

# RIGHT WHALE NEWS

*An independent forum for right whale conservation and recovery,  
publishing several times each year.*

---

*Volume 27 Number 1*

*April 2019*

## **The Southeast U.S. Season: A Hint of a Rebound**

As the Earth slowly tilted on its axis, the Northern Hemisphere got darker and colder. It was early December 2018. The talk in the right whale community tended toward words like extinction, decline, precarious, and concern. The outlook, based on reports at the 2018 annual meeting of the North Atlantic Right Whale Consortium and the associated Report Card, was gloomy. This was exacerbated/reinforced by the spike in mortalities in the spring and summer of 2017, combined with the absence of calf births in the 2017-18 season. The population as well as the calf production appeared to be in decline.

On 21 December, the tilt of the Earth's axis was reversed. Light and warmth, slowly, began to return. A week later, on 28 December 2018, a report came in from the SEUS calving grounds—a mother-calf pair had been sighted SSE of Jacksonville, Florida, some seven nautical miles off the beach. This would be followed by reports of six additional mother-calf pairs from mid-January through mid-February.

The mothers ranged in age from >8 to >37. Female Catalog #4180 was a first-time mother. On the other hand, for female #1204, this was her ninth calf. In the middle were females who had their second, third, and fourth calves—a perhaps small but healthy mix of mother-calf pairs, and a cautious promise of better things to come.

As is almost always the case, there were noteworthy events. The plot of sightings (see below) shows a distribution from South Carolina well into southern Florida. Mother-calf sightings south of the “core area” (Cumberland and Amelia islands) were common. The Volunteer Sighting Network reported several off Daytona Beach, south of Ponce Inlet, south of Cape Canaveral, and off Sebastian Inlet. Indeed, female # 4180, a first-time mother, was only sighted off Sebastian Inlet and farther south. The initial sighting on 5 February was reported by Ed Perry, a ranger at Sebastian Inlet State Park. Likewise, to further illustrate the breadth of the Network, several sighting reports came in from the Volusia County Beach Patrol. A week later, female #3370

with calf #2 was first reported by the Sighting Network off North Peninsula State Park, Volusia County. This was a new report for the season and added calf #6 to the count. Female #3370 and calf provided an additional surprise. This pair, as did others, traveled well south of Cape Canaveral, and on 24 February were off Indialantic (latitude 28°07'). Then in early March, the sighting reports suggested that the migration north was underway. On 8 March, the pair was sighted by the Georgia aerial survey team north of St. Simons Island, Georgia. Indications were that the SEUS would now be in their rear-view mirror. But, no! On 21 March, volunteers just south of Marineland reported the pair heading south. On the next day, they were off Ormond Beach, with a continuing southward movement. The pair has not been sighted since. Along with the promise, there is the unpredictability.

