

THE FIGHT TO SAVE FLORIDA'S KEY DEER

You won't find Key deer in the Boone and Crockett Club's records. There isn't even a hunting season for these tiny deer living in the Florida Keys. That doesn't mean Boone and Crockett Club members turned a blind eye to this whitetail subspecies that was going extinct in the 1940s. B&C members Jay N. "Ding" Darling and C.R. Gutermuth worked to end market hunting of Key deer and protect essential habitat to ensure their survival well into the future. This is how they pulled it off.

WHAT IS THE KEY DEER

Few people have heard of the Key deer. Even fewer have seen one. To be fair, they're easy to miss. As the smallest of the whitetail deer subspecies, mature bucks typically weigh 55-75 pounds—about the size of a golden retriever. They live only in the lower Florida Keys on roughly two-dozen islands, mainly Big Pine Key. For perspective, the Florida Keys are made up of roughly 1,700 individual islands. Able to swim between islands, Key deer use a variety of south Florida habitats, including pine rocklands, mangroves, and freshwater wetlands. They dine on 160 species of plants and have been known to help themselves to ornamental shrubberies.

The first European reference to the Key deer is credited to Hernando de Escalante Fontaneda, the survivor of a shipwreck in 1549. He was 13 when he washed ashore and spent the next 17 years

living with Native American tribes. Escalante Fontaneda's extensive memoir of his time spent living with various tribes includes observations of this tiny deer. A good 400 years later, the Key deer started to make waves again. This time, though, it was in the form of a cartoon.

KEY DEER ON THE DECLINE

In the early 1900s, Florida was ground zero in the fight to save America's disappearing migratory bird populations. Birds like herons, parakeets, and brown pelicans were all sought by market hunters. Some birds, prized for their feathers, were used to decorate ladies' hats, while others were served with a side of potatoes. Unyielding efforts to protect them from wholesale slaughter came from Paul Kreogel and Frank Chapman. The former was a mustache-sporting, shotgun-wielding lover of pelicans, and the latter was an

ornithologist and member of the Boone and Crockett Club. He was also a curator at the American Museum of Natural History. These two men and others from the Florida Audubon Society pitched the idea of protecting Pelican Island's birds from poaching and plunder to President Theodore Roosevelt, a Boone and Crockett founding member. As a result, on March 14, 1903, President Roosevelt signed an Executive Order creating the three-acre Pelican Island Reservation. This was the first installment of what would become the National Wildlife Refuge System.

The creation of Pelican Island was a true conservation milestone, but it did not directly help Key deer found farther south. However, it did give others like Boone and Crockett member "Ding" Darling a way to set aside habitat for the two dozen deer that remained in the 1930s and '40s. In his book, *An American Crusade for Wildlife*, author

James Trefethen writes that Darling was traveling the mangrove thickets of the Florida Keys in 1934 when he saw white smoke rising from the swamp. Upon investigating, Darling discovered that Cuban fishermen were helping themselves to fresh deer meat. "Their common practice was to set fire to the vegetation to drive the deer to water, where they could be easily shot or clubbed," writes Trefethen.

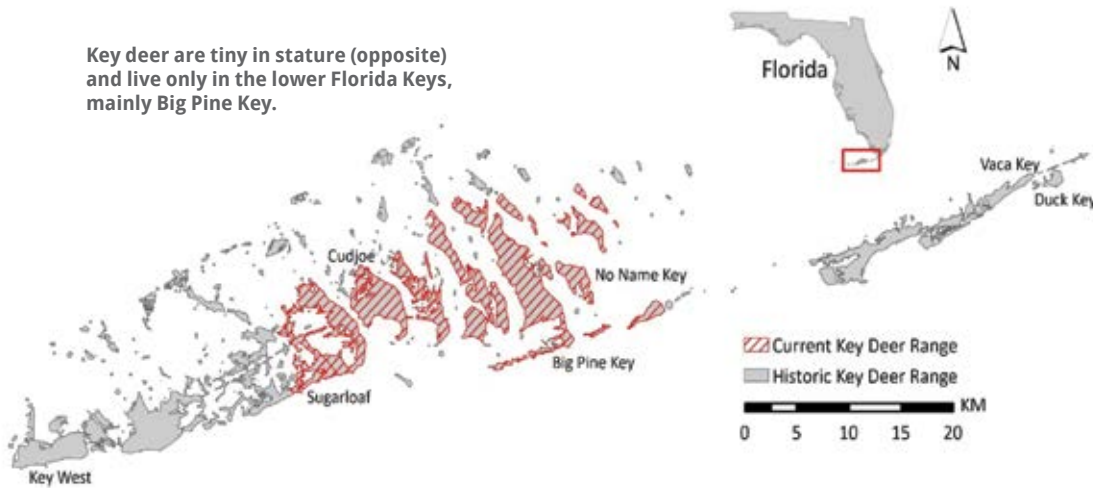
Darling was appalled on several levels. Poaching and decimating an American resource was entirely unacceptable. Even worse, they were foreign invaders. He immediately sketched a cartoon to bring public awareness to the plight of the remaining Key deer. It would take more than two decades, but Darling's cartoon would play a key role in gaining protection for Key deer habitat.

