



NOAA NATIONAL OCEANIC AND
ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

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NOAA Fisheries alerts boaters, right whales are on the move
Endangered species travels south for the winter

This time every year marine biologists with NOAA Fisheries, the Georgia Department of Natural Resources and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission remind all boaters that North Atlantic right whale calving season begins in mid-November and runs through mid-April, which means these large whales are on the move, making their way down the Atlantic coast of the U.S.

Scientists estimate there are as few as 400 right whales left, making them one of the most endangered marine mammals in the world.

“Each winter pregnant right whales travel more than 1,000 miles from their feeding grounds off Canada and New England to the warm coastal waters of South Carolina, Georgia and northeastern Florida,” said Tom Pitchford, wildlife biologist for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. “This is where these whales come to give birth and nurse their young.”

These southern waters are the only known calving area for the species making it extremely important to raise awareness about their movement and migratory patterns.

“Right whales are dark with no dorsal fin and they often swim slowly at or just below the water’s surface,” said Barb Zoodsma, NOAA Fisheries’ southeast right whale recovery program coordinator. “Many assume that due to their size right whales would be easy to see, but just a slight difference in the texture on the water’s surface is often the only clue that a whale is present.”

North Atlantic right whales are protected under the U.S. Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act. To reduce the risk of collisions between right whales and boats, federal law requires vessels 65 feet long and greater to slow to 10 knots or less in Seasonal Management Areas along the U.S. Eastern Seaboard, including the calving and nursery area in the southeastern U.S. Speed restrictions are in place in various areas along the mid-Atlantic from Nov. 1 through April 30, and in the southeast U.S. calving area from Nov. 15 through April 15. For more information on seasonal ship speed restrictions, visit <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/shipstrike/>

Federal law also prohibits approaching or remaining within 500 yards of right whales either by watercraft or by aircraft. NOAA and its partners use planes to fly over the coast of northeast Florida and Georgia from December through March, and throughout the year in New England waters. The information from these aerial surveys is used to alert boaters of the presence of right whales, allowing ships to alter their course to avoid potential collisions with the whales.

While vessels less than 65 feet are not regulated under the Ship Strike Reduction Rule, collisions with smaller vessels have occurred, resulting in injury to whales and expensive damage to boats. Clay George,

Georgia DNR's lead marine mammal biologist, said recreational boaters and fishermen should "keep a sharp eye out for right whales and give the whales their space. Driving slowly is the best way to reduce risk of whale collisions."

Regardless of the current legal status of the Florida Net Limitation Amendment, regulations to protect endangered right whales remain in effect in both state and federal waters. Specifically, the Southeast U.S. Restricted Area North is closed to all gillnet fishing from Nov. 15 to April 15. Also, from Dec. 1 through March 31, the Southeast U.S. Restricted Area South and the Southeast U.S. Monitoring Area require gillnet fishermen comply with certain restrictions in order to fish within these areas, including state waters (see 50 CFR 229.32). More details regarding these restrictions are available on pages 53-60 at: <http://www.nero.noaa.gov/whaletrp/plan/ALWTRPGuide.pdf>

To report sightings of dead, injured, or entangled whales please contact NOAA Fisheries at 1-877-WHALE-HELP or 877-433-8299.

NOAA's mission is to understand and predict changes in the Earth's environment, from the depths of the ocean to the surface of the sun, and to conserve and manage our coastal and marine resources.

On the Web:

NOAA Fisheries Service Southeast <http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov>

NOAA Fisheries Service Northeast Protected Resources http://www.nero.noaa.gov/prot_res/

North Atlantic Right Whale <http://rightwhalesouth.nmfs.noaa.gov>

North Atlantic Right Whale ship strike reduction <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/shipstrike/>

Right Whale Festival 2013 www.rightwhalefestival.org

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) <http://MyFWC.com/>

Georgia DNR Nongame Conservation Section <http://www.georgiawildlife.com/conservation>

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