

Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary

Gulf Treasure

Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary, comprised of three banks about 70-115 miles off the Texas-Louisiana coast, is a true treasure of the Gulf of Mexico—a Caribbean oasis in an unexpected place.

When people visit Texas and Louisiana beaches, they usually see greenish-brown water full of sediments flowing from coastal rivers. Those sediments remain suspended in nearshore waters up to 30 miles from land. Beyond that, however, the northwestern Gulf of Mexico boasts clear blue waters.

East Flower Garden Bank, West Flower Garden Bank, and Stetson Bank are actually small underwater mountains created by salt domes. The tops of these banks are covered in gardens of coral, sponges, and algae that provide habitat for a variety of tropical wildlife.

History

Fishermen in the early 1900s were the first to describe this bountiful place, naming it the Flower Garden Banks after

seeing the corals and sponges below. But, not until the 1960s, when researchers and Navy divers explored the area, did we realize what an amazingly dense and healthy coral reef system thrived at the northern limits for coral reef development.

In 1992, East and West Flower Garden Banks were designated as a national marine sanctuary. Stetson Bank was added to the sanctuary in 1996.

Regional Context

East and West Flower Garden Banks and Stetson Bank are just three of many reefs and banks in the northwestern Gulf of Mexico. Research and exploration have identified biological and physical connections between many of these banks (map below).

East and West Flower Garden Banks are unique among the regional banks, as they contain the only true coral reefs in the area. Some of the other banks have small coral communities, but none rivals the sheer magnificence of over 50% living coral cover formed by huge boulders of star, brain and other corals. Their remote location has helped to maintain some of the healthiest coral reefs remaining in the world.



Imagery Courtesy of Gulf of Mexico Coastal Ocean Observing System

Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary consists of three banks in the northwestern Gulf of Mexico.



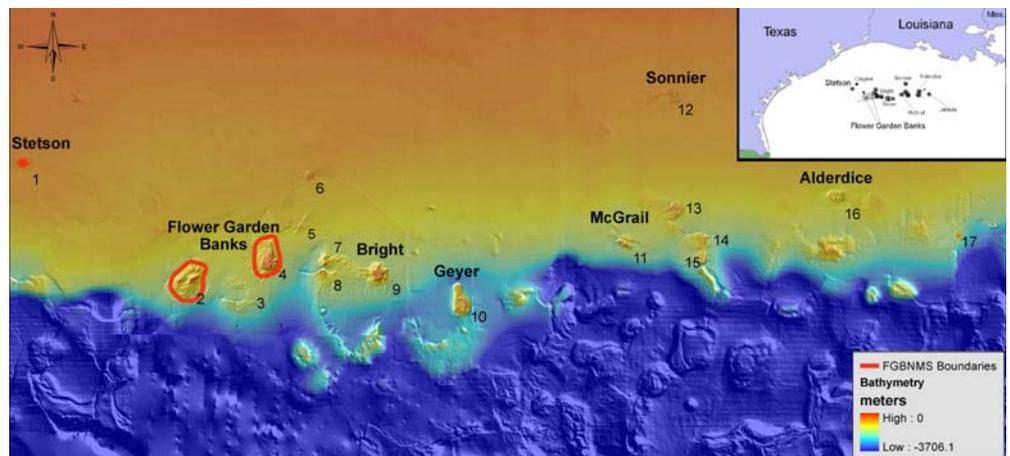
Photo: FGBNMS/G.P. Schmahl

East and West Flower Garden Banks reefs are dominated by boulders of star and brain corals piled on top of one another.



Photo: FGBNMS/G.P. Schmahl

Creolefish (*Paranthias furcifer*) schooling at Stetson Bank.



NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARY SYSTEM



Abundant Wildlife

Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary is a remote haven for tropical Caribbean species. From angelfish to parrotfish to grouper, visitors find a subset of the species they would see in the Florida Keys or Virgin Islands.

In addition to the usual coral reef suspects, the sanctuary is also known for larger, charismatic animals such as sea turtles, manta rays, and whale sharks. In fact, a resident population of over 70 manta rays has been identified in the sanctuary.

Notable Natural Events

Every year, about 7-10 nights after the full moon in August, the coral species at the Flower Garden Banks sanctuary perform a mass spawning event. As a result of the large concentration of mass spawning coral species in the sanctuary, the

experience is often described as an "upside down" underwater snowstorm.

Whale sharks are additional summer visitors, migrating through the sanctuary from about June to September. The reason for their visits is yet to be determined, but divers enjoy the occasional encounters.

In winter months, the sanctuary is noted for schools of scalloped hammerhead sharks and spotted eagle rays.

Diving Deeper

The shallowest, most accessible part of the sanctuary is also the most studied part of the sanctuary, thanks to scuba technology. But, this area, known as the coral cap, only accounts for about 1% of the sanctuary.

As technology has improved, so has exploration of areas beyond recreational

scuba limits. Remotely Operated Vehicles (ROVs) allow us to visit the mesophotic (lower light) or "twilight" zone, where we have encountered black corals and gorgonians in what are known as mesophotic reef communities.

Learn More...

The sanctuary website has been designed as an information and image resource about the sanctuary and the northwestern Gulf of Mexico. It is also an educational resource for topics such as coral biology, bleaching, and spawning; invasive species; and ongoing research.

<http://flowergarden.noaa.gov>

Please contact us if you have any questions: flowergarden@noaa.gov



Photo: FGBNMS/John Embesi

Manta Rays (*Manta birostris*) are year-round residents of the sanctuary.



Photo: FGBNMS/G.P. Schmahl

The mass coral spawn every August looks like an underwater snowstorm.



Photo: FGBNMS

Black corals are found in the deeper areas of the sanctuary.

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