



Almost 70 miles west of Key West, Florida, 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 one of the nation's largest 1800s masonry forts.

First named Las Tortugas (The Turtles) in 1513, by Spanish explorer 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 turtles and threatened loggerhead turtles that nest here. Snorkeling, swimming, saltwater sport fishing, underwater photography, birding, and touring the historic fort are popular activities in the park today.



Green sea turtle  
© DOUG PERRINE / SEAPICS.COM

The large photo shows Fort Jefferson on Garden Key.  
NPS

## Coral Reefs



Smallmouth grunts  
© TOM STACK / TOM STACK ASSOCIATES



Snorkeling  
NPS / JOHN BROOKS

Warm, clear, and well lit, the shallow waters of the Dry Tortugas foster optimal conditions for coral reefs to develop on the outer edges of these islands. Actual builders of these fringing reefs are small primitive animals called polyps. Over centuries these polyps accumulate in living colonies that form the reef’s rigid structures that are 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 create 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

courtship 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 seagrass 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.

## Vital to Nesting Birds



Sooty tern  
NPS

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 North America and South America. Familiar up north in summer, many gulls, terns, and migratory shore birds winter here.

A great wildlife spectacle happens yearly between mid-January and mid-October 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, 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



Frigate bird  
© PHILIP COLLA

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 400 parks in the National Park System. To learn more about parks and National Park Service programs visit [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov).

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## Be Prepared for Your Visit

The park is open all year. Fort Jefferson is open daylight hours only, as is Loggerhead Key. Boats and amphibious planes serve the park from Key West. Go to “Plan Your Visit” on the park website for ferry and seaplane information. **You must be self-sufficient:** the park has no public lodging, water, food, bathing facilities, trash facilities, or supplies. Private pleasure boats are welcome, but must be fully self-sufficient and must acquire a permit through the park rangers at Garden Key.

An entry fee is charged for each person age 16 and up. It is part of your ferry or seaplane fee. If you arrive by private vessel, you must come ashore at Garden Key and pay your park entry fee at the self-service fee station on the main dock. Your entry fee is valid for seven days.

**Getting Around the Park** On arrival orient yourself at the visitor center inside the fort. The parade ground has remains of the Officers’ Quarters, Soldiers’ Barracks, two magazines, and restored hotshot 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. 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, tropi-

cal fish, spiny lobsters, or turtles or their nests. Shipwrecks, their cargo, and all artifacts are protected by federal law.

**Closures** Mid-January to mid-October (or as posted), Bush Key is reserved for birds only. East, Hospital, Long, and Middle keys are closed all year. Other closures may occur as necessary.

**Loggerhead Key** Day use only; no public lodging. All buildings are closed to the public. The pier is closed to docking by the public. To visit, tie off to the mooring ball and approach the beach by small boat.

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

Only non-consumptive recreation activity is allowed in the RNA: There is no fishing or collecting. Anchoring is also prohibited. Contact the park for current regulations or visit Florida Keys Eco-Discovery Center, 35 East Quay, Key West, FL 33040, [www.floridakeys.noaa.gov/eco\\_discovery.html](http://www.floridakeys.noaa.gov/eco_discovery.html) or 305-809-4750. Tortugas Ecological Reserve, which is next to the RNA, has the highest percentage of living coral cover in the Florida Keys.

**More Information**  
Dry Tortugas National Park  
PO Box 6208  
Key West, FL 33041  
305-242-7700  
[www.nps.gov/dрто](http://www.nps.gov/dрто)

## Docking, Mooring, Seaplanes, and More

At Dry Tortugas you can enjoy dramatic natural and cultural features. 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 am to 3 pm daily. Load, unload, and moor vessels 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. Dumping or pumping holding tanks in park waters is prohibited.

Seaplanes must approach, land, and takeoff within one nautical mile of the fort and moor only in the designated area at Garden Key.

Anchoring, fishing, and collecting are prohibited in the Research Natural Area (RNA).

East, Hospital, Long, and Middle keys are closed to protect nesting sea turtles and birds. Bush Key is closed mid-January to mid-October to protect nesting terns. For all closures, people and boats must stay at least 100 feet from the mean low tide mark or obey buoys or signs.

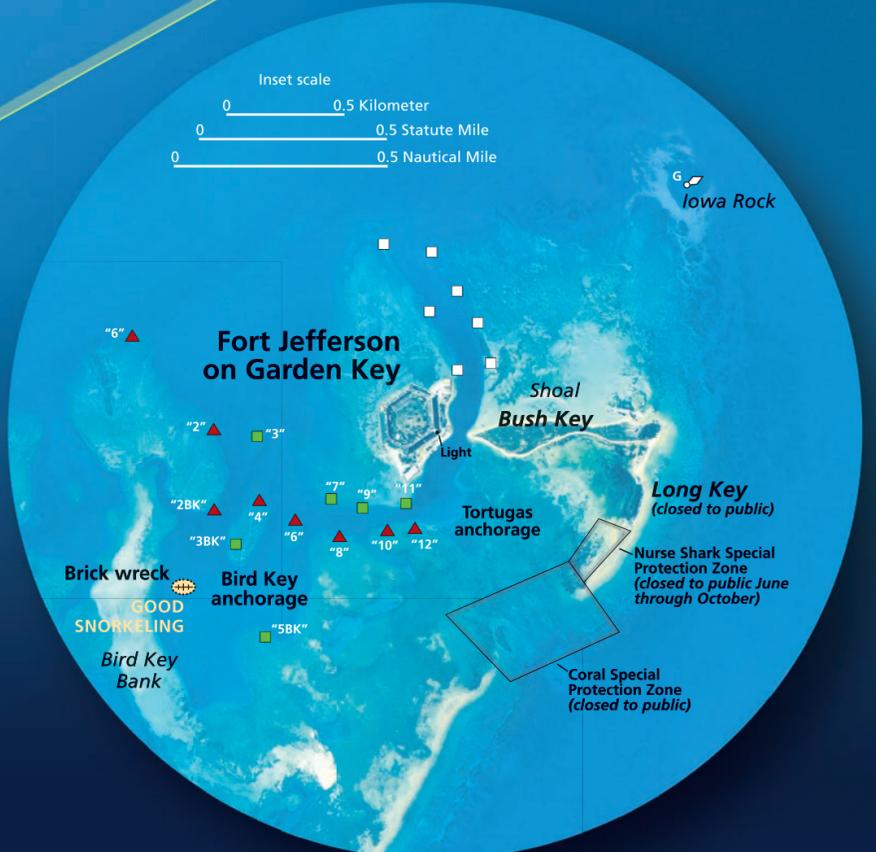
**Warnings**  
Park waters may have strong currents. Be safety conscious. Divers and snorkelers must display the flag indicating "divers down" when not in the designated swim area.

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

TORTUGAS ECOLOGICAL RESERVE  
TORTUGAS NORTH



0 1 Kilometer  
0 1 Statute Mile  
0 1 Nautical Mile



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.

|               |               |              |            |              |   |  |
|---------------|---------------|--------------|------------|--------------|---|--|
| Red daymark   | White daymark | Buoy         | Light      | Sunken wreck | <b>Buoy characteristics</b><br>R Red<br>G Green<br>Y Yellow | <b>Light characteristics</b><br>Fl Flashing<br>W White<br>R Red<br>Y Yellow<br>s Period (in seconds) |
| Green daymark | Daybeacon     | Lighted buoy | Lighthouse | Rock         |   |  |