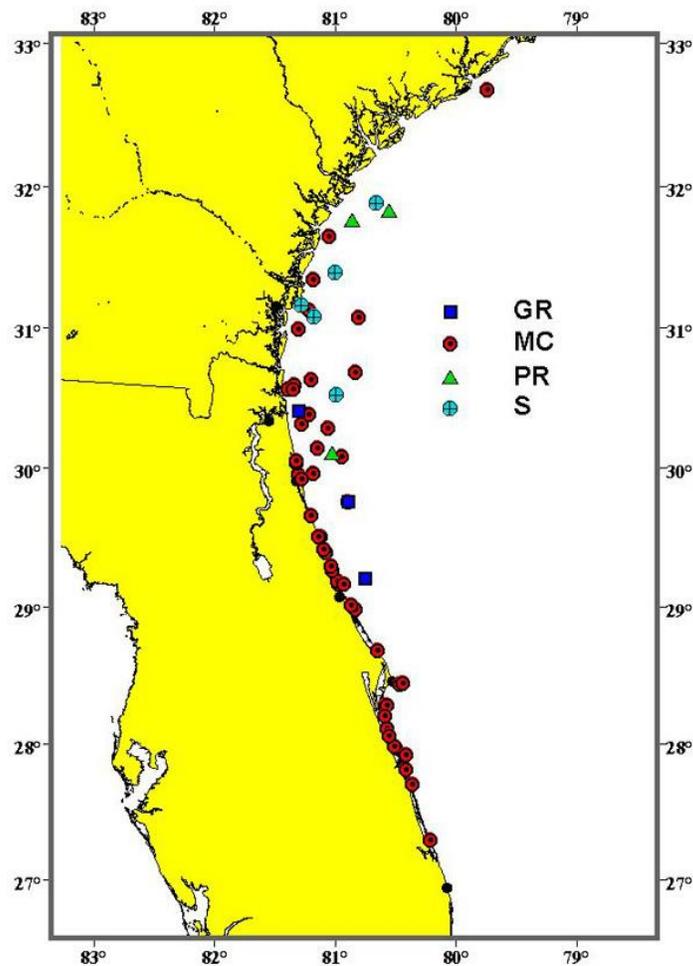


Figure 1. Plot of verified right whale sightings for the 2018-19 SEUS season. N=62. Key: GR=group of  $\geq 3$ , MC=mother-calf pair, PR=non mother-calf pair, S=single individual. Sightings sources through a collaborative effort of the Clearwater Marine Research Institute, Sea2Shore Alliance, Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Florida Fish and Wildlife Institute, Marineland Right Whale Project, and the Marine Resources Council.

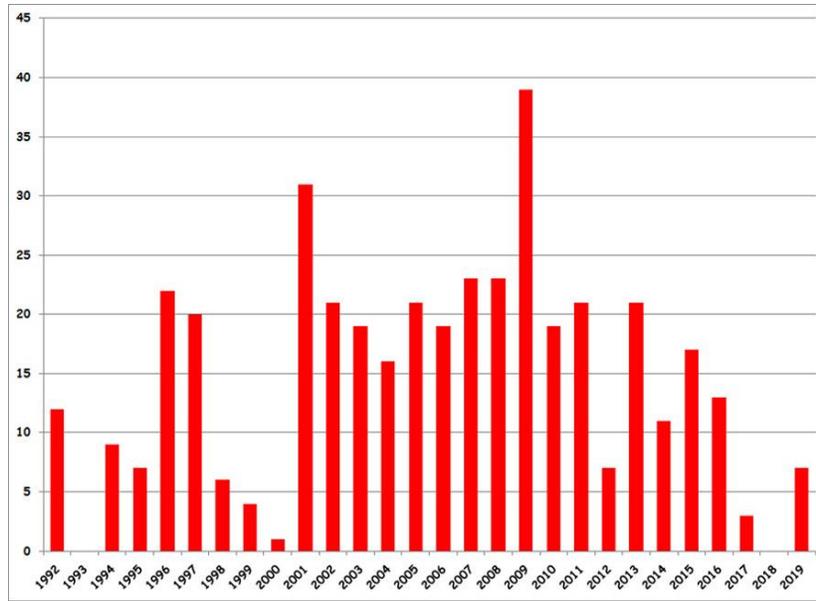


Figure 2. The annual calf production for the North Atlantic right whale 1992 through 2019. The calving is highly variable and predictability is in short supply. During the period 1998 through 2001, there was a downturn followed by a rebound. Will we experience such an event in the 2017 through 2020 period? (Source: New England Aquarium)

## Cape Cod Bay Report

Postings and reports from the Center for Coastal Studies (CCS), Provincetown, Massachusetts, provide descriptions of right whale activity in Cape Cod Bay (CCB). As of 22 April, for the previous five months, CCS researchers identified 244 individual whales out of the currently estimated population of 411—more than half of the population. So far the highest number of right whales sighted in the Bay in one day was 129 (on 7 April)—more than one-third of the population.

There’s more. On 7 April, the first right whale calf of the year in CCB was sighted: mother-calf pair #1204. As described in the previous article, this is #1204’s ninth known calf. She is prolific and certainly doing her part to grow the population.

On 11 April, the CCS aerial survey team sighted two more mother-calf pairs. This brought the number of calves observed in CCB to three. The mothers were identified as #s 4180 and 3317. As described above, this was the first calf for #4180.

For the past several years, Cape Cod Bay has been a productive habitat for right whales.

