

Voices for Nature

News from the Friends of the Florida Keys National Wildlife Refuges



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Colleen Fuller

Photo: Colleen Fuller

Crocodile Lake • National Key Deer • Great White Heron • Key West

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A MOMENT IN NATURE

BIRTH OF A KEY DEER

By Colleen Fuller, FKWS Board Member

This year was a very special one for me — I witnessed the birth of a Key deer fawn! I love wildlife photography, and my passion is photographing the Key deer, which I've been doing since I moved to Big Pine Key from Miami in 2015. I've photographed everything from bucks shedding their velvet and fighting during the rut to deer swimming in the bight, a doe nursing four fawns, and even deer mating! The one thing I've never photographed, until April 12th this year, was a doe giving birth to her tiny fawn. WOW! What an experience! This is something that very few people ever get to witness, and if it wasn't for a good friend who alerted me, I would have never experienced something so magical. **Continued on page 6.**

A WORD FROM THE BIG BIRD

As we head into our 30th year (I know, right?!), we're looking for even more ways to bring our members together. One of our goals is to host more events where we can spend time together, share our love of the Keys and its wildlife, and simply get to know each other in person. Of course, we'll continue some of our favorite traditions, too. Don't forget our Full Moon Kayak paddles and the annual Run With Deer 5K — two events that have become favorites for members and the community alike. We hope you'll join us for one (or both!) and bring a friend. The more people who experience the incredible wildlife and wild places of the Florida Keys, the stronger our conservation community becomes.

As summer winds down, our busiest season is just around the corner. Soon we'll welcome seasonal residents, winter visitors, migrating birds, and volunteers returning to the Keys, all bringing new energy to our mission of supporting wildlife and the unique habitats that make the Florida Keys so special.

This season promises to be an exciting one. We'll be preparing for a new lecture series, our Season Kickoff Get-together, Native Plant Giveaway, and welcoming visitors to our Nature Center and Nature Store. Every event, every volunteer shift, and every membership renewal helps us connect people with nature while supporting conservation projects throughout the Florida Keys National Wildlife Refuges.

None of this happens without you. Whether you volunteer in the Nature Store, help at an event, serve on a committee, make a donation, or simply share your enthusiasm for wildlife with friends and neighbors, you are an essential part of this organization. Together, we're making a lasting difference for native plants, wildlife, and the people who come to experience these remarkable places.

We're also looking for a few more helping hands. If you've ever considered becoming more involved, now is a wonderful time. We have opportunities for people with every interest and schedule — including a pressing need for a Society Treasurer. If you enjoy supporting conservation and have experience with QuickBooks or bookkeeping, we'd love to hear from you.

Thank you for being part of the Florida Keys Wildlife Society. I look forward to seeing many of you at our upcoming events as we celebrate another season of conservation, education, and community.

— Kathy Rhodes,
Florida Keys Wildlife Society Chair



FLORIDA KEYS WILDLIFE SOCIETY

We are the official friends group of the Florida Keys National Wildlife Refuges, a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization whose mission is to support the Keys' four NWRs — Crocodile Lake, National Key Deer, Great White Heron, and Key West — through education, advocacy, volunteerism, and fundraising.

The National Wildlife Refuge System, within the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, protects wildlife and habitat on more than 150 million acres of land and water from the Caribbean to the Pacific, Maine to Alaska. Refuges improve human health, provide outdoor recreation, and support local economies. For more on NWRs, see www.fws.gov/refuges.

The mission of the USFWS is working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. They are known for scientific excellence and stewardship of lands. For more, see www.fws.gov.

Florida Keys Wildlife Society:
Nature Store: 30587 Overseas Hwy., Big Pine Key, FL 33043. Mailing: P.O. Box 431840, Big Pine Key, 33043; 305-872-0645; www.FloridaKeysWildlifeSociety.org, info@FloridaKeysWildlifeSociety.org

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We encourage all nature lovers to get involved. For volunteering info, scan the QR code; also see page 16 for membership/volunteer ops.
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UPCOMING EVENTS

"TOGETHER FOR WILDLIFE" GET-TOGETHER

November 17 marks our newest event, Together for Wildlife: Kicking Off a New Season for the Florida Keys National Wildlife Refuges. It will be held at the Lower Keys Chamber of Commerce and is free, but an RSVP is required.

LECTURE SERIES: WILD FLORIDA KEYS

We're still gathering speakers for the '26-'27 lecture series, so check our social media for updates and sign up for our email news. Last year's series featured six lectures, all free to the public. The events take place at the Nature Center on Big Pine Key, and most often all 50 seats are filled, so come early. By request, we have also started to Zoom broadcast the presentations.

FULL MOON KAYAK

Paddlers wind through mangrove tunnels and across the wildlife-rich flats of Big Pine and No Name Keys. These excursions take place near the full moon, are sponsored by Captain Bill Keogh and his company, Big Pine Kayak Adventures. They're also made possible thanks to a dozen volunteer guides, including event organizer Marianne Shepperd (learn more about her on page 4).

