

CEDAR KEYS

WILDERNESS STUDY AREA



SEAHORSE KEY

CEDAR KEYS NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

FLORIDA



PREFACE

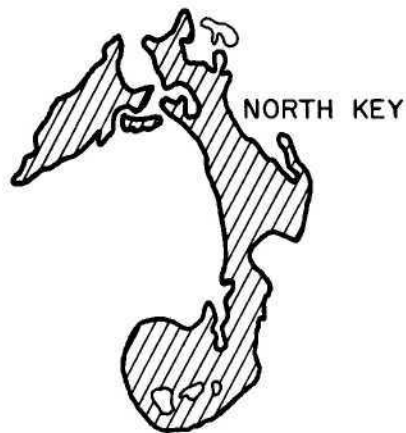
The Wilderness Act of September 3, 1964 (Public Law 88-577) provided the authority and indicated the procedure by which National Wildlife Refuges, meeting the necessary requirements, are to be considered for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System. This law directed the review of every roadless area of 5,000 contiguous acres or more and every roadless island within the National Wildlife Refuge System.

The Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuge qualifies as a wilderness study area. The four islands comprising the refuge are located two to three miles off the coast of Levy County. Ranging in size from 10 to 165 acres, the refuge islands total 378 acres. Narrow beaches of fine white sand alternate with mangrove swamps and salt marshes around the shores while a hammock forest of live and laurel oaks, cabbage palm, and red bay dominate the uplands. Despite a long history of intermittent use, the islands now show little evidence of man's encroachment. An old lighthouse and a small marine laboratory operated by the University of Florida are the only obvious marks of civilization on Seahorse Key.

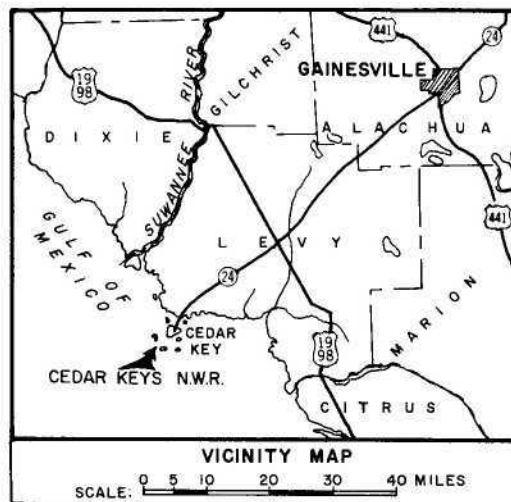
Sections 4(a) and 4(b) of the Wilderness Act provide that: (1) the Act is to be within and supplemental to the purposes for which National Wildlife Refuges are established; (2) wilderness areas shall be administered so as to preserve their wilderness character and shall be devoted to the public purposes of recreational, scenic, scientific, educational, conservation and historical use, insofar as primary refuge objectives permit.

