



Almost 70 miles west of Key West, Fla., lies a cluster of seven islands, composed of coral reefs and sand, called the Dry Tortugas. With the surrounding shoals and water, they make up Dry Tortugas National Park, an area noted for bird and marine life and shipwrecks. Fort Jefferson, its central cultural feature, is the nation's largest 1800s masonry fort.

First named Las Tortugas (The Turtles) in 1513, by Spaniard Ponce de León, the reefs soon read "Dry Tortugas" on mariners' charts, to show they offered no fresh

water. In 1825 a lighthouse was built on Garden Key to warn sailors of coral shoals. The light that now stands on Loggerhead Key was built in 1857.

By 1829 the United States knew it could control navigation to the Gulf of Mexico and protect Atlantic-bound Mississippi River trade by fortifying the Tortugas. Fort Jefferson's construction started on Garden Key in 1846, and went on for 30 years but was never finished. During the Civil War the fort served as a Union military prison for captured deserters. It also held four men convicted of complicity in President Abraham Lincoln's assassination in 1865. The Army abandoned the fort in 1874.

In 1908 the area became a wildlife refuge to protect the sooty tern rookery from egg collectors. Proclaimed as Fort Jefferson National Monument in 1935, the area would be redesignated in 1992 as Dry Tortugas National Park to protect its nationally significant scenic, cultural, marine, and scientific values for the education and inspiration of the public. Not least among its natural treasures are its namesakes, the endangered green sea turtle and threatened loggerhead turtle. Snorkeling, swimming, saltwater sport fishing, underwater photography, birding, and touring the historic fort are popular park activities today.



Green sea turtle
©DOUG PERRINE/SEAPICS.COM

The large photo shows Fort Jefferson on Garden Key.
NPS

Coral Reefs

Vital to Nesting Birds

Be Prepared for Your Visit



Smallmouth grunts
©TOM STACK/TOM STACK ASSOCIATES



Snorkeling
NPS/JOHN BROOKS



Sooty tern
NPS



Frigate bird
©THELIP COLLA

Warm, clear, and well lit, the Dry Tortugas' shallow waters foster optimal conditions for coral reefs to develop on the outer edges of tropical islands. Actual builders of these fringing reefs are small primitive animals called polyps. Over centuries the polyps accumulate in living colonies that form the reef's rigid structures—so often misconstrued as rocks. Though fragile, the Tortugas reef complex supports a wealth of marine life.

Multicolored sea fans sway in gentle currents. Sea anemones thrust upward their rose and lavender tentacles in search of food. Lobsters anticipating danger wave their antennae. Sponges dot sandy bottoms, and staghorn coral clusters simulate underwater forests. Most obvious among coral reef inhabitants are the colorful reef fishes. Vivid and boldly patterned reds, yellows, greens, and blues work like camouflage and identity, warning, and court-

ship messages. Predatory fish include amberjacks, groupers, wahoos, tarpon, and, atop this coral reef food pyramid, sharks and barracudas.

Sea turtle populations have diminished worldwide mostly from illegal hunting for gourmet meat, leather, and cosmetic oils. But green, loggerhead, and hawksbill turtles can still be seen in the Dry Tortugas.

Sea turtles prey on small marine invertebrates and forage turtle grass and other aquatic plants. Twice or more per season females lumber onto beaches to dig out nests, lay up to 100 eggs, cover them, and retreat seaward. Hatchlings crawl seaward by instinct, but many succumb to natural predators somewhere between the nest and the sea. It is critical that humans not add to the threat by disturbing sea turtles or their nests.

In season a succession of songbirds and other migrants fly over or rest at the Dry Tortugas. The islands lie across a principal flyway between the United States and Cuba and South America. Familiar up north in summer, many gulls, terns, and migratory shore birds winter here.

A great wildlife spectacle happens yearly between February and September when as many as 100,000 sooty terns gather on Bush Key for nesting season. They come from the Caribbean Sea and west-central Atlantic Ocean. As early as mid-January, sooties perform nocturnal maneuvers above the Dry Tortugas but spend their days at sea. When they do land here in February, egg-laying starts immediately.

Bush Key is closed to landings during tern nesting season, but the rookery is readily witnessed from the fort with binoculars. Sooty parents take turns shading the

single egg—laid in a simple depression in warm sands—from sunlight. As the young birds grow strong enough for continuous flight, the colony disperses.

Interspersed among the sooties' rookery are up to 10,000 breeding brown noddies. Unlike sooties and most other terns, the noddies nest in vegetation like bay cedar and sea lavender. Sooties and noddies both feed by capturing fish and squid from the sea's surface while in flight.

Magnificent frigate birds soar with seven-foot wingspans. They prey on fish and tern hatchlings. You may also see masked and brown boobies, roseate terns, brown pelicans, and double-crested cormorants.

Dry Tortugas National Park is one of over 390 parks in the National Park System. To learn more about parks and National Park Service programs visit www.nps.gov.

The park is open all year. Fort Jefferson is open daylight hours only, as are Loggerhead, East, and Middle keys. Boats and amphibious planes serve the park from Key West. Go to "Plan Your Visit" on the park website (see below) for ferry and seaplane information. **You must be self-sufficient:** the park has no public lodging, water, food, bathing facilities, or supplies. **Warning:** extremely rough seas are always possible here.

An entry fee (16 years old and up) provides a permit to use the park. Part of your ferry or seaplane fee, it is valid for seven days. If you visit Garden Key by private boat, put your entrance fee in the self-service fee station on the dock.

