

Pelican Island

National Wildlife Refuge



Photo: USFWS



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Refuge Facts

- Established: 1903.
- Acres: 5,413.
- Located: Indian River County, Florida.
- The first national wildlife refuge.
- Other management: lease with state of Florida for open waters and islands; conservation easement with water management district and mosquito control district for impoundments; management agreements with Bureau of Land Management and Indian River County for uplands.
- Location: the refuge is situated within the Indian River Lagoon and the barrier island between the Sebastian Inlet and the Wabasso Causeway, east of the Intracoastal Waterway. The nearest community is Sebastian located near the western boundary of the refuge.
- Administers Archie Carr NWR.

Natural History

- Pelican Island proper is a historic and significant bird rookery island, providing nesting habitat for over sixteen different species of colonial water birds. Over thirty species of water birds use the island during the winter migratory season. Over 130 species of birds are found throughout the entire refuge.
- The Pelican Island rookery provides critical nesting habitat for the endangered wood stork. Other refuge areas provide critical habitat for several other threatened and endangered species, including manatees, loggerhead and green sea turtles and southeastern beach mice.
- Surrounded by development, the refuge is becoming increasingly important as a sanctuary for native wildlife.

Financial Impacts of Refuge

- Permanent, full-time staff of four.
- Shared funding and staff with Archie Carr NWR.
- Current budget (FY 07) of \$390,000.
- 150,000 annual visitors.

Refuge Objectives

- Protect the historic rookery on Pelican Island.
- Protect, enhance and restore marsh and lagoon habitat for migratory birds.
- Provide habitat for threatened and endangered species.
- Protect Pelican Island as a National Historic Landmark, National Wilderness Area and Wetland of International Importance.
- Increase public understanding through outreach, interpretation, environmental education and compatible recreation.

Management Tools

- Wildlife surveys and studies.
- Habitat restoration to restore native habitats for the benefit of wildlife.
- Law enforcement to protect wildlife, habitat and the visiting public.
- Mechanical/chemical control of invasive-exotic plants.
- Volunteer and financial support by the Pelican Island Preservation Society.
- Volunteer program.
- Shoreline restoration and bird rookery habitat management.
- Public education and outreach to help instill conservation ethics.

- Cooperative management of water levels within two salt marsh impoundments for wading bird foraging habitat, mosquito control, and natural tidal exchange.

Public Use Opportunities

- Boardwalk and observation tower to view Pelican Island, 3/4 mile.
- Two salt marsh impoundment hiking trails, each 2.5 miles.
- Wildlife observation and photography.
- Boating, kayaking, canoeing.
- Boat and bank fishing.
- Interpretation/Outreach/Environmental Education.
- Special outreach events in partnership with the Pelican Island Preservation Society.
- Commercial guided boat tours and rental available locally.
- The Centennial Trail, designated as a National Recreation Trail.
- Historic Jungle Trail, designated as a state Greenway.
- Refuge is part of the Indian River Lagoon Scenic Byway.

Calendar of Events

- March: Volunteer Appreciation Day.
- March: Pelican Island Wildlife Festival.
- September: National Public Lands Day and International Coastal Cleanup.
- October: National Wildlife Refuge Week.
- December: Christmas Bird Count.

Questions and Answers

Where is Pelican Island?

Pelican Island is located in the Indian River Lagoon east of Sebastian, Florida.

Can I visit Pelican Island?

Yes, although access to the island itself is restricted to outside of the posted 'closed area' signs around the island. Pelican Island and its array of birds can be viewed on your own or via a commercial guided tour. You may view the island from the Centennial Trail observation tower, located adjacent to the island, or by your own boat. The refuge does not provide a boat ramp access but there are several public ramps in the local area and at the Sebastian Inlet State Park. There are several commercial boat/kayak/canoe rental vendors and tour operators in both Sebastian and Vero Beach. Reservations are required for these commercial guided tours to the island.

Does the refuge have any public facilities?

Yes. Public facilities were opened and dedicated in 2003 marking the Centennial of Pelican Island and the National Wildlife Refuge System. The new facilities include a 3/4-mile round-trip boardwalk that culminates to an 18-foot observation tower to view Pelican Island and the Indian River Lagoon; two 2 1/2-mile salt marsh foot trails; informational kiosks, educational signs, rest-rooms and parking areas. The facilities are located west of Highway A1A on the north end of Historic Jungle Trail. The facilities were produced in partnership with Indian River County, St. Johns River Water Management District, Florida Inland Navigation District, Florida Power and Light, ConocoPhillips, Wild Birds Unlimited, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and others. Future plans include additional wildlife observation facilities including overlooks and a pull-off on Jungle Trail.

Is this really the first National Wildlife Refuge?

Yes. President Theodore Roosevelt set aside Pelican Island as a preserve and breeding ground for native birds on March 14, 1903. Plume hunters, egg collectors and vandals had exterminated all the egrets, herons and spoonbills from the island in the 1800's. Paul Kroegel (first refuge manager) protected the remaining brown pelicans and petitioned ornithologists and naturalists to help him. At the urging of the Florida Audubon Society and the American Ornithologists' Union, President Roosevelt acted to protect Pelican Island and subsequently many other wildlife areas that were to become the National Wildlife Refuge System, the world's largest and most diverse assemblage of lands for wildlife.