Lighthouse on Seahorse Key

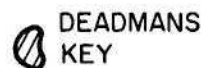




NORTH KEY

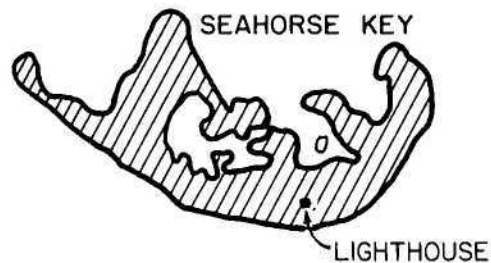


CEDAR KEYS



DEADMANS
KEY

GULF
OF
MEXICO



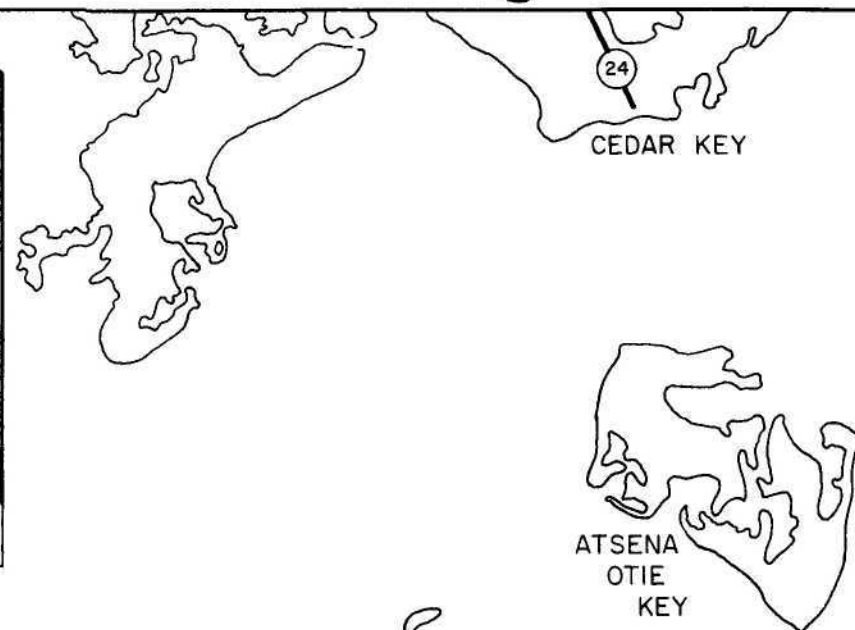
SEAHORSE KEY

LIGHTHOUSE

— LEGEND —



{ STUDY AREA
REFUGE LANDS



CEDAR KEY



ATSENA
OTIE
KEY



GRASSY KEY

CEDAR KEYS WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

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FLORIDA



SNAKE KEY

Location

The Cedar Keys are a group of five major and numerous smaller islands located in Levy County on the west coast of Florida some 90 miles north of Tampa. The four outer islands, Seahorse, Snake, Bird and North Keys, comprise the Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuge. The refuge islands are two to three miles offshore from the town of Cedar Keys which is located on Way Key, another island separated from the mainland by several miles of salt marsh.

History

The Cedar Keys have had a rich and interesting association with man, dating back many hundreds of years before the coming of Spanish explorers to Florida. A number of Indian middens, now evidenced by shells and potsherds strewn along eroding beaches, have revealed use of the islands by four separate Indian cultures ranging from 450 to 1,800 years ago.

Seahorse Key was the site of several military installations during the Florida Indian War and the Civil War; one minor naval skirmish took place there during the early days of the latter war. A small cemetery dating back to the post-Civil War period is located near the lighthouse on Seahorse Key.

The entire group of keys was reserved for Federal military purposes by Executive Order in 1840, and Seahorse Key was reserved for lighthouse purposes in 1851. The existing lighthouse, constructed in 1855, remained in active operation until 1915. In 1880, a quarantine station was established on Snake Key for use during the yellow fever epidemic. During the late 1800's and early 1900's several families lived on Seahorse and North Keys.

The Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuge was established as a colonial bird sanctuary by Executive Order 5158, dated July 16, 1929, and signed by President Hoover. Included under this Order were Snake, Bird, and North Keys. Seahorse Key was later added to the refuge by President Roosevelt's Executive Order 7484, dated November 6, 1936.

In 1952, the Bureau issued a 20-year permit to the University of Florida to establish a marine laboratory on Seahorse Key.

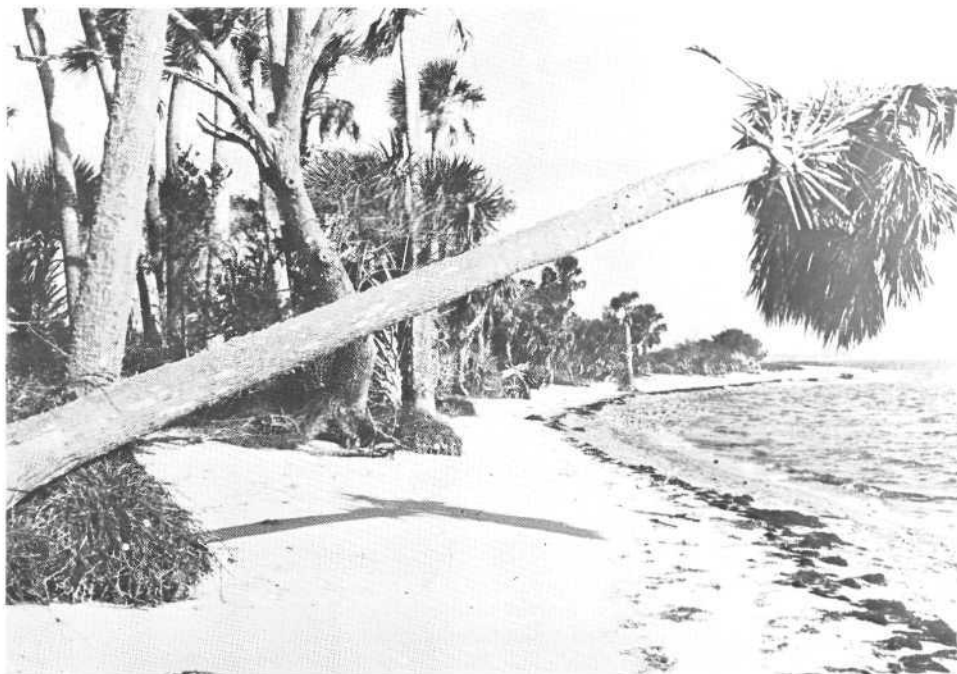
There is today little visible evidence of man's activities on these islands with the exception of the lighthouse and marine laboratory which occupy several acres on Seahorse Key. The Indian middens, the military installations and dwelling sites of the 1800's, the scars of past fires and other uses have been effectively screened by time and now blend unnoticed into the natural landscape.

Description

The Cedar Keys are strikingly different in many respects from the sea-formed islands on other sections of Florida's west coast. Seahorse Key, the outermost refuge island, was formed as a huge sand dune many thousands of years ago. This dune is now evident as a prominent central ridge which slopes abruptly to an elevation of 52 feet. The central ridges of Snake and North Keys are less obvious, extending only 5 to 10 feet above sea level.