- October 24, Saturday, 5:15 to 7:15 p.m.
- November 22, Sunday, 4:00 to 6:00 p.m.
- December 22, Tuesday, 4:00 to 6:00 p.m.
- January 20, Wednesday, 4:15 to 6:15 p.m.
- February 21, Sunday, 4:30 to 6:30 p.m.
- March 20, Saturday, 6:00 to 8:00 p.m.
- April 19, Monday, 6:15 to 8:15 p.m.

If you would like to volunteer to guide the trips, we will be having training in November. Please email Marianne to be notified of the exact date and time: mariannef@mail.com.

For more info on upcoming events, see: FloridaKeysWildlifesociety.org/Coming-Up/.

NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE WEEK

Refuge Week 2026 runs from October 10 to 17, and we typically celebrate it with an open house at the Nature Center and Nature Store, plus a wildlife walk. Unfortunately, last year's event was canceled due to a government shutdown, and we have no way of knowing if that's in the cards for this year. So, the best we can say is... stay tuned.

RUN WITH DEER 5K

This year's annual run (and walk!) will be on February 13, 2027, and we'd love to have you join us, for the run or as a volunteer. The event raises money for the Florida Keys National Wildlife Refuges, plus is just a boatload — or rather an antler-full — of fun, with costumes and camaraderie. Registrants and volunteers also get a T-shirt and reusable tote bag sporting logos of the four Florida Keys Refuges.

NATIVE PLANT GIVEAWAY

This season, we're moving our popular Native Plant Giveaway to April 2027, which is also Native Plant Month for Florida. Come pick up a new addition for your yard, and help us spread the word about the benefits of native plants.



Photo: Brewster Rhoads.

VOLUNTEER WITH THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY



We're always looking for passionate nature enthusiasts to join our team of volunteers. If you love the idea of supporting your local National Wildlife Refuge and meeting people from all over the world, consider volunteering with us. Whether it's helping out at events like Native Plant Day or assisting in our store, there are plenty of ways to get involved. For more information, stop by the Nature Store, message: info@FloridaKeysWildlifeSociety.org, or scan the QR code to the right.

WHY I VOLUNTEER

By Kathy Rhodes, FKWS Chair

Do you wonder why someone would volunteer with the Florida Keys Wildlife Society? For me, the answer is simple: the people. One of the greatest pleasures of volunteering is getting to know others who care deeply about wildlife and wild places. They're generous people who willingly give their time — not for a paycheck, but for the satisfaction of knowing they're making a difference. Along the way, they've become some of my favorite people to spend time with.

Volunteering has also introduced me to an amazing network of Friends organizations across the National Wildlife Refuge System. We've met dedicated volunteers from refuges all over the country, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has always been incredibly supportive of the Friends groups that help protect these special places.

And then there are the visitors. Whether you're greeting people in the Nature Store, staffing the refuge front desk, or welcoming visitors at Blue Hole, you'll meet people from literally every corner of the world. I've had conversations with families on their first trip to the Keys, birders who have traveled thousands of miles to see a single species, and travelers who simply stumbled upon a refuge and left with a new appreciation for nature. Every day brings a different story.

Yes, we help protect wildlife and wild places — and that's reason enough to volunteer. But I've discovered that volunteering also enriches my own life. The friendships, the conversations, and the shared sense of purpose have been every bit as rewarding as the work itself.

By Marianne Shepperd

After volunteering as a guide with the Full Moon Kayak program for a few years, Nancy Chatelaine (former manager of the FKWS Nature Store) asked me to help out with the program in early 2020 so that she could devote her energies to the store. The next two events were canceled due to weather, and then we were shut down due to Covid, so my first year was really easy.

When it was time to restart the program, I found I was now in charge, so Bill Keogh (of Big Pine Kayak Adventures) and I got everything up and running. Many of our guides returned to volunteer again, plus we got additional guides as well. We added advertising banners, additional safety equipment, and training to use that equipment. The Full Moon Kayak excursions have since continued as a fabulously fun fundraiser to benefit the refugees of the Florida Keys.

Some evenings, the sky is bland, the winds are a challenge, or we don't see much wildlife. Other nights, the sky is filled with magnificently lighted clouds, an incredibly bright moon, and all kinds of creatures, both in the sea and the air.

Some that I've seen include: green herons, white herons, blue herons, night herons, kingfishers, frigate birds, white pelicans, brown pelicans, cormorants, egrets, osprey, Cassiopeia jellyfish, horseshoe crabs, blue crabs, hermit crabs, tulip snails, sponges, anemones, manatees, turtles, a snake, tree snails, mangrove crabs, baby snapper, permit,

bonnethead sharks, nurse sharks, lemon sharks, mullet, tarpon, needlefish, baby barracuda, and baby grunts. We spend a lot of time in and near the mangroves, so it's fun finding big schools of the young ones. There have also been nights with a lot of no-see-ums. Those are not so pleasant.

