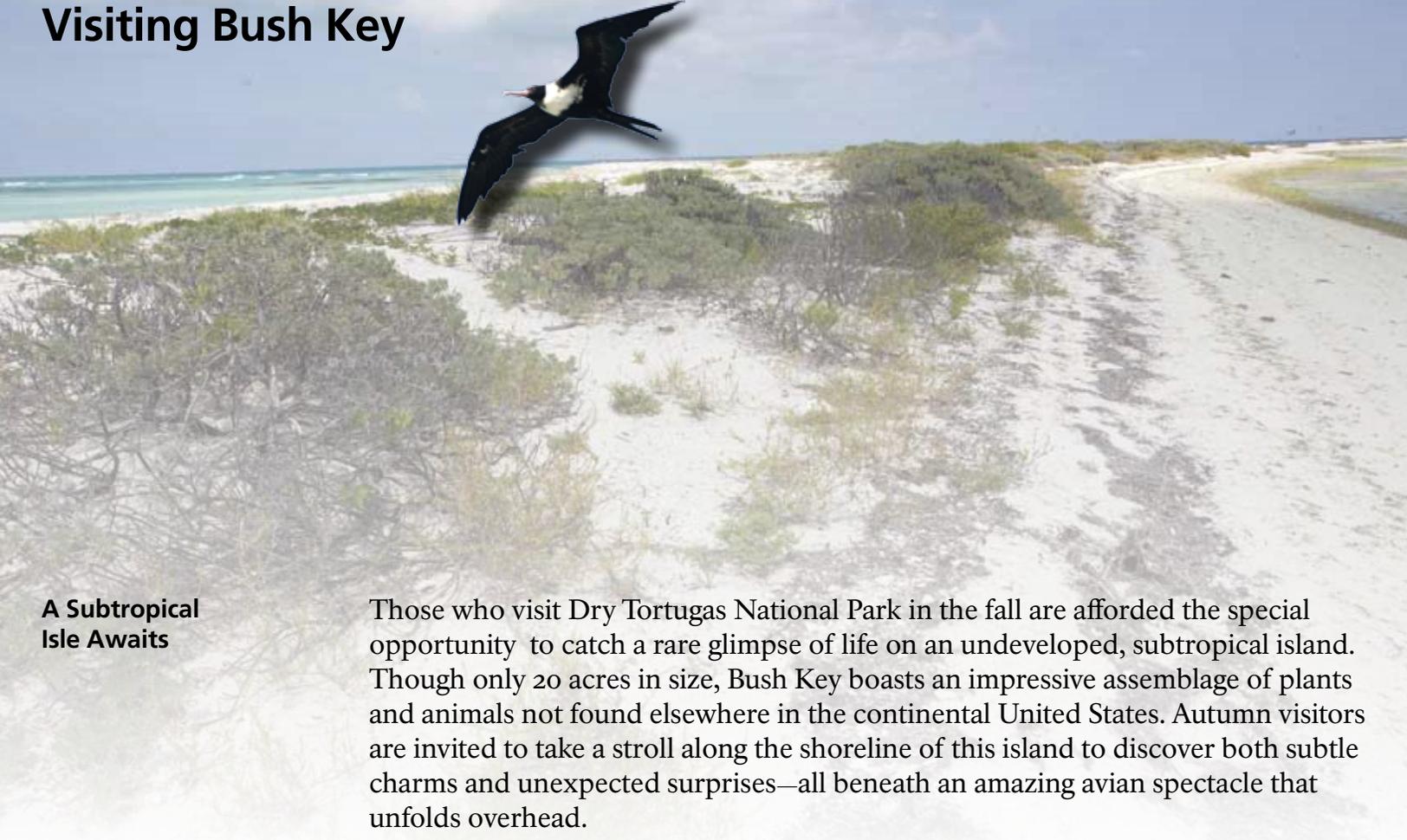




Visiting Bush Key



A Subtropical Isle Awaits

Those who visit Dry Tortugas National Park in the fall are afforded the special opportunity to catch a rare glimpse of life on an undeveloped, subtropical island. Though only 20 acres in size, Bush Key boasts an impressive assemblage of plants and animals not found elsewhere in the continental United States. Autumn visitors are invited to take a stroll along the shoreline of this island to discover both subtle charms and unexpected surprises—all beneath an amazing avian spectacle that unfolds overhead.

