

Guide to Reporting Whale Sightings



Please help the National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) collect vital information on right whales and dead, entangled, or injured whales of any species

by calling one of the numbers below **immediately** when these critical sightings are made. Please take **video or photographs** whenever possible. If a whale is sighted near gear or appears to be in distress, check for signs of entanglement or injury.

If an **entangled, injured, or dead** whale is sighted, please try to keep the whale in sight until you can report the sighting to NOAA Fisheries responders. **Do not attempt to disentangle a whale unless authorized.** Please bear in mind that federal law prohibits all approaches to right whales within 500 yards except under special circumstances.

Reporting Strategy

For any critical sighting, be prepared with the following information:

- ✓ Time and location of the sighting
- ✓ Distinctive features and estimated length of animal
- ✓ Signs of injury or entanglement
- ✓ Description of behavior, injuries, and entangling gear
- ✓ If the whale is dead, the condition of the carcass
- ✓ How you can be contacted

In the **Northeast Region** call the appropriate pager:

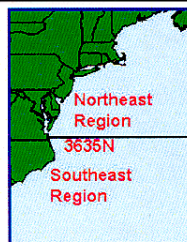
Entangled whales: **800-900-3622**

Dead, ship-struck, or injured whales: **978-585-7149**

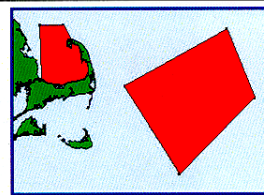
General right whale sightings: **978-585-8473**

In the **Southeast Region** (includes the Gulf of Mexico) report sightings of dead, entangled, or otherwise injured whales to **305-361-4586**. Report general right whale sightings by calling **888-979-4253**.

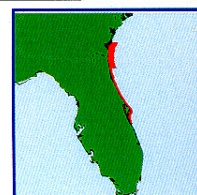
In both Regions, reports can also be relayed through U.S. Coast Guard stations.



NMFS Atlantic Administrative Divisions



New England Right Whale Critical Habitat Areas



Southeast U.S. Right Whale Critical Habitat Area

Northeast Region: ME - VA and offshore north of 36°35'N

Southeast Region: NC - TX and offshore south of 36°35'N

Right Whale Critical Habitat areas: **

Great South Channel: 41°00'N, 69°05'W;

41°40'N, 69°45'W; 42°10'N, 68°31'W; 41°38'N, 68°13'W

Cape Cod Bay: 42°04.8'N, 70°10'W; 42°12'N, 70°15'W;

42°12'N, 70°30'W; 41°46.8'N, 70°30'W

Southeast: 31°15'N to 30°15'N & offshore 15 nm;

30°15'N to 28°00'N & offshore 5 nm

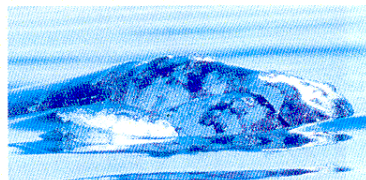
** Right whales follow a migratory path close to shore along the entire U.S. eastern seaboard. This migration is primarily in the early spring and late fall.

Identifying Right Whales

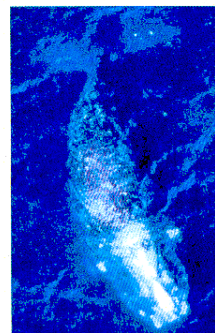
Several features should be observed to confirm species identification. These may include:

- ✓ Rough white patches ('callosities') on head
- ✓ Dorsal fin absent when the whale arches on a dive (But be cautious--other species may not show their dorsal fin until they arch up for a deep dive.)
- ✓ Flukes have smooth trailing edges and taper gradually to narrow pointy tips. (Only right whales, humpbacks and sperm whales routinely lift their tails when diving.)
- ✓ Distinct 'V' shaped blow when viewed from directly behind or head on (but not from the side)

From the air, right whales are best identified by the presence of callosities on the head. Their body shape is more robust than other whale species, and the flukes are proportionally larger. The flippers are typically hard to see.



Right whale head showing 'callosities'
NEFSC/PSB



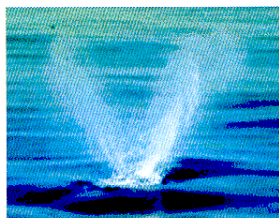
Right whale aerial view
NEFSC/PSB



Right whale flukes
NEFSC/PSB



Humpback flukes
NEFSC/PSB



Right whale 'V' shaped blow
NEFSC/PSB



Blow of other species
Scott Hill, NOAA Corps

(continued on back)

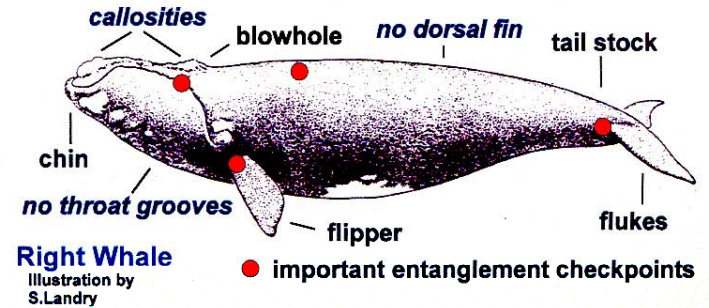
Spotting Entangled Whales

Spotting entangled whales requires careful observation. Whenever a whale is sighted, look for buoys or lines moving or unusually clumped near the whale or trailing some distance behind. Gear may also be seen wrapped over the whale's back, flippers, tail stock, or through the mouth.

Photographs or video of an entanglement are extremely valuable, especially when they document areas where the gear is entangled on the whale

Be sure to stay well clear of an entangled whale to avoid spooking it or running over any trailing gear.

The right whale illustration below shows both important entanglement checkpoints and the primary body features mentioned. Key right whale features are *italicized*.



Identifying Dead Whale Species at Sea

Whale carcasses are typically seen floating belly up. Due to predation and weathering, carcasses may differ significantly from the pictures below. Rely on described body structures for identification. If possible, closely examine the carcass for signs of injuries, such as gashes, bruises, or line marks.

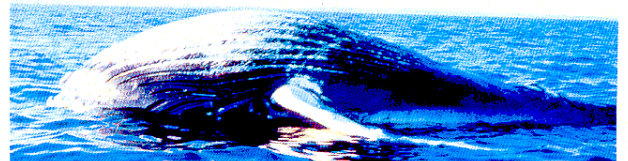
Video or photographs are extremely valuable, especially close-ups of the areas around the tail stock, flukes, flippers, and any injuries.

Dead right whales

- ✓ Throat grooves absent (Belly may have white patches or be completely black.)
- ✓ Flippers squarish in shape and, when the whale is belly-up, both may be up out of the water
- ✓ If floating on its side, note strongly arched mouth that contains long (6+ foot) baleen.

Dead humpback whales

- ✓ Throat grooves present
- ✓ Flippers white and about 1/3 the length of the body with knobby bumps on front edge
- ✓ Trailing edge of tail flukes ragged-looking with large barnacles on tips
- ✓ Several grapefruit-sized knobby black bumps on chin and snout



Dead humpback whale (head to the left)

NERO/PRD

Dead finback whales

- ✓ Throat grooves present (narrower and more numerous than on humpbacks)
- ✓ Flippers smooth, slender and fairly short
- ✓ Tail flukes have smooth trailing edges and taper to narrow pointy tips.
- ✓ Chin smooth and relatively slender



Dead finback whale (head to the right)

NEFSC/PSB

Dead minke whales are physically similar to finbacks but are smaller (less than 30 feet long), and their throat grooves do not extend as far aft.

A good reference for identifying other species is [Guide to Marine Mammals & Turtles of the U.S. Atlantic & Gulf of Mexico](#) (c) 1999. Rhode Island Sea Grant. To order, call 401-874-6842.



Dead right whale (tail closest)
NEFSC/Sea Sampling



Dead right whale (head to the left)
NEFSC/Sea Sampling



Dead right whale aerial (white marks on back are gull-related)
Center for Coastal Studies

(space below provided for sighting notes)

Time: _____ **Location (lat/long):** _____

Notes: _____