I've lived on Big Pine for over 11 years now, and it is wonderful. Besides the Full Moon Kayak events, I lead our monthly Bunco group and the Mah Jongg group in Big Pine, plus play Mah Jongg in Marathon as well. I play the bassoon, and occasionally the flute, with the Keys Chamber Orchestra, where I am also board secretary, and play the triple cello drums, or the tenor, in the Marathon Steel Drum Band. There is also line dancing, where I teach a few dances, and occasionally lead when necessary.

Retirement has been fabulous. So many fun things to do and great opportunities abound if you're ready to look for them.



OUR NEWEST REFUGES STAFF MEMBER ANNA MARLOW, NATIONAL KEY DEER REFUGE

By Anna Marlow

Hi! My name is Anna Marlow, and I am working at National Key Deer Refuge as the Community Engagement and Visitor Services member through American Conservation Experience. I graduated from the University of Denver in 2025, obtaining a Bachelor of Science in Environmental Science, with minors in Business Administration and Photography.

I grew up in Tacoma, Washington, but following my college graduation, I moved to Florida to intern at J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge on Sanibel Island. Following the internship, I have made my way down to the beautiful Florida Keys to work at National Key Deer Refuge!

I have always been a big fan of wildlife and the outdoors. I was able to spend much of my childhood hiking, camping, backpacking, and more. I learned from a young age the importance of wildlife, their habitats, and having protected spaces such as wildlife refuges. This love and passion for

our environment is what has led me to work at great places like our National Key Deer Refuge.

Here, I assist with a variety of tasks. I do a lot of work with our Key Deer Research and Response Program, a partnership between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), which helps with injured and deceased deer. I also assist at our Nature Center and Nature Store, create posts and take photos for our Facebook page, attend outreach events, work closely with our volunteers, and so much more! Every day is a new adventure.

A big thank you to the Florida Keys Wildlife Society and the Florida Keys National Wildlife Refuges Complex for funding me in this position; I love working here with the amazing staff and volunteers! This has been a great experience so far, and I'm looking forward to seeing and learning even more!



WANTED: ARGENTINE BLACK AND WHITE TEGU INVASIVE SPECIES WARNING

By Isabella Collamati, Biologist, Crocodile Lake NWR

Argentine black and white tegus are a large species of lizard native to South America, characterized by their black-and-white banded coloration. They can reach up to five feet in length and are commonly found in disturbed habitats such as clearings and roadsides.

Tegus have been established in Miami-Dade County for several years, and have a reputation for eating the eggs and young of sensitive species, including American alligators, sea turtles, ground-nesting birds, and gopher tortoises.

While not yet established (breeding) in the Florida Keys, sightings have been increasing since the first wild individual was found in Key Largo in the spring of 2025. Many of the environmental harms they have demonstrated on the mainland are equally, if not more of a risk, in the sensitive ecosystems of the Keys, which are home to threatened and endangered species like the American Crocodile, Key Largo woodrat, and Key Largo cotton mouse.

At the time of this writing, sightings have only encompassed a 20-mile spread from the Card Sound bridge/CR-905 intersection down to MM 98 on US-1. But, if tegus establish and spread farther into the Keys, then the Lower Keys marsh rabbit and silver rice rat could also be under threat.

Despite the increase in sightings, the population is still believed to be low, which means we may still have a chance to prevent the species from establishing. Rapid response and removal are critical in these early stages, and that is only possible with public participation in looking out for and reporting when/where a species occurs.

If you see a tegu, please follow these three steps to

ensure managers in the area receive the information they need to be able to verify sightings and respond as needed.

1. Take a picture. 2. Record the location. Most pictures taken with cellphones will already have the location attached, but it doesn't hurt to drop a pin on Apple/Google maps! 3. Use a reporting resource. Either call FWC's IVEGOT1 hotline (888-483-4681), use the IVEGOT1 app, or enter the information into the EDDMapS website (<https://www.eddmaps.org/reportform/test.cfm?formid=98>).

Remember, timing is critical and so is spreading the word. Tegus would bring yet another added pressure to a sensitive ecosystem already bearing the burden of numerous invasive species. The sooner a report is filed, the more likely a successful response effort will be made.

Below: tegu in the wild, courtesy Alec Rex, python contractor. Bottom: trapped tegu, public domain, taken at an invasive reptile trapping event in Fort Pierce, Florida.



THE MAGIC OF KEY DEER FAWN SEASON ON BIG PINE KEY

By Colleen Fuller, FKWS Board Member and Secretary, Volunteer, and member of Key Deer Research and Response Team

It's fall on Big Pine Key, and most of the fawns you'll see are from the spring season. They have fading spots or have lost their spots altogether.

The peak time for births is between April and June, but fawns are also born throughout the summer. It's also not unusual to spot "spots" this time of year with late fawns, which can be born as late as October and November!

The gestation period for a doe is about 200 days (seven months), and it's not uncommon for a doe to have twins. In February and March, does will still be active and look VERY pregnant, but soon they'll disappear. You might be thinking, "Where did they go?" This is the time when they bed down and get ready to give birth to their fawns, which are only two to four pounds when born. Then, within the first 10 to 15 minutes, these precious babies can stand and walk on their own.