*Contributions to this article by Christy Hudak, Amy James, Stormy Mayo, Brigid McKenna, and Alison Ogilvie, Center for Coastal Studies.*

## WOW: The Shoe is on the Other Foot

On 7 March 2019, the Water, Oceans, and Wildlife (WOW) subcommittee of the House Natural Resources Committee convened an oversight hearing in room 1324 of the Longworth House Office Building, Washington D.C., examining threats to the North Atlantic right whale. The focus was on climate change and, more specifically, geophysical seismic testing, and, on the question, “How can Congress help?” The hearing was public and available via webinar.



*Figure 3. On 7 March 2019, the Water, Oceans, and Wildlife (WOW) subcommittee of the House Natural Resources Committee convened an oversight hearing examining the threats to the North Atlantic right whale in room 1324 of the Longworth House Office Building. Mr. Chris Oliver, Assistant Administrator for NOAA Fisheries, is testifying; other panel members are in the lower left.*

Recall that whether or not a topic makes it to the hearing stage is exclusively in control of the majority party (*Right Whale News*, December 2018, p. 17). With the Democrats in charge (at least of the House), previously sidelined topics have been brought forward.

To a large extent, the laser beam of the hearing was directed to the Incidental Harassment Authorization (IHA) letter provided on 30 November 2018 by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration/National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA/NMFS) to five separate companies involved in geophysical surveys using airgun surveys in the Atlantic Ocean. See:

<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/action/incidental-take-authorization-oil-and-gas-industry-geophysical-survey-activity-atlantic>

as well as *Federal Register* Vol 83 No. 235 page 63268, 7 December 2018.

The extent and complexity of the topic is indicated by the number of pages occupied in the Federal Register (114), and the corresponding Biological Opinion (396).

The IHA was issued in accordance with the regulations implementing the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) as amended.

The authorizations require monitoring, reporting, and mitigation measures to reduce the impacts of survey activities on marine mammals, including:

- Observers on board geophysical survey vessels to listen and watch for marine life and alert operators if a protected species comes within a certain distance,
- Operational restrictions designed to eliminate or reduce impacts to sensitive species in their preferred habitats,
- Acoustic monitoring to detect marine mammal vocalizations beneath the ocean surface,
- Gradual increases of seismic activity to alert animals in the area and reduce potential for exposure to intense noise,
- Required shutdowns when certain sensitive species or groups are observed, and
- Vessel strike avoidance procedures.

Testifying on behalf of NOAA/NMFS was Chris Oliver, Assistant Administrator for NOAA Fisheries. Coming under close questioning, Oliver stated, “we don’t believe that seismic activities are a direct cause of serious injury and mortality [on right whales].” The questioning and testimony included decibel levels, the Biological Opinion, and a comparison between the Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico.

Next to testify was Scott Kraus, Vice President and Senior Scientist, New England Aquarium. In a statement that notably and precisely fit within the five-minute allotted time, Kraus addressed the central question, “Why does this matter?” as well as chronic underwater noise, stressors that impact reproduction, and sub-lethal effects. Next, Chris Clark, Cornell University, described the role of sound in right whale biology and the distances that sound travels.

The flavor of the hearing was perhaps best exemplified when Chairman Jared Huffman (D, CA) asked NOAA/NMFS representative Oliver, “If you had said no to the oil and gas industry, would you still have your job, sitting here today?”

The questioning was not one sided, as minority members of the Subcommittee, including ranking member Tom McClintock (R, CA), provided statements and questions with alternative views. A noteworthy event at the hearing came when Joe Cunningham (D, SC) blew an airhorn to illustrate the sound levels and the disturbance that seismic testing might produce.



*Figure 4. Testifying on behalf of NOAA/NMFS was Chris Oliver, Assistant Administrator for NOAA Fisheries. Speaking in defense of an Incidental Harassment Authorization (IHA) issued by the agency, Oliver stated, “we don’t believe that seismic activities are a direct cause of serious injury and mortality [on right whales].” The continuing questioning and testimony included decibel levels, the Biological Opinion, sublethal effects, and sound propagation. Seated behind Mr. Oliver are panel members Scott Kraus, New England Aquarium (R), and Chris Clark, Cornell University (L).*

Towards the end, Seth Moulton (D, MA) offered, “We can be the generation that saves the right whales, let’s not miss this moment. To this end, last evening I re-introduced the SAVE the Right Whales Act, which will arm us with the funding we need.” (see also *Right Whale News*, December 2018, p. 17).