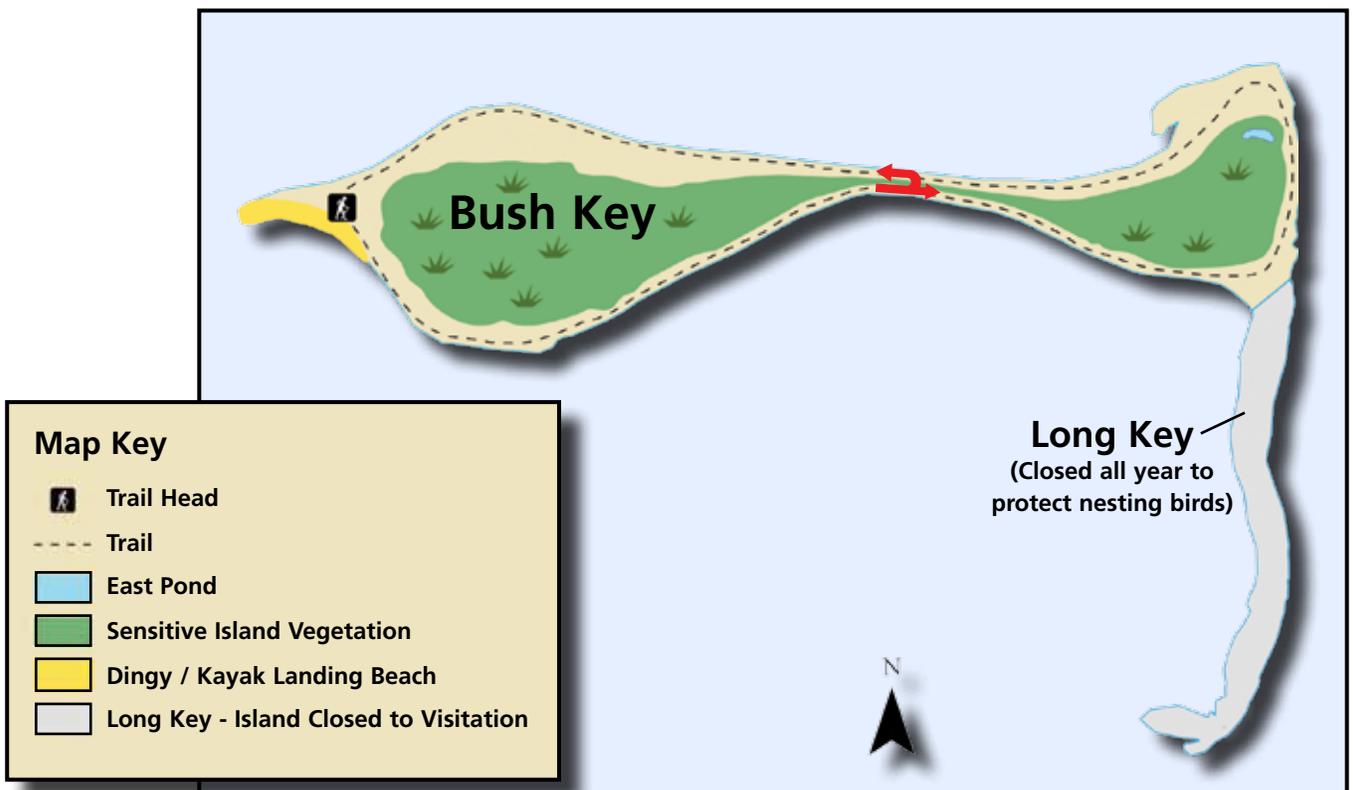
Island Access

Bush Key is open for visitation annually from October 15 to January 15. During this time, visitors are welcome to land kayaks, canoes, dinghies, or small skiffs on the beach at the western end of the island from sunrise to sunset. To preserve a tranquil visitor experience, landings are limited to a total of 24 persons daily, and visitors are required to obtain a vessel permit from a park ranger.