Photographing Key deer in intimate moments like this requires a long lens, like the 180-600mm Nikkor I use on my Nikon Z9. Key deer seek out very private areas when giving birth, far from people, way back in the mangroves along the water. The night of this fawn's birth, we kept our distance and stayed very quiet. Both my friend and I weren't even sure if it was going to happen, but when it did, it was so amazing! To be honest, it was the FIRST birth I have ever witnessed in my life, and to see a Key deer fawn being born, for me, was really special.

Once a doe gives birth, she'll leave her fawn hidden away in a safe spot for hours, while she goes off to forage, until she comes back to nurse. If a doe gives birth to twins, she'll leave each fawn in a different spot until she returns, to reduce the risk of predation.

I witnessed this behavior this year with a doe who had twins, when she left one fawn behind, tucked away in the tall grass, as the

other followed her out into the mangroves. A doe will keep her fawns hidden until they're old enough to keep up with her, which is when they're about two to three weeks old.

Remember, if you see a fawn alone, leave it alone. This is a crucial time for bonding, and any movement or touching of the fawn can be detrimental. Key deer are also a protected species under the Endangered Species Act, and while it may be tempting to touch or interact with one, it's against the law to intervene.

Fawn season is a special time of year on Big Pine Key, lasting from April all the way into the fall, so please respect the speed limit and pay close attention to deer crossing the roads. Stopping in the roads and parking on the edges lures deer toward your vehicle, which can endanger them.

Also, use a big lens when photographing intimate Key deer moments. This will keep the Key deer safe, and you'll also get to capture great photos without upsetting their natural behavior.

Key deer fawn photos by Colleen Fuller.



HABITAT PROTECTION ON TRIAL **ESA CHANGES THREATEN ENDANGERED KEYS' ANIMALS**

By Ed Rhodes, FKWS Board Member

For more than four decades, federal agencies have interpreted the Endangered Species Act (ESA) to recognize that destroying the habitat of an endangered species can constitute unlawful "harm." That long-standing interpretation is now under direct attack following the Trump Administration's effort to rescind the regulatory definition of "harm" — a move that has triggered high-profile litigation with potentially far-reaching consequences for wildlife conservation.

The Administration's proposal, developed pursuant to its broader deregulatory agenda, argues that the ESA's prohibition on the "take" of endangered species should apply only to direct actions against animals themselves, not to habitat destruction. If adopted, the rule would eliminate the longstanding regulatory definition that treats significant habitat modification as "harm" when it kills or injures wildlife by impairing essential behaviors such as breeding, feeding, or sheltering.

Environmental organizations, tribal communities, several states, and conservation advocates have challenged the rule in federal court, arguing that it conflicts with the ESA's text, ignores decades of conservation science, and attempts to overturn settled Supreme Court precedent through regulation rather than legislation. The lawsuits contend that removing habitat protection would undermine one of the

ESA's most effective conservation tools because habitat loss remains the leading cause of species decline worldwide.

The legal battle is rooted in more than a century of conservation history. Early wildlife laws focused on preventing direct killing through hunting and commercial exploitation. By the 1920s, however, conservationists recognized that protecting individual animals would accomplish little if their habitats continued to disappear. That insight — that wildlife conservation depends on habitat management — became the philosophical foundation for modern conservation.

Congress embraced that principle in the Endangered Species Act of 1973 by declaring that the law exists not only to conserve endangered species but also "the ecosystems upon which" they depend. The Supreme Court later reinforced that intent, holding that habitat destruction may constitute prohibited "harm" because species cannot survive without functioning ecosystems.

The outcome of current litigation will determine whether that half-century of legal precedent and conservation practice remains intact. At stake is far more than the meaning of a single word. The courts are being asked to decide whether the ESA will continue protecting the habitats essential for species recovery or retreat to a narrower interpretation that addresses only direct injury to individual animals. The decision could redefine endangered species conservation in the United States for decades to come.

TALKING TRASH WAYS OUR GARBAGE IS DAMAGING NATURE & HOW TO HELP PREVENT IT

By Shirley Gun, FKWS volunteer

In the U.S., we generate huge amounts of trash — close to five pounds per person per day. It's difficult to get rid of most of it responsibly, which ends up putting pressure on wildlife, ecosystems, the atmosphere, and our own health. Over the years, volunteers with FKWS and the refuges have cleaned up tons and tons of trash from land and sea. On land, most of that trash has come from illegal dumping and littering. Some of it is hazardous and toxic, not to mention unsightly. In the water, the trash we collect is similar, plus includes commercial fishing nets and traps. While it's dismaying to see dumped trash in our natural areas, our collective household trash has grown into an even more epic issue. Materials decomposing inside of sanitary landfills release methane, a greenhouse gas that's 80 times more potent than CO2 — and in the U.S., methane from landfills accounts for the third-largest source of human-related methane emissions. In the Keys, trash on land and in the water directly harms wildlife. Birds and other species get entangled in it, sea turtles ingest plastic bags, mistaking them for jellyfish, and whales starve, with stomachs blocked by plastic bags and fishing line. On a larger scale, environmental costs start long before items become trash. Raw materials have to be mined, timber harvested, and oil and coal burned to manufacture and transport goods. Toxins from manufacturing escape into ecosystems, too — and all of this results in habitat destruction and heightened greenhouse gas emissions. Even disposing of our waste uses energy and creates pollution, while it's being transported, burned, buried, or recycled.



WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT? A lot! We can help control the amount of waste we generate based on what we buy, or choose not to buy, and what we reuse, recycle, compost, and throw away. Even small habits, like using reusable shopping bags, refraining from buying trinkets that will only be enjoyed for a brief time, being more conscious about food waste, and choosing products and packaging made from renewable resources (like paper, cotton, and wool) can make a meaningful ecological differences, plus save money and set a good example for others to follow.



DANGEROUS TRASH CULPRITS IN THE KEYS Some items are particularly cruel offenders when it comes to injuring wildlife. Those include plastic cups, plastic bags (and pretty much anything plastic), fishing line, and abandoned commercial fishing gear.

Another biggie is anything that's round with a hole in it. So take particular care when disposing of items that fit that description, including plastic rings from the top of milk jugs, rubber bands, and six-pack holders. Worldwide, six-pack loops kill a million seabirds and 100,000 marine mammals a year — with some of that happening right on our shores. But, a few changes in habit can make a real difference. And don't forget, no one is perfect. We're all in this together, trying our best!

Above: former FKWS Chair Robert Keeley rescues an ibis entangled with a plastic ring. Below left: a great blue heron with a plastic bag. Below: volunteer Jeff Kelly at an illegal dumping site clean-up event in National Key Deer Refuge. Photos courtesy Shirley Gun.



CREATURE SPOTLIGHT

ROSEATE SPOONBILL PLATALEA AJAJA

By Phil Dodderidge, FKWS Board Member

The flamboyant Roseate Spoonbill is one of the Florida Keys' most visually striking residents, and certainly one of my favorite avian species. Roseates are one of six spoonbill species in the world, and the only one in the Americas. In the U.S., they are primarily found in Florida, and along the southern Texas coast and the southern banks of the Mississippi. The spoonbills' name comes from their wide, spatula-like bill. These birds forage in shallow, rust-colored waters by sweeping their partially opened bills from side to side in the muck. Nerves inside the bill allow them to snap up small fish, crabs, and crustaceans strictly by feel. Their striking rosy hue comes directly from this diet; the birds ingest crustaceans



rich in carotenoid pigments, which are then deposited into their feathers — the same process that colors flamingos. In the late 1800s, this rosy wading bird was nearly driven to extinction, being hunted mercilessly for the millinery (hat-making) trade. Their vibrant feathers were prized by the fashion industry. They then received vital protections with the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. Today, they are listed as a state-designated Threatened species by the FWC, and are heavily monitored. This iconic wading bird is considered a crucial barometer for the health of the Keys and Everglades ecosystems. Historically, Florida Bay and the mangrove islands of the Keys were a major stronghold for breeding spoonbills. These social birds build bulky platform nests in red and black mangrove trees, alongside other wading birds like ibises, egrets, and herons. However, rising sea levels — which have increased by about five inches since 2000 — have created water depths that are often too deep for spoonbills to forage effectively, and historic colonies in Florida Bay have experienced steep declines, dropping from nearly 900 nesting pairs in the late 1980s to just over 150 today. Many breeding colonies have migrated northward to places like Tampa Bay and Cape Canaveral. The National Audubon Society's Everglades Science Center, founded in the Keys in 1939, has banded thousands of chicks over the last two decades. Bird enthusiasts here and across the state are encouraged to report any sightings of banded spoonbills. Documenting these sightings is critical for assessing dispersal rates, behavioral changes, and ongoing conservation efforts to preserve this unmistakable Florida icon. For more information, search for roseate spoonbills on these websites: National Parks Service, All About Birds, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the National Audubon Society.

Photos by Phil Dodderidge.



THE REFUGES NEED YOUR VOTE: KEYS' NATURE DEPENDS ON IT

By Phil Dodderidge, FKWS Board Member

In November, voters will make choices that will determine the future of the Florida Keys Wildlife Refuges' 208,308 acres of land and water. Your vote on November 3, 2026, is the most direct mechanism for citizens to safeguard these critical public lands.

THE DIRECT LINK BETWEEN VOTING & PUBLIC LANDS

The health of National Wildlife Refuges, including those in the Keys, depends on elected officials who control federal funding and environmental legislation. Congress determines the annual budget for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the agency tasked with managing the refuge system. This funding directly impacts staffing levels, habitat restoration projects, law enforcement on public lands, and public education programs.

When we vote in federal elections, we choose the lawmakers who hold the power of the purse, either for good or... not. With proper funding, our refuges can combat invasive species, restore degraded wetlands, and maintain trails for the public. Conversely, a lack of legislative support leads to budget cuts, closed areas, dangerous, unmaintained infrastructure, and reduced protections for vulnerable flora and fauna ecosystems.

