



**Media only:** John Gibbons (202) 633-5187  
Michele Urie (202) 633-2950

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## Fact Sheet

### Phoenix, the North Atlantic Right Whale

A full-scale model of a North Atlantic right whale has become the iconic image of the new Sant Ocean Hall at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History in Washington. Measuring in at 45 feet and 2,300 pounds, the model is not only impressive in size, but in scientific accuracy as an exact replica of an actual whale that exists in the wild today.



Chip Clark/SI

Whale experts at the New England Aquarium in Boston helped the museum identify the model's real-life counterpart: Phoenix, a female North Atlantic right whale born off the coast of Georgia in 1987. Phoenix was considered an ideal candidate because she has been tracked throughout her life allowing scientists to know a great deal about her, including her family tree. Phoenix is the mother of three calves and became a grandmother in 2007.

Photographs taken from ships and airplanes have allowed scientists to follow Phoenix's progress over time. These photos are kept in the North Atlantic Right Whale Catalog, a database of more than 200,000 right whale images. Phoenix—whale No. 1705—was last seen on July 29, 2008, in the Gulf of Maine (see image below). Scientists can tell Phoenix apart from her peers due to a distinct pattern of callosities—wart-like tissue on the top of her head. Only right whales have these unusual birthmarks, which are often confused for barnacles because of their white color. Other distinctive traits include the right whale's unmistakable tail—black with a deep notch in the middle and a smooth trailing edge—and its V-shaped blow and absent dorsal fin.

Though right whales spend nearly 80 percent of their time underwater, researchers also use behavioral characteristics to distinguish right whales from other species. One of the most unusual

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behaviors is surface skim feeding, when right whales feed at the ocean’s surface with their mouths fully open for hours at a time. On a typical day, Phoenix may eat more than 2,200 pounds of copepods (tiny animal plankton)—128 pounds of which may be consumed in one hour alone. Other unique behaviors include “posturing,” when a whale arches its back to bring both the flukes and tail out of the water



Misty Niemeyer/NOAA. Image taken under MMPA Research Permit #775-1600-09.

simultaneously, and “surface active groups,” when two or more whales are found socializing at the water’s surface.

North Atlantic right whales are baleen whales, belonging to the genus *Eubalaena*. With a current population of less than 400, the endangered North Atlantic right whale is one of the rarest whale species in the world today. They can be found anywhere along the North Atlantic coast between

Norway and Florida, where they migrate seasonally to feed and calve.

Right whales began to decline in number during the 19th century due to whaling; they got their name because they were known as the “right” whale to catch at the time. In recent years, they have become particularly vulnerable to vessel strikes and entanglement in fishing gear. Today, organizations like the New England Right Whale Consortium are actively engaged in right whale research, conservation and management to ensure the long-term conservation and recovery of right whales in the North Atlantic.

The Phoenix model seen in the Sant Ocean Hall was created in eight months and installed this past spring. Dozens of contributors were involved in the process, including designers, painters, sculptors, engineers, whale biologists, exhibit fabricators and electricians.

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