From the landing beach, a 1-mile trail winds along the margin of Bush Key, providing opportunities to experience some of the area's natural features, including sand beaches, coastal dunes, and an active Magnificent Frigatebird colony.

Visitors seeking a shorter walk are invited to use the designated crossover trail located approximately midway along the island. Visitors are asked to stay on marked trails to prevent disturbing vegetation and nesting wildlife. A sturdy pair of closed-toe shoes is recommended, and visitors are advised to use caution while navigating the rocky terrain of coral rubble. Visitors are also advised to bring an ample supply of drinking water.

Visitors should plan approximately 1-2 hours to explore Bush Key. Inquire at the visitor center on Garden Key regarding the availability of ranger-led tours during your stay.



Island Living

The cycle of life unfolds continuously on Bush Key. Skeletons of red mangrove trees rise along the northern shore of the island in silent testimony to the power of occasional hurricanes. But beneath, amidst sand and coral rubble, grows a verdant garden of sea lavender, prickly pear cactus, and coastal sea rocket. Among the roots and rocks wander hundreds of tiny hermit crabs. Some timber or an old bottle might even be found washed upon the shore—seafaring flotsam from a far distant coast, perhaps. Such curiosities may lower your gaze, but its important to also look up!

Brown Pelicans, Double-crested Cormorants, gulls, and terns all frequent Bush Key in great numbers. And from a distance, visitors can take

in the daring aerial maneuvers of immense Magnificent Frigatebirds as they conspicuously circle their nests on Long Key. A quick glance into the shallows south of Bush Key might even find a nurse shark swimming idly by—plying the waters of the nearby Nurse Shark Special Protection Zone.



Dense growth of sea lavender and coral rubble beaches are but a few of the scenes that greet visitors to Bush Key.

The Other Nine Months

Access to Bush Key is restricted for the majority of the year to protect the unique assemblage of wildlife that gathers on the island. Cacophonous nesting colonies of Frigatebirds, Brown Pelicans, Brown Noddies, and Sooty Terns take up residence in the spring, where they raise their young before abandoning the island again in late summer.

During the fall migration, Bush Key beckons a collection of transient songbirds, warblers, and raptors en route through the Atlantic flyway. These birds often depend upon the island vegetation for protective cover.

The key also provides important habitat for both loggerhead and green sea turtles, which nest on the sandy beaches of Bush Key throughout the summer. In addition, the island provides habitat for a surprising year-round resident—a federally-protected American crocodile, which can occasionally be found sunning itself. For years, this crocodile has called the East Pond of Bush Key home, and visitors are asked to maintain a respectful distance wherever it is encountered.



Sooty Terns (top) and Brown Noddies (bottom) are present seasonally at Bush Key.

Island in Flux

The Dry Tortugas are a dynamic landscape. The actions of wind and water are a constant catalyst for change, and the islands respond to them dramatically. As evidence, the number of islands found here has varied over time between eleven and six.

Swarming masses of nesting birds that were once known to exist on Bird Key took up residence on nearby Bush Key when the former disappeared into the sea in the 1930s. During subsequent years, the coastline of Bush Key undulated in tune with the waters around it—alternately merging and rifting with nearby Garden and Long Keys.

Hurricanes Katrina and Wilma passed near the islands of the Dry Tortugas in 2005, stripping Bush Key of much of its vegetation. The island remained closed to visitation during subsequent years, affording the establishment of the new growth that is visible today.

Beyond physical change, the human history of Bush Key has also evolved over time. Throughout history, the island has served as a reliable source of wild eggs and meat, as pasture for cattle, and a quarry for the construction of Fort Jefferson. Today, the island offers solitude and inspiration for visitors to Dry Tortugas National Park.



Aerial photos of Bush Key taken circa 1962 and 2005 show pronounced changes in island vegetation and shape.