PROTECTION FOR THREATENED & ENDANGERED SPECIES

National Wildlife Refuges provide sanctuary for more than 380 threatened or endangered species, including 23 just in the National Key Deer Refuge. From the Florida panther, to the Key deer, to the whooping crane, these lands provide the specific habitats necessary for endangered species to survive and recover.

Climate change, urban sprawl, and habitat fragmentation threaten these lands daily. When we vote, we elect leaders who decide whether to maintain, strengthen, or weaken the Endangered Species Act and other bedrock environmental laws, or... not. Supporting candidates who value conservation ensures that refuges retain their legal protections and the resources needed to shield species from extinction.

PRESERVING BIODIVERSITY & ECOSYSTEM SERVICES

Wildlife refuges also provide essential services to human communities. Wetlands within refuges act as natural sponges that absorb floodwaters and protect nearby populated areas from storm surges. Forested refuges filter drinking water and sequester massive amounts of carbon, helping to mitigate the impacts of global climate change. When we vote to elect leaders who will safeguard these areas through the ballot box, we protect global biodiversity. Your vote on November 3 is

critical to enact policy choices that recognize nature as vital infrastructure.

ECONOMIC BENEFITS TO LOCAL COMMUNITIES

National Wildlife Refuges are powerful economic engines that generate billions of dollars in economic activity annually through ecotourism.

Ecotourism and ocean recreation are massive drivers in the Florida Keys. Visitors spend roughly \$3.5 billion annually in Monroe County. Studies from VisitFloridaKeys.com show that ecotourism within the Florida Keys exceeds \$2.3 billion

in annual sales and supports over 23,000 local jobs. Refuge visitors travel here each year for birdwatching, hiking, photography, kayaking, sailing, scuba diving, and fishing. This tourism fuels local economies by supporting small businesses, hotels, restaurants, and outdoor outfitters.

When you vote on November 3, please vote for elected officials who support the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), which allows the refuge system to acquire critical inholdings from willing sellers, expanding public access and boosting local economies. November 3, please vote for candidates who understand the economic value of conservation.

SECURING PUBLIC ACCESS & OUTDOOR HERITAGE

The National Wildlife Refuges in the Keys provide unparalleled opportunities for our visitors to connect with the natural world. Unlike some public lands that are focused solely on preservation, refuges emphasize wildlife-dependent recreation, and they provide safe, accessible spaces for families to experience wilderness. Decisions made by elected officials influence whether these lands have the budget to remain open and accessible in the near term and for future generations. Your vote determines whether public lands stay in public hands or face pressure for privatization and unsustainable resource extraction.

COMBATING THE IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate change poses an existential threat to habitats worldwide, and wildlife refuges are on the front lines. Rising sea levels threaten coastal refuges, while shifting weather patterns alter the vegetation and water availability. Addressing these challenges requires forward-thinking policy and robust federal investment in climate resilience.

Voters in November will decide which climate strategies the nation will pursue. When you vote, please select leaders committed to science-based land management that allows refuges to implement adaptive strategies, such as building living shorelines and creating wildlife corridors that allow species to move as habitats shift.

YOUR VOTE IS A VOICE FOR THE LAND

Wildlife, clean water, and pristine forests cannot advocate for themselves in the halls of government. Your vote is their proxy at the ballot box. Public lands belong to all Americans, making their preservation a shared democratic responsibility.

Elections are frequently decided by slim margins, meaning every individual vote can shape environmental policy for years to come. Casting your ballot on November 3, 2026, provides a clear, actionable way to protect biodiversity, support our Keys economy, and ensure our Keys' unique natural heritage endures.

FIELD NOTES

WHO YOU GONNA CALL? KEY DEER RESEARCH AND RESPONSE PROGRAM!

By Anna Marlow, National Key Deer Refuge Community Engagement and Visitor Services

The Key Deer Research and Response Program is a collaborative effort between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC). Our team, comprised of staff and amazing volunteers, assists with Key deer conservation efforts by monitoring the deer, educating the public, and responding to sick, injured, or deceased deer throughout the Lower Keys.

The Key Deer Research and Response Program works with FWC dispatch to manage calls concerning Key deer. When someone calls the FWC alert line, FWC dispatchers determine if the issue is an enforcement violation that law enforcement should respond to, or a biological issue for the Key deer response team.

For biological calls, we determine the type and level of response needed. If it is, unfortunately, a deceased deer, our team will remove the deer from the location, record details on the health of the deer prior to its death, and record the likely reason for mortality. If the deer is injured, our team will do a thorough assessment before determining the next course of action, which varies depending on the injury and situation.

Everyone can help by picking up "circles" that are made of wire, plastic, PVC, etc., which deer have a knack for getting stuck around their hooves.

Our most recent of several successful disentanglement efforts over the last year, since the program started, was this past August. Our team responded to an injured doe that had a metal ring around her hoof, which was causing a minor injury. Before our team could remove the ring, the Program Coordinator had to examine the situation and determine the plan of action. This included talking with the local homeowners to find out about her general daily

routine, seeing how severe the injury was, and using that to determine how they would go about removing the ring.

