

THE DRY TORTUGAS

by Wayne Hoffman, Lawrence, Kansas

The Dry Tortugas are a series of about seven (it changes) sandy islands on a large oval coral reef sixty-eight nautical miles west of Key West, Florida. They form the western terminus of the Florida Keys and are thirty miles beyond the nearest islands (the Marquesas Keys). The reef, the islands, and the surrounding waters of the Gulf of Mexico form the Fort Jefferson National Monument, which is managed by the National Park Service.

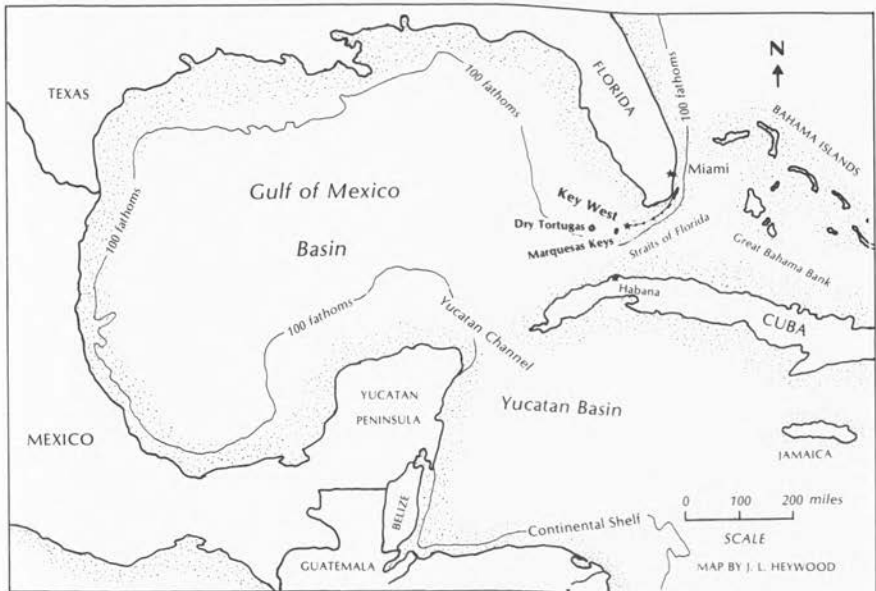
The Gulf of Mexico has a basin of deep oceanic water at its center, but it is virtually surrounded by shallow continental shelves one to two hundred miles wide. Warm tropical water enters the gulf through the Yucatan Channel between Cuba and the Yucatan Peninsula and leaves as the Gulf Stream flowing east between Florida and Cuba. Tropical oceanic birds, such as Sooty Terns, noddys, boobys, and tropicbirds, need remote islands near or even beyond the outer edge of the continental shelf. These birds feed over deep ocean waters and need to nest close to their feeding grounds. The gulf has few suitable islands, and the only ones in U. S. waters are the Dry Tortugas. Other bird colony sites are the islands north of the Yucatan Peninsula and along the north coast of Cuba.

Bush Key, in the Dry Tortugas, hosts nesting colonies of Sooty Terns (up to forty thousand pairs), Brown Noddys (a few thousand pairs), and Roseate Terns (about a hundred pairs). The Tortugas also provide roosts for Brown and Masked boobys, and for the last two years a single pair of Masked Boobys has attempted to nest on one of the islands.



*Bridled Terns
Dry Tortugas, April 1985*

Photo by Rick Cech



The location of the Dry Tortugas also makes the area a major migrant trap. Large numbers of herons, raptors, cuckoos, caprimulgids, flycatchers, thrushes, vireos, warblers, orioles, grosbeaks, and buntings migrate from Yucatan across the Gulf of Mexico to Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and northwestern Florida each spring. Occasionally these birds encounter cold fronts over the gulf and are blown east toward peninsular Florida. These cold fronts often produce spectacular fallouts at the Dry Tortugas and on barrier islands from Sanibel, Florida, to the Texas coast.

The Tortugas also provide the first landfall for Caribbean birds that overshoot or stray north from western Cuba. Antillean Nighthawks, Cuban Cave Swallows, Black Noddys, and Red-footed Boobys occur annually, and other strays reported have included Ruddy Quail-Dove, Zenaida Dove, Fork-tailed Flycatcher, Thick-billed Vireo, and Bahama Mockingbird. White-tailed Tropicbirds have been prospecting the bastions of Fort Jefferson for potential nest sites for the last several years and are commonly seen performing their spectacular courtship flights.

WAYNE HOFFMAN, who has a doctorate in ornithology from the University of South Florida at Tampa, led the Bird Observer Tortugas Trip in April 1985 (described in this issue by Harriet Hoffman). Wayne has studied feeding behavior and systematics of terns and gulls and their allies in Florida. He is now censusing the birds at Cheyenne Bottoms for the Museum of Natural History at the University of Kansas in Lawrence.