Poaching wasn't the Key deer's only problem. Habitat loss from residential and



Ding Darling's depiction of Cuban fishermen slaughtering Key deer brought attention to the few deer remaining in the Keys.

Key deer are tiny in stature (opposite) and live only in the lower Florida Keys, mainly Big Pine Key.



commercial development on Big Pine Key, combined with increasing automobile traffic on Highway 1 that bisects the deer's range, reduced the population to an estimated 25 deer. In 1939, Florida outlawed deer hunting, but poaching continued. The Key deer clearly needed a little room to stretch its tiny legs before they were all gone.

THE CLUB STEPS IN

James Silver worked for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in the Southeast, and he began to include the demise of Key deer in his reports to Washington D.C. His requests for help got the attention of Bud Jackson at the National Wildlife Federation (NWF), who asked Silver for a brochure outlining what the deer needed to survive. What they needed, Silver explained, was a refuge and protection from poaching. Even though a bill that would have created a refuge failed to pass in 1950, it got the ball rolling.

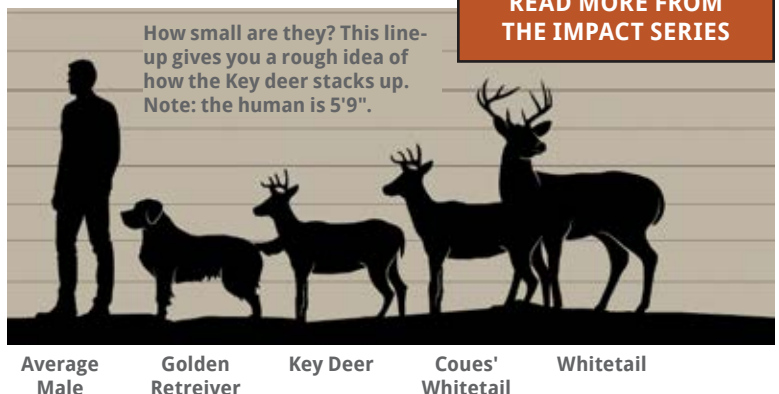
Jackson's boss at the NWF was Richard Borden, chairman of the conservation committee at the Boone and Crockett Club. The committee recognized that they needed to protect the deer until a refuge could be established. Otherwise, the Key deer

might not make it. Another member of the Club, C.R. Gutermuth, was vice president of the Wildlife Management Institute and pledged \$5,000 toward hiring a warden. The Club pledged an equal amount. The \$10,000 for a warden was only a fraction of the \$100,000 needed to establish a refuge, but again, it was a start.

Jack C. Watson was a young biologist the Club hired as the area's first game warden. His effective and spirited interpretation of the law kept poachers of the proposed refuge on notice. According to his son, Jack "Kippy" Watson, his father put a few bullet holes in carburetors as he waited for poachers to return to their vehicle, shot dogs chasing deer, and burned boats of known poachers as they hunted deer on the islands. Warden Watson would sit quietly for hours in the swamp, waiting for the poachers to come along—all the while covered in mosquitoes. "It's not a means that they recommend today," Kippy says. "But at the time, it was what it took and did the job."