With this most recent injury response, the homeowners were very helpful in tracking down this elusive doe, which allowed our team to efficiently remove the object before it did more damage. Our volunteer veterinary partners, Dr. Doug Mader and Dr. Gerry Diethelm, confirmed that the deer was in great condition before being released.

Our Key Deer Research and Response Program is running every single day to help our beloved Key deer. If this is something that you might be interested in helping with, email FW4_key_deer_team@FWS.gov to learn more.

If you see a severely injured or deceased deer, call Wildlife Alert at 888-404-3922 ext. 1. The Key deer calls get sent to our amazing team for response!

Left: program members after a successful entanglement removal. Center: Dr. Doug Mader and Kevin Kalasz remove the metal ring from the injured doe. Right: the ring, removed. Photos courtesy Anna Marlow.



Refuges Artists — Photo Showcase



The Florida Keys Wildlife Society Photo Club meets monthly at the Nature Center on Big Pine Key. Join us in person, or email for more info: info@FloridaKeysWildlifeSociety.org. Please put “photo club” in the subject line. If you would like to submit images for consideration for elsewhere in this newsletter, email newsletter editor Karuna Eberl, karuna@WanderingDogCreations.com.



American flamingo with shorebirds, Kristie Killam;
anhingas, Phil Dodderidge;
queen angelfish, Claudine Bartels.



White-eyed vireo, Mary Stella;
Key deer buck, Susan Natale;
Lower Keys marsh rabbit, Colleen Fuller;
school of blue tangs, Sherri Krilly.



Nature Store Highlights

NEW IN THE NATURE STORE: CALENDARS, INSULATED BAGS, T-SHIRTS
SUPPORT WILDLIFE & LOCAL ARTISTS, GET COOL ECO-GEAR, AND COME HANG OUT

- We have some GREAT new items in the Nature Store:
- The Florida Keys Wildlife Society 2027 calendar arrives at the end of October, and makes a perfect holiday gift. The calendar highlights stunning photography, with each month showcasing beautiful wildlife photos by FKWS Photo Club members, taken in and around the Keys National Wildlife Refuges. It also includes community events, including the FKWS educational lecture series, society meetings, full-moon kayak excursions, and the annual Run With Deer 5K.
 - Every purchase directly supports educational programs, conservation, and wildlife research across the Keys NWRs.
 - Another new offering is reusable, insulated tote bags, with artwork representing the four Keys Refuges. These were donated by the “Got Your Bags?” organization and are great for keeping snacks and food cool, plus helping to protect Keys’ creatures from single-use, disposable plastic bags.
 - We also have some new T-shirt designs, which feature images of beloved wild Keys residents, including manatees and herons.

Stop by and check out these new items and the rest of our large selection of nature-oriented collectibles and gifts, including T-shirts, hats, mugs, local art, field guides, stuffed animals, children’s games, puzzles, postcards, jewelry, pins, cards, hiking medallions, reusable shopping bags, and more!

A few other highlights include SPF moisture-wicking shirts, so you can stay sun-safe while exploring the great outdoors and gardening; plus canvas shopping bags with images from local artists. We’re also proud to offer a large selection of local books for every reader, which focus on nature, conservation, native plants, and the history of the Florida Keys — the perfect gifts for curious minds and passionate readers.

All proceeds benefit your four Florida Keys National Wildlife Refuges.

Come on in and pick up some goodies for your nature-loving friends and family, all for a good cause. We’re excited to help you find original gifts — and maybe even get involved with our volunteer opportunities this season!

THE NATURE STORE

30587 OVERSEAS HIGHWAY
BIG PINE KEY, FL 33043

OPEN WEDNESDAY-SATURDAY
10:00 AM TO 3:00 PM.

STOP IN TO SAY HELLO
AND SUPPORT YOUR LOCAL
WILDLIFE REFUGE.



FLORIDA KEYS NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES

Crocodile Lake National Wildlife Refuge on Key Largo protects the habitat of the American crocodile. It is also home to the endangered Key Largo woodrat and hundreds of other species. The butterfly garden is open to the public. The rest of the refuge is closed to the public, but there are volunteer opportunities and special events for those wanting to experience it. 10750 County Road 905, Key Largo, FL 33037.

Great White Heron and Key West National Wildlife Refuges are accessed only by boat, and encompass the shallow-water habitats of the Keys backcountry. Kayak past mangrove islands, tidal sandbars, and of course great white herons, found only in south Florida. For information, visit the Nature Center on Big Pine, 30587 Overseas Highway.



Follow us on Facebook & Instagram.
Tag your Florida Keys National Wildlife Refuges photos
@FloridaKeysWildlifeSociety



MEMBER UP: WILDLIFE NEEDS YOUR VOICE, WE NEED YOUR \$\$

THESE ARE UNUSUAL TIMES. PLEASE, BECOME A MEMBER OR DONATE TO THE FLORIDA KEYS WILDLIFE SOCIETY. THERE IS SO MUCH TO DO TO HELP PROTECT THE KEYS WILDLIFE AND ECOLOGY.

