



Watch That Wildlife

A guide to viewing wildlife in the Florida Keys.



FEDERAL GUIDELINES FOR VIEWING MARINE MAMMALS AND SEA TURTLES IN THE WILD

To reduce the potential for wildlife viewing that inadvertently harms marine mammals or violates Federal laws, use the following Federal guidelines:

- Remain a respectful distance of at least 50 yards from marine mammals and sea turtles.
- Limit your viewing time to a half hour.
- Marine mammals and sea turtles should not be encircled or trapped between watercraft, or watercraft and shore.
- If approached by a marine mammal or sea turtle, put your watercraft's engine in neutral and allow the animal to pass. Any vessel approach should be from the rear of the animal. Pursuit of marine mammals and sea turtles is prohibited by Federal law.
- Never feed or attempt to feed marine mammals or sea turtles. Federal law prohibits feeding or attempting to feed marine mammals.

It's Wild Here!

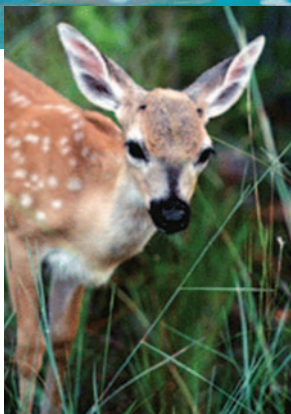
The Florida Keys host an astonishing array of wildlife living here as residents or traveling through on migration. You can increase your chances of viewing these intriguing animals and enhance your experience if you are forearmed with some knowledge. This guide presents information for four of the Florida Keys' most popular and sought-after animals: bottlenose dolphins, Key deer, manatees, and sea turtles.



Dolphin Ecology Project



Mike Bacon



USFWS

Mike Bacon



manatees, and sea turtles. Whether you are new to the Keys' wild side or you have known these animals for years, you will find insights into their behavior, natural history, and how to encounter wildlife safely. What's more, you can apply this knowledge to many of the Keys' diverse wildlife and habitats.

Discover the Real Wildlife

Humans enjoy close relationships with many animals and it's natural to want to extend that pleasure to wild animals, too. The sight of a sea turtle crawling out onto shore to lay her eggs or a bewhiskered manatee grazing on seagrass will compel us to move closer to see better or to make contact. Resist this urge! In return for your consideration, wildlife will reveal more of their authentic selves that make them so



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unique. Plus, they won't be wasting valuable energy fleeing from you, which could cost them a meal, separate them from their young, or put them in harm's way.

Keep Them Wild

This guide is designed to help you enjoy wildlife acting naturally. Here are a few general ideas that will help you to do your part.

- **Save your food and bait for yourself.** Encouraging wildlife to take handouts from humans can endanger their health with poor nutrition. Animals may readily accept handouts, but it's similar to giving children a choice between candy and vegetables. Most will choose candy, but they will suffer health problems as a result. Feeding also brings animals into

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potentially hazardous surroundings and near people who may hurt them.

- **Follow the recommended approach distances and techniques for each animal.** Wildlife is easier to view if we are predictable. Always give wildlife a way to leave the area and position yourself away from their direct path of travel. Avoid coming between mothers and their young.

- **Consider the cumulative effect of many people watching an animal or watching for long periods of time.** Cut your stay short if other people are around. Look for the behaviors listed with each animal that indicate disturbance and move away slowly if you see them.
- **Trash and debris, particularly monofilament fishing line, injure and kill many animals each year through entanglement or ingestion.** Make sure to dispose of these items in proper containers on shore. Be especially careful that trash in the boat's cockpit stays there when you increase speed.
- **Choose a nature tour company or guide wisely.** Ask them if they follow government-approved guidelines. (see



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inside front cover) During the tour, respect a responsible guide's decisions and avoid adding pressure to get closer or stay longer.

- **Remember, you will be a guest in the animals' homes.** Tread lightly and leave their habitat intact. While individually we may have a small impact, what we do collectively will have an enormous influence on the very survival of these animals. Let's preserve our wildlife for future generations.

Tools for Watching the Wild Side

Consider bringing along a few helpful tools and supplies.

- **Binoculars** and spotting scopes enable you to see more clearly from a distance.
- **A telephoto camera lens** helps you to take better photographs.
- **Polarized sunglasses** cut glare on the water, allowing you to see below the surface.
- **Sunscreen**, a light long-sleeved shirt and a hat offer protection from the intense sun while on or near the water.
- **Insect repellent** will be welcome when exploring the woods.



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ATLANTIC BOTTLENOSE DOLPHINS

Fun Facts

- Dark gray upper body with light gray underside.



