

Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary

Gulf Treasure

Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary, made up of three reefs about 70-115 miles off the Texas-Louisiana coast, is a true treasure of the Gulf of Mexico—a tropical, underwater 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 coastal waters up to 30 miles offshore. Beyond that, however, the northwestern Gulf of Mexico boasts clear blue waters. That's where you will find East Flower Garden Bank, West Flower Garden Bank, and Stetson Bank.

These three banks are actually small underwater mountains, the tops of which are covered in coral, sponges, and algae that provide habitat for a variety of tropical wildlife. In fact, East and West Flower Garden Banks contain some of the healthiest coral reefs in the world. Stetson Bank is more of an algae and sponge community, with some coral.

History

Fishermen in the early 1900s were the first to describe this bountiful place, naming it the Flower Gardens 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 existed at the northern limits for coral reef survival.

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

The sanctuary contains just three of many banks in the northwestern Gulf of Mexico. Research and exploration have identified not only biological connections between these banks, but also geological ones (map below).

East and West Flower Garden Banks are unique among the regional banks, as they are the only extensive coral reefs in the area. Some of the other banks have small coral communities, but none rivals the 50% coral cover formed by huge boulders of star and brain corals in the sanctuary.



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



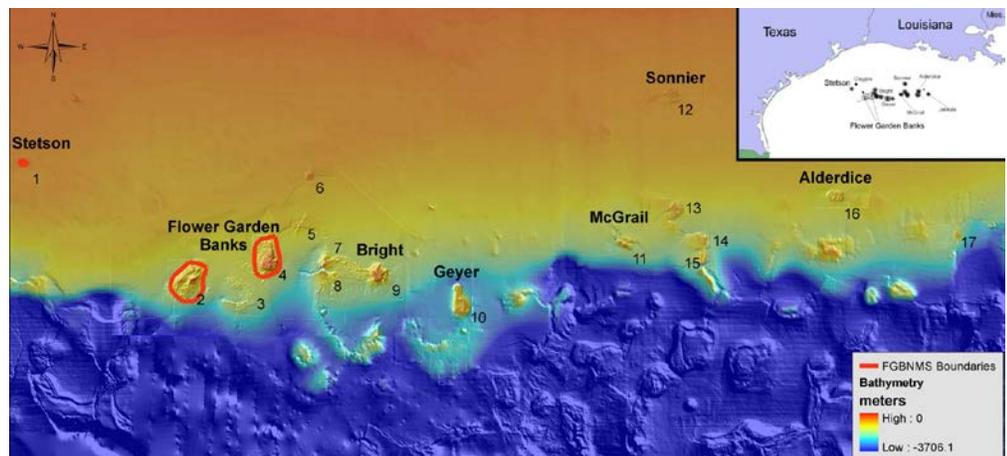
Photo: FGBNMS/G.P. Schmahl

East and West Flower Garden Banks reefs are mostly 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



Scale varies in this perspective. Adapted from National Geographic Maps.

- National Marine Sanctuary
- ▲ Marine National Monument
- Proposed National Marine Sanctuary

Abundant Wildlife

Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary is home to tropical Caribbean species. From angelfish to parrotfish to grouper, visitors find a subset of the fish and invertebrate 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, animals such as sea turtles, manta rays, and whale sharks. In fact, over 80 manta rays have been identified in the sanctuary.

Notable Natural Events

Every year, about 7-10 nights after the full moon in August, the Flower Garden Banks corals reproduce in a magnificent mass spawning event. As a result of this large concentration of mass spawning coral species, the experience is often described as an 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, 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 (middle light) or "twilight" zone, where we

have encountered black corals and gorgonians in what are now called Mesophotic Coral Ecosystems (MCEs).

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. We invite you to explore!

flowergarden.noaa.gov

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



Photo: FGBNMS/John Embesi

Manta Rays (Manta birostris) are found in the sanctuary all year long.



Photo: FGBNMS/G.P. Schmahl

The mass coral spawning event every August looks like an underwater snowstorm.



Photo: FGBNMS

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