These are uncertain times, in which we could certainly use your help. This would be a great time to donate, become a member, or make a contribution to our endowment. There is mounting work to be done in the four Florida Keys National Wildlife Refuges. There are invasive species to chase down, habitats to restore, and woods and beaches to clean up. There are scientists trying to understand how to protect our iconic Keys’ species, visitors and locals to educate, and kids whom we can help fall in love with nature. Much of this work is only possible because of the financial contributions of our community.

We are a 501(c)(3) charitable organization, so donations are tax deductible. The Florida Keys Wildlife Society works as a “friends” group to the refuges, which means all of our fundraising goes directly to supporting the work being done there. And we mean all of it, since we are volunteers.



You can participate by becoming an individual member, or a business sponsor. Donations can be made at www.FloridaKeysWildlifeSociety.org (there’s a button on the homepage). The FKWS (formerly known as FAVOR) has been supporting the refuges through education, non-adversarial advocacy, volunteerism, and direct funding of various refuge projects since 1997.

Chances are if you are taking a hike, or boating in the backcountry, you are enjoying the natural marvels of the Keys that the Refuges are helping to protect.

Join Team Wildlife. Be our change. Thanks!



WILDLIFE SOCIETY ENDOWMENT FUND

The Florida Keys Wildlife Society opened an endowment with the Community Foundation of the Florida Keys. The permanent fund will help ensure support to the four Keys’ National Wildlife Refuges for decades to come. If you would like to be a supporter and make a tax-deductible donation to the fund, mail checks to CFFK, 300 Southard Street, Suite. 201, Key West, FL 33040, with “Florida Keys Wildlife Society” in the memo or attachment. Gifts of stock, real

estate, and retirement accounts are also welcome. For more information, contact Elizabeth Brown at 305-809-4995 or Elizabeth@cffk.org.



The National Key Deer Refuge protects many endangered species of both plant and animal, such as the iconic Key deer and the Lower Keys marsh rabbit. It also protects endangered pine rocklands habitat. Many hiking and kayaking opportunities are found in the Refuge, including the shortest nature walk of all, about 20 feet to the Blue Hole, a unique naturalized freshwater quarry with nesting birds and alligators. Visit the Nature Center for interpretive learning and advice on bird and deer watching, and check out the adjacent Nature Store for gifts and books. 30587 Overseas Highway, Big Pine Key, FL 33043.

RANGER KATY RECOGNIZED REGIONALLY

A very big congratulations to our Visitor Services Ranger, Katy Hosokawa, who received the Sense of Wonder Spark Award this year from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, for the Southeast Region! This award is given to those who do excellent work with interpretation and environmental education through a variety of programs, partnerships, and projects. Ranger Katy is constantly engaging with the community, teaching school groups, leading Ranger talks, and bringing in volunteers to help with our Key Deer Research and Response Program. We cannot think of anyone more deserving of this award, congratulations Ranger Katy!



BE A VOICE FOR NATURE & TEAM WILDLIFE

MEMBERSHIPS TO THE FLORIDA KEYS WILDLIFE SOCIETY

Not a card-carrying Friends member? Join or renew today.

Annual memberships are available for Individuals (\$25) or Family (\$50). Fill out the form online at FloridaKeysWildlifeSociety.org, or just mail us with your name, email, phone, address, and check to Florida Keys Wildlife Society, P.O. Box 431840, Big Pine Key, FL 33043, or stop by the Nature Store, at 30587 Overseas Highway on Big Pine Key.

Your membership benefits include: 10% discount at the Nature Store, advance registration for events held by FKWS, newsletters, and a warm fuzzy feeling. To become a member, contact Melissa Depinet at Members@FloridaKeysWildlifeSociety.org or scan the QR code to the right.

JOIN TODAY!



YOUR MEMBERSHIP SUPPORTS

- Scientific projects
- Citizen science
- Educational programs
- Research activities
- Community outreach
- Intern study programs
- Nature center exhibits
- Healthy wildlife and ecosystems



Volunteer, Please!

SUPPORT WILDLIFE

Volunteers are the lifeblood of the four Florida Keys National Wildlife Refuges and the Florida Keys Wildlife Society, contributing over 7,000 hours per year, and ensuring the protection of many native and endangered species, such as Key deer, Key Largo woodrats, and Schaus' swallowtail butterflies, and their habitats. Our activities are split between running the organization behind the scenes and being in the public eye, so there's an opening for just about every taste, skill, and schedule. You can help:

- In the Nature Center, store, or Blue Hole on Big Pine Key.
- With native plants.
- On a clean-up, outdoor festival, or other event.
- Plan events for public outreach and education.
- Get the word out on our social media sites.

- Write articles about nature and the Refuges.
- Increase membership and pledge campaigns.
- Maintain our member database and emails.
- Plan fundraising events and PR efforts.
- Help find and write grants.
- Join a committee, like Nature Store, fundraising, or communication.
- Or make up your own job.

VOLUNTEER NOW!

For info on how to be part of Team Wildlife, email or visit:

VOLUNTEER@FLORIDAKEYSWILDLIFESOCIETY.ORG
FloridaKeysWildlifeSociety.org/Get-Involved/Volunteer/