## Calendar

23–26 April 2019. Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Team Meeting, Providence Marriott, Providence, Rhode Island. Agenda and documents available at:  
<https://www.greateratlantic.fisheries.noaa.gov/protected/whaletrp/trt/meetings>

1–2 May 2019. Meeting of the Southeast U.S. Implementation Team (SEIT) at the GTM National Estuarine Research Reserve (NERR) in Ponte Vedra, Florida. The Public Forum will

be held from 9am to 5pm on the 1<sup>st</sup>, the SEIT will deliberate on the 2<sup>nd</sup>. Contact [thomas.pitchford@myfwc.com](mailto:thomas.pitchford@myfwc.com) for further information.

2–3 November 2019, the Right Whale Festival will be held at a new location in Fernandina Beach, Florida. Fernandina Beach is about 30 miles north of Jacksonville Beach. The festival will also grow to a 2-day event with new and exciting features. For more information and updates, follow the event on Facebook or go to: <http://rightwhalefestival.com>.

14–15 November 2019. North Atlantic Right Whale Consortium Annual Meeting, University of Southern Maine, Portland, Maine. For further details, registration, and abstract submission, see [www.narwc.org](http://www.narwc.org). Ropeless consortium meeting precedes on 13 November.

9–12 December 2019. World Marine Mammal Science Conference, Barcelona, Spain. Society for Marine Mammalogy joined with the European Cetacean Society. Abstract proposals due online by 30 April 2019. For more information and to get involved, contact : [conference@wmmconference.org](mailto:conference@wmmconference.org).

## Scientific Literature and Reports

Arias M., M.A. Coscarella, M.A. Romero, N. Sueyro, G.M. Svendsen, E.A. Crespo, and R.A. Gonzalez. 2018. Southern right whale '*Eubalaena australis*' in Golfo San Mathias (Patagonia, Argentina): Evidence of recolonisation. PLOS ONE 13(12):e0207524. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0207524>

Charlton, C., R. Ward, R.D. McCauley, R.L. Brownell Jr., C.S. Kent, and S. Burnell. 2019. Southern right whale (*Eubalaena australis*), seasonal abundance and distribution at Head of Bight, South Australia. Aquatic Conservation: Marine and Freshwater Ecosystems 2019; 1-13.

Crespo, E.A., S.N. Pedraza, S.L. Dans, G.M. Svendsen, M. Degradi, and M.A. Coscarella. 2019. The southwestern Atlantic southern right whale, *Eubalaena australis*, population is growing but at a decelerated rate. Marine Mammal Science 35:93-107. DOI:10.1111/mms.12526

Cubaynes, H.C., P.T. Fretwell, C. Bamford, L. Gerrish, and J.A. Jackson. 2019. Whales from space: Four mysticete species described using new VHR satellite imagery. Marine Mammal Science 35:466-491. DOI:10.1111/mms.12544

Durette-Morin, D., K.T. Davies, H.D. Johnson, M.W. Brown, H. Moors-Murphy, B. Martin, and C.T. Taggart. 2019. Passive acoustic monitoring predicts daily variation in North Atlantic right

whale presence and relative abundance in Roseway Basin, Canada. *Marine Mammal Science*. DOI:10.1111/mms.12602

Ganley, L.C., S. Brault, and C.A. Mayo. 2019. What we see is not what there is: Estimating North Atlantic right whale *Eubalaena glacialis* local abundance. *Endangered Species Research* 38:101-113.