Getting Around the Park On arrival see the orientation program at the visitor center in the fort and do the self-guiding fort tour. The parade ground has remains of the Officers' Quarters, Soldiers' Barracks, two magazines, and restored hot-shot furnace. Beware of loose mortar and bricks and wall edges. Help us preserve the park's features by leaving everything in place. And please do not litter.

Overnight Stays Camp only in the Garden Key primitive campground (fee), first-come, first-served (until a reservation program is set up). Limit 14 consecutive days, 30 days per calendar year. Grills, picnic tables, compost toilets, and posts for hanging food provided. Groups of 10 or more must obtain a reservation *in advance*—contact the park. Overnight anchorage in the park must be within one nautical mile of the Garden Key Harbor Light.

Natural and Cultural Features *Collecting, commercial fishing, spearfishing, and the taking of conch or lobster are prohibited.* Don't disturb shells, coral, sea fans, tropical fish, spiny lobsters, or turtles or their

nests. Shipwrecks, their cargo, and all artifacts are protected by federal law.

Closures February to September (or as posted), Bush Key is reserved for birds only. Hospital and Long keys are closed all year. Other closures may occur as necessary.

Loggerhead Key Day use only; no public lodging. All buildings are off limits. The pier is closed to docking by the public: to enter, anchor offshore and approach the beach by small boat.

Research Natural Area Forty-six percent of the park is a Research Natural Area (RNA), part of a national network of ecological areas for education, non-manipulative research, education, and preserving biological and genetic diversity. As sanctuaries for species affected by harvesting or degraded habitat, RNAs provide baseline ecosystem information. (The area within one nautical mile of the Garden Key Harbor Light and the central part of Loggerhead Key are not in the RNA.)

Only non-consumptive recreation activity is allowed in the RNA: there is no fishing, collecting, or—when moorings are installed—anchoring. Contact the park for current regulations or visit the Florida Keys Eco-Discovery Center, 35 East Quay, Key West, FL 33040, 305-809-4750, www.floridakeys.noaa.gov/eco_discovery.html. The Tortugas Ecological Reserve, adjacent to the RNA, has the highest percentage of living coral cover in the Florida Keys.

More Information
Dry Tortugas National Park
P.O. Box 6208
Key West, FL 33041
305-242-7700
www.nps.gov/dрто

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Docking, Mooring, Seaplanes, and More

Dry Tortugas offers dramatic natural and cultural features for you to enjoy. Marine life concentrates near patches of live coral. You can explore the coral wonderlands in just three or four feet of water.

Docking facilities are reserved for park-permitted ferries 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. daily. Load, unload,

and moor vessels only as designated on the public dock and for up to two hours between sunrise and sunset. Overnight mooring to docks or piers is prohibited. Anchor overnight only within one nautical mile of the fort.

Approaches, landings, and takeoffs by seaplanes must be within one nautical mile of the fort.

Moor seaplanes only in the designated area at Garden Key. To dump or pump holding tanks in park waters is prohibited. Until mooring buoys are installed, anchoring on sand bottom in the Research Natural Area (RNA) is allowed. Fishing is prohibited in the RNA.

Warnings

Park waters may have strong currents. Be safety conscious. Divers and snorkelers must display the flag indicating "divers down."

Submerged features like coral make navigating in the park's waters hazardous.

Y "E"
Fl Y 6s
24°39'00"N
82°58'00"W

Y "D"

24°36'00"N
82°58'00"W

24°34'00"N
82°58'00"W
Y "C"
Fl Y 4s

PARK BOUNDARY

Y "F"

Loggerhead Key
Fl W 20s 167ft 24M

Windjammer wreck
Loggerhead Reef

G "I"

RESEARCH NATURAL AREA BOUNDARY

SOUTHWEST CHANNEL

Y "B"

TORTUGAS ECOLOGICAL RESERVE
TORTUGAS NORTH

NORTHWEST CHANNEL

Y "H"
Fl Y 2.5s
24°43'00"N
82°54'00"W

Texas Rock

Brilliant Shoal

DRY TORTUGAS NATIONAL PARK

Middle Ground

Fort Jefferson
on Garden Key
(see inset below right)

White Shoal

DRY TORTUGAS

RESEARCH NATURAL AREA BOUNDARY

"1"

Y "Q"

FLORIDA KEYS
NATIONAL MARINE
SANCTUARY

Y "A"
Fl Y 2.5s
24°34'00"N
82°54'00"W

This map is an orientation aid for visitors to Dry Tortugas National Park. It should not be used in place of National Ocean Survey chart 11438, which is indispensable for safe boating on these waters.

SOUTHEAST CHANNEL

PARK BOUNDARY

RESEARCH NATURAL AREA BOUNDARY

24°36'00"N
82°51'00"W

Y "P"

Middle Key
(awash in summer)

East Key

Y "O"
Fl Y 6s
24°37'00"N
82°48'00"W

Pulaski Shoal
Fl W 6s 49ft 9M

GOOD SCUBA DIVING

24°42'00"N
82°46'00"W
Y "L"
Fl Y 2.5s

Y "M"
Fl Y 4s
24°40'00"N
82°46'00"W

FLORIDA KEYS
NATIONAL MARINE
SANCTUARY

Y "N"



0 1 Kilometer
0 1 Statute Mile
0 1 Nautical Mile

- | | | | | |
|---------------|---------------|--------------|------------|--------------|
| Red daymark | White daymark | Buoy | Light | Sunken wreck |
| Green daymark | Daybeacon | Lighted buoy | Lighthouse | Rock |

- Buoy characteristics
R Red
G Green
Y Yellow
- Light characteristics
Fl Flashing
W White
R Red
Y Yellow
s Period (in seconds)