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- Breathe air through a blowhole on top of head. Can hold their breath up to seven minutes.
- Dorsal fin located in middle of the back. Dorsal fins have distinctive markings (nicks and notches), like a fingerprint, enabling researchers to identify individual dolphins.
- Swimming speeds can reach around 18 mph, with a typical cruising speed of 3-7 mph.
- Adults average 8 to 9 feet long and weigh 400 to 600 lbs. At birth, young, called calves, are three to four feet long and weigh 35 to 45 lbs.
- Elongated snout contains 88 to 100 sharp teeth.



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- Status: Protected Species (Marine Mammal Protection Act - NOAA Fisheries)

Where to Find Them

Dolphins living in near shore waters are coastal dolphins, commonly found near channels, sea grass beds and mud flats with water depths ranging from two to eight feet. You also will see them out to and beyond the reef line. Dolphins can be seen throughout the year in the Florida Keys.

What To See

- Your first view will likely be a dorsal fin, arching up and down in the water. By comparison, a shark's fin moves from side to side. You can hear the blow of dolphins breathing from one hundred feet or more in quiet surroundings.



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- When feeding or socializing, dolphins can be seen splashing, leaping, and churning up white water. You can distinguish feeding by looking for muddy patches in the water where they have stirred up the bottom, sea birds and/or pelicans diving in the same area, or fish in the dolphins' mouth.

What to Do

- Dolphins use different areas for resting, socializing, feeding, and protection from predators. When approaching or observing dolphins from a boat, use slow speeds. The recommended distance is 50 yards and time limit is a half hour.



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- If the dolphins are traveling, steer your boat on a parallel course to the side of the group and avoid being directly in front of, or behind them.
- When dolphins are relatively stationary, idle your engine in neutral. Always maintain a distance of at least 50 yards.
- If dolphins approach your vessel while you are at speed, maintain your speed and course. The dolphins may be catching a free ride in your bow or stern wake. Intentionally trying to repeatedly initiate this riding behavior is considered a form of harassment that can disrupt essential resting, feeding or nursing behaviors, and may result in the dolphins leaving the immediate area.

- Dolphins also may approach idle boats, or fishing piers out of curiosity or looking for an easy meal. Some dolphins have learned to strip off fish from hooks or beg for handouts. Bring in your fishing lines if dolphins approach and do not attempt to reach out and touch dolphins. Intentionally entering the water to swim with dolphins in the wild is not recommended, as this activity has the potential to significantly disrupt the animals' natural behaviors.
- Feeding dolphins is especially dangerous and illegal. Begging dolphins will bite and seriously injure people when food is not forthcoming. Feeding brings dolphins closer to boats where they can, and have been, struck by boat propellers.



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- Be aware that attempting to swim with, pet, touch or elicit a reaction from dolphins has the potential to harm or disrupt their behavioral patterns. Such activities are therefore considered “harassment” as defined by the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

Signs of Disturbance

- Slapping the water's surface with their tails (tail slap).
- Changing direction of travel.
- Remaining underwater for extended time periods.



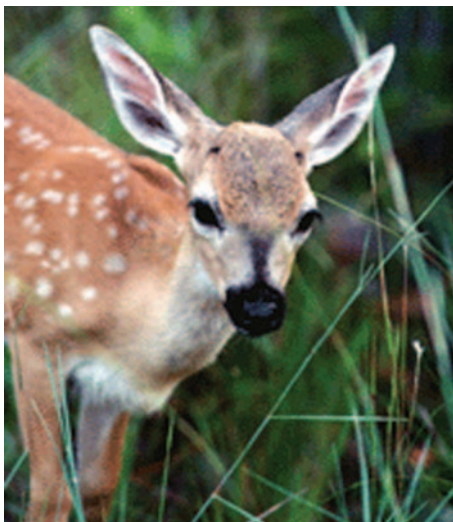
Lee Tiller

- Forcefully exhaling (chuff, which sounds like a cough).
- Jumping out of the water and landing on their sides (breach).

KEY DEER

Fun Facts

- Color varies from deep reddish brown to grizzled gray.
- Smallest deer in North America, reaching a height of 25 to 30 inches at the shoulder.



