass flats which make them relatively inaccessible. At low tide, few sites along the shore can be reached by boat.



Fishing is excellent from any of the island beaches, the boat dock at Atsena Otie Key, or the fishing pier at Shell Mound. Common saltwater fish include mullet, speckled trout, redfish, whiting, sheepshead and flounder.



Wildlife observation and photography of the many shore and water birds, as well as strolling along the island beaches are favorite activities for refuge visitors.



Another way to explore the refuge, whether onshore islands like Scale or Live Oak Keys or the nearby offshore island of Atsena Otie Key, is by sea kayak. The other islands, North, Snake, and Seahorse, are better reached by conventional boat. There are several good boat launches available in the town of Cedar Key.



A walking trail is available through the interior upland habitat of Atsena Otie Key. This 0.5 mile round trip walk also takes you back in history. The ruins of the old cedar “slat” pencil mill, a cistern for holding the original town’s water supply, and a 1890’s cemetery are along the trail.

**Note: Biting insects are abundant along the trail, especially during the summer. Use of an insect repellent is advised.**



photo: Bruce Collin

## Shell Mound Unit

Accessible by County Road 326, the Shell Mound Unit of the Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge is adjacent to the Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuge and used by visitors for wildlife observation and photography, fishing, hiking and boating. Shell Mound is both a historic and scenic site. The Dennis Creek Trail (1.0 mile loop) takes you through a coastal island where you will see various bird life and unique coastal habitat. The Shell Mound Trail (0.3 mile loop) crosses over an ancient Indian shell midden, reaching 28 feet above mean sea level. A spectacular view of the coastal estuary and the Gulf of Mexico awaits you. A launch for small boats and handicap accessible fishing pier are located at Shell Mound.



photo: Ken Litzzenburger



## The Refuge System

The “Blue Goose” symbolizes the National Wildlife Refuge System. This network of lands was established for the conservation and management of fish, wildlife, and plants in the United States for the benefit of present and future generations. Cedar Keys Refuge is one of over 500 refuges nationwide. Each refuge provides a unique piece of the puzzle, securing necessary habitats needed to protect plants, animals and provide outdoor recreation.

The refuge system encompasses over 92 million acres administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, an agency of the Department of the Interior. In addition to the refuge system, the Fish and Wildlife Service is responsible for the endangered species program, national fish hatcheries, certain marine mammals and migratory birds, as well as other wildlife programs.



## Refuge Regulations

Camping is not permitted on the refuge, but is available at the County Campground on County Road 326 near the Shell Mound Unit.



The surface collection of sea shells along the beaches is permitted; however, the removal of ancient artifacts, plants or animals, or government property is prohibited.



Firearms and weapons are prohibited.



Fires are prohibited



Pets must be on a leash and under the control of the owner at all times.

## Closed Areas

The interiors of all the islands, except Atsena Otie Key, are closed to the public for the safety of visitors and the protection of the flora and fauna. **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.** The Lighthouse and the outbuildings utilized by the University of Florida are closed to the public except on special announced dates.

## For More Information Contact:

Refuge Manager  
Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuge  
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Chiefland, FL 32626  
352/493-0238

e-mail: [r4rw\\_fl.swe@fws.gov](mailto:r4rw_fl.swe@fws.gov)  
<http://www.fws.gov/r4eao/wildlife/nwrswe.html>

The Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuge is administered by Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge. The Refuge Office is 17 miles north of the town of Cedar Key off County Road 347. Office hours are Monday through Friday, 7:30 am to 4:00 pm.



# Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuge

Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuge is located 50 miles southwest of Gainesville, Florida, along the southern edge of the Big Bend Region of Florida's West Coast. The refuge encompasses approximately 800 acres and is composed of 13 offshore islands in the Gulf of Mexico, ranging from 1 to 165 acres.

Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1929 as a refuge and breeding ground for colonial birds. Four islands (Snake, Bird, North and Seahorse) are designated wilderness areas. The most recent addition to the refuge is Atsena Otie Key. This island is owned by the Suwannee River Water Management District and is managed as part of the Cedar Keys Refuge.



photo: USFWS



photo: USFWS

In addition to attracting thousands of shore birds and diving ducks, the salt marshes and tidal flats act as a valuable nursery area for fish, shrimp and shellfish. Marine turtles, such as the green sea turtle and the Kemp's ridley turtle, use coastal waters; however, they do not nest on the islands. The bottlenose dolphin and the endangered West Indian Manatee are commonly seen in the waters surrounding refuge islands.

Some ten species of reptiles have been recorded on the refuge. Unusually dense populations of cottonmouth snakes occur on all of the islands. On the other hand, due to the lack of available freshwater, mammals are relatively scarce.

The forested habitat that occurs on the uplands includes live oak, cabbage palm, red bay, and laurel oak. The understory plants include cherry laurel, saw palmetto, yaupon, wild olive, prickly pear, eastern red cedar and Spanish bayonet. The lower elevations of the islands, comprising almost forty percent of the refuge, are subject to frequent flooding and are dominated by salt marsh with patches of mangrove trees.

Seahorse Key, the outermost refuge island, was formed as a huge sand dune many thousands of years ago. This dune is now evident as a prominent central ridge which rises abruptly to an elevation of 52 feet (the highest elevation on Florida's West coast). The central ridges of the other keys are less obvious, extending only five to twenty feet above sea level.

## Wildlife and Habitats

The Cedar Keys refuge ranks as one of the largest nesting areas in Florida for colonial birds. During the 1960's and 1970's, a record 200,000 birds were recorded. Today, the average number of birds utilizing the refuge is about 20,000. The more abundant nesting species include white ibis, brown pelican, common and snowy egret, great blue and tri-colored heron, and the double-crested cormorant. Osprey are also common nesters on the refuge and can be seen diving for fish. Bald eagles nest on the refuge, as well. Over 250 species of birds have been identified on the refuge.