The narrow, white sand beaches are one of the most attractive features of these islands. The beach on Seahorse Key extends along the entire south shore of the island. Snake and North Keys have smaller beaches which alternate along the shorelines with salt marshes and mangrove swamps. In many areas, the sand beaches have been stranded by shoreline accretion and are separated from the water by a zone of salt marsh and mud flats. All the islands are surrounded by shallow sand and mud flats which make them relatively inaccessible, even by outboards. At low tide few sites along the shores can be reached by boats.

The elevated ridges are dominated by an upland forest of cabbage palm, red bay, live oak and laurel oak. Characteristic understory plants include cherry laurel, saw palmetto, youpon, wild olive, prickly pear, cedar, and Spanish bayonet. The lower elevations of the islands, comprising almost 40 percent of the total refuge acreage, are subject to frequent tidal flooding, and are dominated by mangrove swamps and patches of salt marsh. All the islands possess shallow bays and lagoons partly encircled by mangrove swamps. Submerged stands of marine grasses and algae are common in these interior bays and the waters surrounding the islands.



Seahorse Key Beach

Wildlife

Although the Cedar Keys might be expected to support animal life similar to that of the nearby mainland, they more nearly resemble oceanic islands in that they possess a very limited terrestrial fauna. The lack of permanent fresh water has been a major factor in limiting populations of resident vertebrates and in preventing the establishment of species which have landed on the keys in the past.

Cedar Keys historically has been of tremendous value as a nesting area for colonial birds. During the period 1960-65, the total annual production of colonial birds ranged from about 4,000 to over 54,000 with an average of 20,600. The more abundant nesting species include the white ibis, common egret, double-crested cormorant, snowy egret, Louisiana heron and great blue heron. Many species of gulls, terns, and shore birds use the refuge beaches and mud flats for feeding and loafing throughout the year. Passerine birds are most abundant during periods of migration.



Common Egrets

The refuge provides nesting and year-round habitat for several "threatened" species. One active bald eagle nest is present on North Key. Thirty-two osprey nests were present on the refuge in 1966; 25 of these were on Seahorse Key, making it an extremely important nesting area for this species.

Some ten species of reptiles have been recorded on the refuge. Unusually dense populations of cottonmouths are present on Seahorse and Snake Keys. Mammals are relatively scarce on the refuge. Exceptions are the gray squirrel and the black rat on Seahorse Key. Raccoons visit all four keys regularly, while otter and mink are considered rare visitors.

Management

Because of its small size and importance to wildlife, Cedar Keys Refuge obviously can support only limited public use if it is to meet the objectives for which it was established and if its wilderness character is to be preserved as required by the Wilderness Act. The open season for public use will extend from mid-July through October. Visitor use at other times of the year must be prohibited to avoid disturbance to colonial bird rookeries and osprey and eagle nesting activities.

Access will be by boat only. Shell collecting, picnicking, beachcombing, birdwatching, and photography will be permitted during daylight hours. Hunting, camping, and fires will not be permitted.

Operation of the University of Florida Marine Laboratory will be continued under permit from the Bureau.

There are no plans for further developments on Cedar Keys Refuge. The development of improved public access to the islands or visitor use facilities on the islands would be completely incompatible with refuge and wilderness objectives and, therefore, will not be considered. Provisions can be made, however, for offshore observation platforms to enable visitors to enjoy and photograph colonial bird nesting without disturbance to the birds.



Snake Key



North Key

Relationship to Surrounding Area

Cedar Keys Refuge lies in the center of a section of Florida's west coast that is just now beginning to display the rapid development for real estate, commercial and recreational purposes that has characterized other coastal areas in Florida. The Intracoastal Waterway along Florida's west coast and the Cross-Florida Barge Canal, already under construction, will intersect each other near the mouth of the Withlacoochee River, 20 miles southeast of Cedar Keys. These major waterways are expected to result in an expansion of industry, tourism, commercial shipping, and water-oriented recreational uses.

State and Federal agencies administer a number of areas providing important outdoor recreational opportunities within a 50-mile radius of Cedar Keys. These include the Gulf Hammock Wildlife Management Area and Manatee Springs State Park in Levy County, the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge in Citrus and Hernando Counties, and the Citrus Wildlife Management Area in Citrus County. Anclote State Park, located on Anclote Key 65 miles south of Cedar Keys, is the closest beach recreation area. The nearest wilderness study area is the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, 115 miles to the northeast, which offers an entirely different type of wilderness environment.

The rich marine environment surrounding Cedar Keys supports productive oyster and sponge beds as well as leading crab, mullet, bait shrimp and sport fishing industries. The refuge islands are an integral part of this environment, contributing a tremendous amount of nutrients to the surrounding waters.

The University of Florida Marine Laboratory, located on Seahorse Key under permit from the Bureau, serves as a base for scientific research on these important marine resources and for education and training in the marine sciences.

Inspection

Anyone concerned about this study is urged to personally inspect the Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuge. Arrangements should be made in advance with the refuge manager, Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge.



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
BUREAU OF SPORT FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE

