



Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program

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Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

North Atlantic Right Whale *Eubalaena glacialis*

State Status: **Endangered**
Federal Status: **Endangered**

DESCRIPTION: The North Atlantic Right Whale can reach to 16 meters in length and weigh up to 70 tons. This rotund baleen whale has a stocky black body, lacks a dorsal fin, and has a narrow and strongly arched rostrum. The species has callosities (raised patches of rough skin) on the rostrum, chin, above the eyes, and behind the blowhole. Most individuals have white patches on their abdominal area, but the majority of the whale is black to dark gray. Identification in the field is assisted by a characteristic V-shaped blow. The North Atlantic Right Whale has up to 250 baleen plates on each side of the upper jaw, measuring about two meters long and fringed with fine hairs.

RANGE: North Atlantic Right Whales usually occur from the Bay of Fundy south to northern Florida, but individual whales may disperse beyond these limits. Different parts of their range are used for different purposes, including distinct feeding areas, calving areas, nursery aggregation areas, and breeding locations. Historically, the North Atlantic Right Whale occurred in all the world's oceans. They primarily inhabit coastal and shelf waters, moving to higher latitudes during the spring and summer.

DISTRIBUTION IN NEW ENGLAND WATERS: North Atlantic Right Whales concentrate in Cape Cod Bay and the Great South Channel east of Nantucket Island in small numbers from December to March, and in larger numbers in April and May. These areas are important feeding grounds for the species because of the unusually dense concentrations of zooplankton. Few North Atlantic Right Whales remain in Massachusetts waters throughout the summer; the majority of the population spends summer and fall in the Bay of Fundy and on the Nova Scotian shelf. Right whales move south to warmer waters off the coast of Georgia and Florida to calve.



Photo courtesy of NOAA

LIFE HISTORY AND ECOLOGY: North Atlantic Right Whales live to at least 50 years of age. The closely related Bowhead Whale in the North Pacific may live over 100 years. Females give birth to their first calf at 10 years of age, with the gestation period lasting approximately 12 months. A calf can be up to 4.2 meters long at birth. North Atlantic Right Whales are occasionally observed from the beaches of Cape Cod in the spring, where they generally feed on zooplankton, including copepods, euphausiids, and cyprids. North Atlantic Right Whales sometimes feed by skimming prey from the surface of the water as they swim through a patch of plankton with their mouth open. They then use their tongue to force the water through their baleen, the comb-like fibrous plates hanging from the upper jaw, while retaining the zooplankton in their mouth.

Parasitic amphipods called whale lice heavily infest the callosities of the North Atlantic Right Whale, sometimes giving their heads a yellowish-white patchy appearance. Although there is no definitive evidence of Killer Whale predation on North Atlantic Right Whales in the north Atlantic, about 5 percent of the population exhibit

A Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the Massachusetts State Wildlife Action Plan

Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

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parallel raking scars on their tail flukes, which match the dentition of the Killer Whale.

POPULATION STATUS: The North Atlantic Right Whale is listed as Endangered under both the federal and state endangered species acts. From the early 1500s to the 1920s, these whales were extensively hunted in the western North Atlantic. A full prohibition on hunting began in 1935. It is believed that the western North Atlantic Right Whale population now includes about 450 individuals. The eastern North Atlantic Right Whale population is nearly extinct, with numbers only in the low tens of individuals. Currently, ship collisions and entanglement in fishing gear are the two most important causes of mortality.

STRANDED WHALES: For all live or dead marine mammal strandings, please call one of the following Hot Lines:

For Cape Cod: 508-743-9548
IFAW Marine Mammal Rescue and Research

For areas near Boston: 617-973-5247
New England Aquarium

For all other areas: 978-281-9300
National Marine Fisheries Service, Gloucester

Be prepared to provide the following information:

- Name and contact number
- Location of animal with detailed description and nearby landmarks, if possible
- Number, size, and type of animal
- Any other helpful information such as behavior or tidal cycle

Keep a safe distance away from the animal. For mass strandings of two or more animals and large whales, the International Fund for Animal Welfare will establish an incident command system where respondents will have logo gear and/or vests.

For all dead marine mammals, please describe:

- If the carcass is marked with grease pen or tagged, note the tag's color, number, and position on the animal

Though every carcass cannot be removed due to budget limitations, it is required by law that data and samples be collected from every dead marine mammal that comes to shore.

REFERENCES:

North Atlantic Right Whales (*Eubalaena glacialis*). Office of Protected Resources, NOAA Fisheries. URL: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/species/mammals/whales/north-atlantic-right-whale.html>

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