Hamilton, S. and G.B. Baker. 2019. Technical mitigation to reduce marine mammal bycatch and entanglement in commercial fishing gear: Lessons learnt and future directions. *Reviews in Fish Biology and Fisheries*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11160-019-09550-6>

Jacobs, E., M. Duffy, J. Magolan, B. Galletti Vernazzani, E. Cabrera, R. Landea, S. Buchan, and L. Sayigh. 2019. First acoustic recordings of critically endangered eastern South Pacific southern right whales (*Eubalaena australis*). *Marine Mammal Science* 35:284-289. DOI:10.1111/mms.12519

Kenney, R.D. 2018. What if there were no fishing? North Atlantic right whale population trajectories without entanglement mortality. *Endangered Species Research* 37:233-237. <https://doi.org/10.3354/esr00926>

Marón, C.F., K.D. Kohl, A. Chirife, M. Di Martino, M.P. Fons, M.A. Navarro, J. Beingesser, D. McAloose, F.A. Uzal, M.D. Dearing, V.J. Rowntree, and M. Uhart. 2019. Symbiotic microbes and potential pathogens in the intestine of dead southern right whale (*Eubalaena australis*) calves. *Anaerobe* 57:107-114.

Pirotta, V., A. Grech, I.D. Jonsen, W.F. Laurance, and R.G. Harcourt. 2018. Consequences of global shipping traffic for marine giants. *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment* 17(1):39–47. DOI: 10.1002/fee.1987

Seger, K.D. and J.L. Miksis-Olds. 2019. Acoustic documentation of temperate odontocetes in the Bering and Chukchi Seas. *Marine Mammal Science*. DOI:10.1111/mms.12577

Sironi, M., C.F. Marón, L. Pettite, J. Guevara, J.P. Martorel, V. and Rowntree. 2019. First record of an unsuccessful parturition of a southern right whale (*Eubalaena australis*) at Península Valdés, Argentina. *Marine Mammal Science*. DOI:10.1111/mms.12594

Southall, B.L., J.J. Finneran, C. Reichmuth, P.E. Nachtigall, D.R. Ketten, A.E. Bowles, W.T. Ellison, D.P. Nowacek, and P.L. Tyack. 2019. Marine mammal noise exposure criteria: Updated scientific recommendations for residual hearing effects. *Aquatic Mammals* 45(2):125-232. <https://doi.org/10.1578/AM.45.2.2019.125>

Tetra Tech Inc. 2019. April 2019 survey report for New York Bight whale monitoring aerial surveys. Prepared for New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, Division of Marine Resources, Albany, New York.

Werth, A.J., M.A. Lillie, M.A. Piscitelli, A.W. Vogl, and R.E. Shadwick. 2018. Slick, stretchy fascia underlies the sliding tongue of rorquals. *The Anatomical Record*. DOI:10.1002/ar.24035

Wright, D.L., C.L. Berchok, J.L. Crance, and P.J. Clapham. 2019. Acoustic detection of the critically endangered North Pacific right whale in the northern Bering Sea. *Marine Mammal Science* 35:311-326. DOI:10.1111/mms.12521

## **Right Whale News**

*Right Whale News* is a publication of Associated Scientists at Woods Hole. It is disseminated online through the courtesy of the North Atlantic Right Whale Consortium. The Editor is Jim Hain. The Editorial board consists of Julie Albert, Robert Kenney, Hans Neuhauser, and Amy Whitt. The current and back issues of *Right Whale News* published between 1994 and 2018 are available at the North Atlantic Right Whale Consortium website, [www.narwc.org](http://www.narwc.org), under the *Right Whale News* tab.

To submit ideas, article topics, and comments, contact Editor Jim Hain at [jhain@earthlink.net](mailto:jhain@earthlink.net) and place “RWN Editorial” in the subject line. To subscribe, please use the new “Mail Chimp” system at: <http://eepurl.com/JvmKf>. The link is also available via the *Right Whale News* tab on [www.narwc.org](http://www.narwc.org).

**Citing *Right Whale News*:** The requested format for citations from *Right Whale News* is: Right Whale News Volume(number): page(s). Alternatively, a less formal citation may simply use month and year of issue.

An index to *Right Whale News*, subject and author, for the period 2014-2004 is posted at the North Atlantic Right Whale Consortium website, [www.narwc.org](http://www.narwc.org)—under the *Right Whale News* tab. Indexing for the period 2004-1994 is underway.

Support for *Right Whale News* is provided by the Island Foundation and the Massachusetts Environmental Trust.

Jim Hain, Editor of *Right Whale News*, is a member of the Society for Environmental Journalists.