GRAY'S REEF

NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARY

NOAA

Gray's Reef

Office of National Marine Sanctuaries
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary

Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary protects a vibrant hard-bottom area off the Georgia coast. About 65 feet below the surface, the reef's rocky, hard bottom, and scattered ledges provide a home for an abundance of marine life. Crabs, lobsters, soft corals, sponges, sea stars, and other organisms form a dense carpet of living creatures called a "live bottom." The reef attracts more than 200 species of fish, loggerhead sea turtles, and is a known calving area for the North Atlantic right whale. It's a popular destination for scuba divers, recreational anglers, and boaters.

About the Artwork

Gray's Reef is a marine oasis. On the surface, recreational anglers try for grouper, sea bass, and snapper, while a northern gannet flies overhead, and a NOAA weather buoy collects data. Beneath the waves, divers share the waters with a host of colorful tunicates, sponges, soft corals, and other residents of the live-bottom reef, like a loggerhead sea turtle, octopuses, nurse sharks, schools of spadefish, jellyfish, and North Atlantic right whales.

LOGGERHEAD SEA TURTLE *(Caretta caretta)*:
Loggerhead sea turtles rest under the ledges of Gray's Reef to hide from predators and graze on the many sponges, jellies, and mollusks of the live bottom.

BLACK SEA BASS *(Centropristis striata)*:
The most abundant predatory fish at Gray's Reef is also a common fish caught year round by anglers in the sanctuary.

NURSE SHARK *(Ginglymostoma cirratum)*:
Sharks use an evolved sense to detect electrical waves of prey. Nurse sharks use this sense to prey on fishes, clams, and other burrowing animals in the sand.

NORTH ATLANTIC RIGHT WHALE *(Eubalaena glacialis)*:
The most endangered whales on Earth migrate to waters off South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida each winter to give birth, nurse, and feed their whale calves.

RECREATIONAL FISHING
Responsible recreation has kept Gray's Reef an ideal fishing destination for over 40 years. Anglers enjoy year-round fishing for snapper, groupers, black sea bass, and kingfish.

RESEARCH AREA
Ocean studies happen throughout the sanctuary, but the southern third of the sanctuary is a research-only area for scientists to conduct experiments with minimal human impacts from fishing or diving.

Quick Facts

LOCATION
19 miles off the coast of Sapelo Island, Georgia.

PROTECTED AREA
22 square miles

DESIGNATION
January 1981

HABITATS
Ledges and crevices
Flat and sandy areas
Rocky outcroppings
Overhangs and undercuts
Sponge fields
Tabletop ledges

KEY SPECIES
Black sea bass
Grouper
Soft corals
Loggerhead sea turtle
North Atlantic right whale
Nurse shark
Red snapper
Sea whips
Tunicates
Vase sponge
Carpet sponges
Algae

Photos: (diver) Greg McFall/NOAA; (turtle) Greg McFall/NOAA; (nurse shark) Greg McFall/NOAA; (fisher) Alison Soss; (sea bass) Greg McFall/NOAA; (right whales) NOAA; (researcher) Greg McFall/NOAA; (background photo) NOAA

BELOW
Live-bottom refers to the dense carpet of living creatures on the seafloor, composed of soft corals, sponges, sea squirts, and other organisms that build the reef ecosystem. This dense carpet is what attracts fishes and other marine life, as well as scuba divers and anglers to the sanctuary. Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary is representative of other live-bottom habitats found throughout the waters of the southeast U.S.

America's Underwater Treasures

NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries serves as the trustee for a network of underwater parks encompassing more than 620,000 square miles of marine and Great Lakes waters from Washington state to the Florida Keys, and from Lake Huron to American Samoa. The network includes a system of 15 national marine sanctuaries and Papahānaumokuākea and Rose Atoll marine national monuments. For more information on the National Marine Sanctuary System, visit: sanctuaries.noaa.gov

National Marine Sanctuary
Marine National Monument
Proposed National Marine Sanctuary

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

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