Hiring Watson bought time, but any bill proposing a refuge met strong opposition from landowners and developers. A clause in the Interior Appropriations Bills of 1954 authorized the USFWS to lease lands within Key deer habitat as a workaround. It wasn't ideal, but it was all they could get at the time. Meanwhile, Gutermuth was selecting a spot for the proposed refuge's headquarters. He befriended Miami Beach local Radford Crane, who liked the idea of a refuge. Eventually, Crane got the land donated to the USFWS for their headquarters. They were moving forward, but it wasn't enough land for a refuge.

With this momentum, Florida Congressman Charles Bennett introduced a bill authorizing \$35,000 for land acquisition and the



The Impact Series is dedicated to showing how sportsmen, members of the Boone and Crockett Club in particular, saved the wildlife and wild places of the United States. Early members of the Boone and Crockett Club comprised the movers, shakers, and initiators of the American conservation movement. They were hunters, anglers, explorers, lawmakers, soldiers, and, above all, conservationists. These members established laws that allowed our wildlife resources to flourish. They also protected landscape-scale geologic marvels and American icons like Yellowstone, Grand Canyon, Denali, and many, many more. These members may no longer be with us, but their legacy remains. This series aims to honor their accomplishments and remind us of the good work still yet to do.



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establishment of a refuge. In the late summer of 1957, President Eisenhower signed the bill, establishing the National Key Deer Refuge—but there was one significant exclusion. The bill gave the refuge no money to acquire land. Enter Crane and Gutermuth again. The men were tasked with raising \$40,000 to purchase private inholdings if they wanted to receive \$100,000 worth of land from a foundation that owned much of the Key deer habitat around the headquarters. Gutermuth presented his fundraising challenge at a meeting of the Boone and Crockett Club, which then pledged \$10,000 to purchase land for the refuge. The Wilderness Society of Philadelphia kicked in another \$10,000. When the rest of the funds were raised, the lands were purchased and

transferred to the federal government.

Today, the National Key Deer Refuge is roughly 9,200 acres on Big Pine Key and No Name Key. While it provides critical freshwater wetlands and mangrove forests that Key deer need, the refuge is also home to 23 endangered and threatened plant and animal species. And even among the sea of sun worshippers and retirees, the area includes some federally-designated Wilderness, which is part of the 6,197-acre Florida Keys Wilderness System.

THRIVING OR THREATENED?

After the creation of the National Key Deer Refuge in 1957, deer numbers rebounded, but not enough to keep the Key deer off the endangered

species list. It was listed in 1967, along with the Florida panther and Florida manatee. With secure habitat and proper management, deer populations currently hover around 800 animals, but numerous short- and long-term threats remain.

Humans, hurricanes, and the New World screwworm hamper deer recovery for the short term. U.S. Highway 1 is the main road that connects the Florida Keys, bisecting the refuge. Automobile mortality accounts for roughly 50 percent of all deaths. And people aren't moving away. In 1968, Big Pine Key had 500 residents. Today, that figure tops 5,000. Increasingly, deer are treated like pets, get tangled in fences, and dine on non-native vegetation.

In the summer of 2016, the deer experienced a potential extinction event attributed to the New World screwworm. The outbreak threatened deer, people, other wildlife, and U.S. livestock. The USDA released infertile male flies, which caused the flies to breed out, but not before the worm had killed 135 deer. The screwworm has yet to return.

Not making things better for anyone, Hurricane Irma (Category 4) hit the

Florida Keys head-on in 2017. A 14-foot storm surge contaminated the deer's freshwater supply with seawater, and vegetation overstory was damaged significantly. Between screwworm and Irma, Key deer populations dropped by roughly 40 percent. As sea levels rise, hurricanes will increasingly impact low-lying areas like the Florida Keys, where the highest point is eight feet above sea level. "Their habitat is literally going underwater," says Roel Lopez, director of the Texas A&M Natural Resources Institute.

Dr. Lopez, a Boone and Crockett professional member, has spent the better part of his 30-year career researching Key deer, among other species. He's authored and co-authored hundreds of research articles on every issue affecting them since his dissertation project in the late 1990s. To this day, he continues to work on issues affecting Key deer, and he's well aware of past efforts to protect them. "If you want to see Key deer in their natural habitat, you go see the land the Boone and Crockett Club worked so hard to protect," Dr. Lopez says. "If it weren't for the Club, the course of the history of Key deer would likely be very different today." ■

Why did the Key deer cross the road? Well, it didn't because it was killed before it got across. Death by automobile accounts for roughly half of all Key deer mortality.



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