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- Related to the Virginia whitetail deer, but found only in the Florida Keys.
- Breeding can occur year-round, but peaks in September and October. Young, called fawns, arrive primarily in the rainy season during April and May. Newborn fawns weigh two to four lbs.
- Can drink some brackish water, but must have fresh water to survive.
- Status: Endangered Species (Endangered Species Act - U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

Where To Find Them

Ohio Key to Summerland Key, although two-thirds of the population is located on Big Pine and No Name Keys. The best and safest place to view Key deer is the north



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end of Key Deer Boulevard, part of the National Key Deer Refuge. Also look on the Refuge's nature trails and around the Blue Hole, on Big Pine Key. Visit the

National Key Deer Refuge Visitor Center on Big Pine Key. To get there from U.S. 1, turn north onto Key Deer Blvd., and then turn right into the Big Pine Key Shopping Center.

What To See

- Key deer are more active around dawn and dusk, tending to rest in the shade of trees in the middle of the day.
- The Key deer often feed alongside roads and will stand up on their hind legs to browse vegetation within reach.



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What To Do

- Road kills are a leading cause of Key deer deaths. Observe speed limits and remain alert, especially at night. The deer will freeze in the glare of headlights.

- When you see deer, use caution around other traffic and pull safely off roads. Observe them quietly from your car and remain at least 50 yards away. Deer can spook and bolt into traffic. Prevent this by keeping your distance, using slow movements, avoiding loud noise, and keeping pets under control.



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- If deer approach you, back off slowly, if possible, and maintain the 50 yards. Keep your hands in the car or close to your body, to avoid looking like you have food. Feeding Key deer is a serious problem, causing deer to congregate



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in larger than normal numbers, putting them at greater risk for disease, poaching and being hit by vehicles.

Signs of Disturbance

- Stomping the ground with their front hooves.
- Flashing the white underside of their tail.
- Moving away or fleeing.

MANATEES

Fun Facts

- Slow-moving marine mammals, gray-brown in color.
- Broad body tapers to a flat, paddle-like tail that moves up and down.
- Breathe air through two nostrils located at the end of their snout.



Mike Bacon



Mike Bacon

- Adults average 10 feet long and weigh about 1,000 lbs.
- May hold their breath on average

for three to five minutes when resting. When active, may surface as often as every 30 seconds.

- Are vegetarians and can consume up to 10% of their body weight in sea grasses and other aquatic plants daily.

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- Give birth to young, called calves, year-round, peaking between spring and fall.
- Have specialized molars that continuously replace themselves throughout their lives.
- Status: Endangered Species (Endangered Species Act, Marine Mammal Protection Act - U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

Where to Find Them

The Keys have a year-round population numbering between 18 and 26, which grows in winter as manatees head south to escape water temperatures below 68° F. You can find them in both the Atlantic and Gulf waters, close to shore, often feeding or resting in calm protected areas such as canals, boat basins and marinas, or traveling in channels. Manatees can often be viewed from piers at local hotels in the Upper Keys during the winter months.

What to See

- Swimming just under the water's surface, their big paddle-shaped tails create round, almost smooth patches of water surrounded by ripples, called "footprints." (see right photo)



FMRI

- When they surface to breathe, you may see the two round nostrils at the tip of the snout and, if you are quiet, hear a short slurping sound as they exhale, then inhale quickly. If they dive, you will see their broad flat back with no dorsal fin.

- Manatees feed on shallow bottoms near or at the surface, and on overhanging



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vegetation. The corners of their upper lips are very flexible and help to gather vegetation into their mouth.

Manatees use their two front flippers to maneuver.

- Almost all adult manatees will have white parallel scars across their backs or tails from strikes by boat

props. Other scars may be caused by fungi or barnacles. Scientists often use these scar patterns to identify individuals.



FMRI

What to Do

- While boating, follow all speed restrictions in designated areas and use idle speed in shallow areas. If possible, avoid the edges of channels, and seagrass beds.

- Watch for “footprints” that signal a manatee is just below the surface. If a manatee is close to your boat, shift the engine



FNRI

into neutral until you are sure that the manatee is safely past. Maintain a 50-yard distance when observing from a boat.

- Manatees will feed on the vegetation growing under docks and around piers and may accidentally eat fishing line and hooks. Avoid casting your line near them and reel it in if a manatee approaches.



Dolphin Research Center

- Be especially careful to bring all of your monofilament line back to shore. Getting tangled in discarded fishing

line is a common and serious threat to all wildlife in the Keys.

- Manatees may approach boats, docks or swimmers, looking for a handout. Resist the urge to reach out to touch them or to give them anything. By seeking handouts, manatees are at greater risk from boat collisions and from people who may feed them the wrong things or harass them. There is an abundance of aquatic plants and plenty of fresh water springs in the Florida Keys to satisfy their needs.

Signs of Disturbance

- Changing direction underwater.
- Interrupting activity to move away, fleeing.
- Separating mothers and calfs.

