

# THE KEY DEER

By Libby Hopkins



The Key Deer, or *Odocoileus Virginianus Clavium*, as it's known by its scientific name, the smallest of all white-tailed deer, is a subspecies of the Virginia white-tailed deer. Key deer live on 20 to 25 islands in the southern Florida Keys, hence their name. They used to live across the lower Florida Keys but now are only found in the areas from Sugarloaf Key to Bahia Honda Key. The National Key Deer Refuge in Florida, where many of the deer can be found, was established in 1953.

Key Deer live in all the types of ecosystems found in the Florida Keys, from pine forests to mangroves and freshwater wetlands. They can swim between islands and move around their habitat in search of fresh water.

Key Deer feed on native plants such as red, black and white mangroves, thatch palm berries, and over 150 other species of plants. Key Deer can tolerate small amounts of salt in their water, and they will also drink brackish water, but fresh water is essential for their survival. They must also have suitable habitat to ensure their future existence.

Rutting season activities begin in September, peaking in early October and decreasing gradually through November and December. Some breeding may occur as late as February. The gestation period is 204 days, with fawns born April through June. At birth, fawns weigh two to four pounds.

Antlers are dropped in February through March and re-growth begins almost immediately so that by June, bucks with two-inch stubs are seen. Antler growth is completed by August, and velvet is rubbed and kicked off in early September.

No records exist documenting the origin of the deer in the Keys. It is believed the deer migrated to the Keys from the mainland many thousands of years ago across a long land bridge. As the Wisconsin Glacier melted, the sea rose, dividing the land bridge into small islands known as the Florida Keys.



The earliest mention of Key Deer is found in the memoirs of Fontaneda, a shipwrecked Spaniard held captive by the local Indians. Records suggest that the deer were found around Key West and were used for food by residents and ship crews alike. Although early records indicated sporadic wider distribution of Key Deer throughout the lower keys, current data indicates they occupy a range from Johnson Keys to Saddlebunch Keys.

Because Key Deer have lost their fear of humans, there is a serious problem with people illegally feeding them. This makes the deer more vulnerable to dog attacks or getting entangled in fences. It also brings them closer to roads where they can be hit by cars. Feeding Key Deer can also cause them to group in a small area, rather than spreading out over the available habitat. Then if one deer is sick, it more easily passes its diseases on to other deer.

The Key Deer are listed as endangered by the Endangered Species Act. Currently, fewer than 1,000 Key Deer survive, and their future remains precarious. Threats to Key Deer include habitat loss from the development of coastal habitats and floodplains, car accidents, disease, illegal feeding by humans, and climate change, which is affecting mangroves.

The National Wildlife Federation has worked to protect the Key Deer since 1951 when only about 25 of the animals still survived. That year, they adopted a resolution at their annual meeting to safeguard them and soon after made "Save the Key Deer" the subject of National Wildlife Week.

The National Wildlife Federation also was instrumental in creation of the National Key Deer Refuge in 1953 and in making the Key Deer one of the first endangered species protected by the U.S. Endangered Species Act in 1973. Today, the National Wildlife Federation continues to take action to ensure a safe future for the Key Deer and its habitat through the courts and through education.