



## Notes & Observations



National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

Dry Tortugas National Park  
P.O. Box 6208  
Key West, FL 33041

305-242-7700 phone  
305-242-7766 facsimile



This brochure was funded by the Florida National Parks and Monuments Association in cooperation with the National Park Service. Proceeds from educational sales help make this brochure possible.

02/04

The bird life of the Dry Tortugas has attracted the notice of visitors since Spanish explorer Ponce de Leon discovered these isolated, almost waterless islands in June 1513. After extensive military use, the area was transferred to the Department of Agriculture in 1908, and maintained as a National Wildlife Refuge. Fort Jefferson National Monument was established in 1935 to protect the nesting colonies, marine life, and historic resources. In 1992, the area was re-designated Dry Tortugas National Park.

The Dry Tortugas provide long-term habitat for few birds. Fewer than 40 species are usual in winter and only 7 nest more-or-less regularly (Masked Booby, Brown Pelican, Magnificent Frigatebird, Roseate Tern, Sooty Tern, Brown Noddy, Mourning Dove). Most birds in the area are transients or strays, present only briefly (usually during migrations), but often very numerous when they occur.

This bulletin, which includes 299 species, builds upon the work of many renown naturalists dating back to Audubon's visit in May 1832. Dr. Bill Robertson, Jr. was instrumental in much of this work. After decades of public service, Bill and Betty Robertson are no longer with us. Both have recently passed away, but their legacy lives on. Their contributions will never be forgotten. This latest list was compiled by Sonny Bass. Please report changes or unusual sightings to: sonny\_bass@nps.gov.

### Key

B S S F W

Breeding Status Spring Summer Fall Winter

### Seasons

S - Spring (March 1 - May 31)  
S - Summer (June 1 - July 31)  
F - Fall (August 1 - November 15)  
W - Winter (November 16 - April 30)

### Abundance

C - Commonly observed  
(more than 20 records per season)  
U - Uncommonly observed  
(11 to 20 records per season)  
R - Rarely observed  
(6 to 10 records per season)  
1 through 5 - number of records per season

### Breeding Status

+ - Known to breed in the park  
? - Breeding status unknown

## EXPERIENCE YOUR AMERICA

### Spring

Scattered northbound migrants arrive as early as mid-February, and substantial migration is usual during March (especially of herons, Ibises, and some raptors and shorebirds). The flood of spring migration extends from the last days of March to about May 20, and potentially includes well over 200 species. A fair representation of migrants is likely on any day during this period, but the occurrence of major concentrations requires bad weather, typically cold front storms from the northwest accompanied by rain. Typically the worse the weather, the larger the number and diversity of grounded migrants. Also, the stronger the storm's westerly component, the greater the likelihood of rarities. After intense spring storms, normally scarce species may be common and the more usual migrants are often present in the thousands. Weather severe enough to cause major fallout of spring migrants is more likely during April and infrequent after mid-May.

### Summer

In June the tern colonies are in full cry and masses of juvenile Sooty Terns cover the Bush Key beaches. Most of the non-nesting species of waterbirds are reduced to a few individuals. Magnificent Frigatebirds, especially during windy, unsettled weather, prey to some extent on young terns. Landbirds, except the resident Mourning Doves, are scarce, but spring migration persists in a very small way through much of June. By mid-July, many terns have left the nesting colonies, and the first southbound migrants appear.

### Fall

Compared to the spring migration, bird migration in the fall is more prolonged and not as obviously influenced by weather. The migration goes on from early July until late November. Large flights of raptors (especially Sharp-shinned and Broad-winged Hawks, Merlins, and Peregrine Falcons) are a feature of the September-October migration, and at times these predators seem to outnumber the small landbirds they prey upon.

### Winter

Midwinter bird life consists mostly of a scant assortment of waterbirds, notably the flocks of gulls and terns that follow the fishing fleet. Landbirds are limited to a few American Kestrels and Belted Kingfishers, an occasional Gray Catbird, Yellow-rumped and Palm Warblers, and Savannah Sparrows.

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



Dry Tortugas National Park

## Dry Tortugas National Park Bird Checklist



## Tortugas Specialties

### Sooty Tern

About 80,000 nest annually on Bush Key, the only important breeding colony in the continental U.S. Outside the nesting season, they resort to the high seas and seldom approach mainland shores. Sooties are first heard in late December at night. Their numbers increase gradually until they land and begin nesting in early February. Each female produces one egg, and the male and female alternately incubate it for 29 days. They then care for the chick for 8 to 10 weeks. Their food is primarily fish and squid caught at sea surface, at times 50 miles or more away from the colony. Sooties begin to leave during June and by mid-August the colony is almost deserted. Extensive bird-banding shows that most adults spend their off-season in the eastern Caribbean, whereas young birds migrate to the eastern tropical Atlantic where they spend up to 5 years in seas off West Africa before they return to the Dry Tortugas.

### Brown Noddy

About 4,500 Brown Noddies also breed on Bush Key, placing their bulky nest of seaweed and sticks in the bushes and mangrove trees. They arrive with the Sooty Terns, but tend to stay longer, sometimes as late as October. From band returns, they seem to range much less widely than Sooties, seldom leaving the Gulf-Caribbean region.

### Black Noddy

First discovered at the Dry Tortugas in 1960, a few have been found in most years since then. They appear as early as late March and as late as September. Most often they are seen perched on the north coaling dock on Garden Key, or in mangroves on Bush Key. As yet, there is no evidence that they nest in the area.

### Magnificent Frigatebird

Long Key contains the only current nesting colony for the Magnificent Frigatebird in the continental U.S. They first nested in this area in 1988, and may be the same population that nested for 25 years at the Marquesas Keys until driven away by human disturbance. Long Key contains approximately 100 nests.

### Masked Booby

Present year-round in numbers up to about 40. Usually seen perched on buoys or roosting on the smaller islands. Since 1984, a few pairs have nested each winter/spring on Hospital and Middle Keys.