SEA TURTLES

Fun Facts

- Sea turtles are air-breathing reptiles with adaptations to spend most of their lives at sea.
- “Fly” through the water with amazing speed using paddle-shaped forelimbs.
- Can make repeated, deep dives searching for food, easily holding their breath 20 min. and up to two hours when resting.



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- Females dig nests in the sand with their back flippers. Each nest contains about 100 soft, leathery eggs resembling ping-pong balls.
- After incubating for two months, eggs hatch together and the two-inch baby turtles dig themselves out of the nest, usually at night, and scramble for the sea.
- Only 1% to 3% of sea turtle hatchlings will survive to adulthood.
- Status: Endangered Species – Green, Hawksbill, Leatherback and Kemp’s Ridley. Threatened Species – Loggerhead (Endangered Species Act - U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

Where to Find Them

The three species most commonly found in the Keys are the hawksbill, green and loggerhead turtles. Leatherback and Kemp's Ridley are more rare.

Loggerhead turtles are brownish-orange in color and named for their large, broad head, which can be 10 inches wide. Loggerheads are generally found in near shore waters, around bridges and in channels.

Hawksbill turtles are found on the

reef, where they stake out a favorite area, commonly including a hole, to which they

return after feeding. They may live here for many years. Their shield-shaped shell is covered with thick, horny overlapping plates in the classic "tortoiseshell" color pattern of brown, black, and amber streaks. Hawksbills have a narrow head and a beak-like snout.

Green sea turtles have a smooth, heart-shaped or oval, shell, olive to

brown in color. Some shells may have mottled, sunburst, or wavy patterns. The name, "green," comes from the greenish color of their body fat. They are the only vegetarian sea turtle and are found primarily in seagrass beds.



Mike Bacon



Mike Bacon

What to See

- Sea turtles spend most of the day sleeping or feeding. When feeding, greens will be grazing on sea grasses, hawksbills will be combing the reef for sponges and bottom-dwelling animals, and loggerheads will be using their powerful jaws to crush clams, crabs, conch and lobster. Loggerheads and juvenile greens also consider jellyfish a delicacy.



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- When resting, hawksbills will nestle among sea fans or wedge themselves into a crevice. Greens will often lodge themselves under a ledge to keep from surfacing and loggerheads will generally be found basking in the sun on the water's surface. While resting, sea turtles will remain immobile with their eyes open. When a sea turtle surfaces to breathe, it makes a "pop" sound, followed by a sharp intake of breath.



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- Like to stroll the beach at sunrise? You might see a "crawl," the trail a female turtle's flippers make crossing the beach to lay her eggs and return to the sea.

Later in the summer, dozens of smaller versions of this distinctive trail, heading from a nest to the water, show where hatchlings made their way to the ocean.

What to Do

- When snorkeling or diving, watch sea turtles quietly from a distance of 50 to 75 feet. Resist the urge to swim towards them, as they will flee rapidly if disturbed. Hawksbills, in particular, may be frightened away from their home and not return.
- If a sea turtle is on the surface near your boat, shift the engine into neutral. They



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are very likely to dive under the boat, the opposite of what you would expect. Boat collisions play a significant role in sea turtle loss.

- Sea turtles can be caught on a hook and line or get tangled in discarded monofilament and drown. Plastic bags resemble jellyfish, fooling sea turtles who eat them and often die. Avoid fishing near turtles and bring all of your fishing gear and trash back to shore with you.

- You can safely observe a nesting female from 50 to 75 feet away if you keep your voice low and avoid using any bright lights such as flashlights or flash photography.



Mike Bacon



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- If your home or vacation spot overlooks a nesting

beach, turn off beachside lights during hatching season, June through August, so you won't attract sea turtle hatchlings away from the water. If you see baby sea turtles heading in the wrong direction, try to eliminate the light that is attracting them away from the water by turning it off or closing the blinds. For turtles headed toward a road, call the FWCC number on the back of this brochure.

Signs of Disturbance

- Rapidly swimming away, fleeing.
- Rapidly diving.

Photo Credits

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(Note: photographs of dolphins were taken while conducting research under NOAA Fisheries General Authorization LOC No. 911-1722-00)

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Big Pine Kayak Adventures

www.keyskayaktours.com

Florida Marine Research Institute

www.floridamarine.org

Dolphin Research Center

www.dolphins.org

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Wildlife In Distress

If you see injured wildlife or to report harassment of wildlife, please call the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission toll free:

1-888-404-FWCC (1-888-404-3922)



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