

FIELD GUIDE

THE SEAGRASS HABITAT

OVERVIEW

The coastal Everglades, especially Florida Bay, is famous for its vast meadows of seagrass. Seven different species of these flowering plants can be found here. Seagrasses thrive in the shallow marine and estuarine waters of South Florida...that is as long as conditions are right. Unfortunately, Florida Bay has suffered from several catastrophic seagrass die-offs in recent years, the result of an unnatural, altered hydrologic system.

Seagrass meadows provide food and habitat for countless animals, and are important nursery grounds for many species of fish. Their waving blades help to catch and trap sediment, improving water quality. Their roots (**rhizomes**) also help to stabilize the soil, protecting the coastal shallows from erosion. Take it from me, the seagrass habitat is an amazing world.

PLANTS

TURTLE GRASS- turtle grass is the most common species of seagrass in Florida and is easily identified by its broad, flat blades. Turtle grass can grow in lush, thick meadows, which are important habitat for countless species of invertebrates and small fish.

Where, do you think, turtle grass got its name? Well it happens to be a favorite food of the green sea turtle.



SHOAL GRASS- this species is wide-ranging and often grows in mixed communities alongside other sea grass species. The blades are thinner and shorter than turtle grass.

Shoal grass is a hardy species, often becoming quickly established in disturbed areas where turtle grass has trouble growing.



MANATEE GRASS- this is the second most common species of seagrass in Florida, often growing in mixed communities alongside turtle grass or other species. It's blades are thin and cylindrical.

If the name is any hint, you guessed it. Manatee grass is a favorite food of one of our favorite marine mammals.



RED MANGROVE- the red mangrove, with its stilt like prop roots, can grow in deeper water than the other species of mangroves in Florida and it's not unusual to see a lone mangrove growing amid a bed of seagrass.

Like the seagrass roots, the roots of the mangroves help to stabilize the soils and prevent erosion from tropical storms.



ANIMALS

GREEN SEA TURTLE- this turtle isn't particularly green...on the outside. It gets its name from the unusual green colored fat underneath its shell.

The endangered green sea turtle primarily feeds on seagrass, with some algae mixed in for some variety.



WEST INDIAN MANATEE- the manatee spends lots of time grazing on sea grass. Occasionally, however, they'll scarf down a fish for some protein.

Manatee bones are incredibly dense, especially their rib bones which have no marrow. This means they act as ballast, or diving weights. This also means they are very brittle. Boat strikes are one of the biggest dangers for manatees.



NURSE SHARK- this bottom-dwelling shark species is common in Florida's coastal habitats, including coral reefs, mangrove fringes and sea grass beds

Female nurse sharks incubate their eggs internally, giving «live» birth to 20-30 pups at a time.



SPOTTED TRUNK FISH- this species of box fish is a bit of a goofy swimmer. It's not particularly fast or agile, but it is pretty heavily armored by a protective layer of hexagonal bony plates.

In addition to armored plating, it's also toxic if ingested. In fact they have been known to kill nurse sharks when swallowed. Respect.



LETTUCE SEA SLUG- Some people call this the «solar-powered sea slug.» That's because this animal can actually create food energy through photosynthesis. Seriously.

Chloroplasts from the sea lettuce that this mollusk eats are incorporated into its tissues. These are used to photosynthesize, and also give the slug its green color.

