

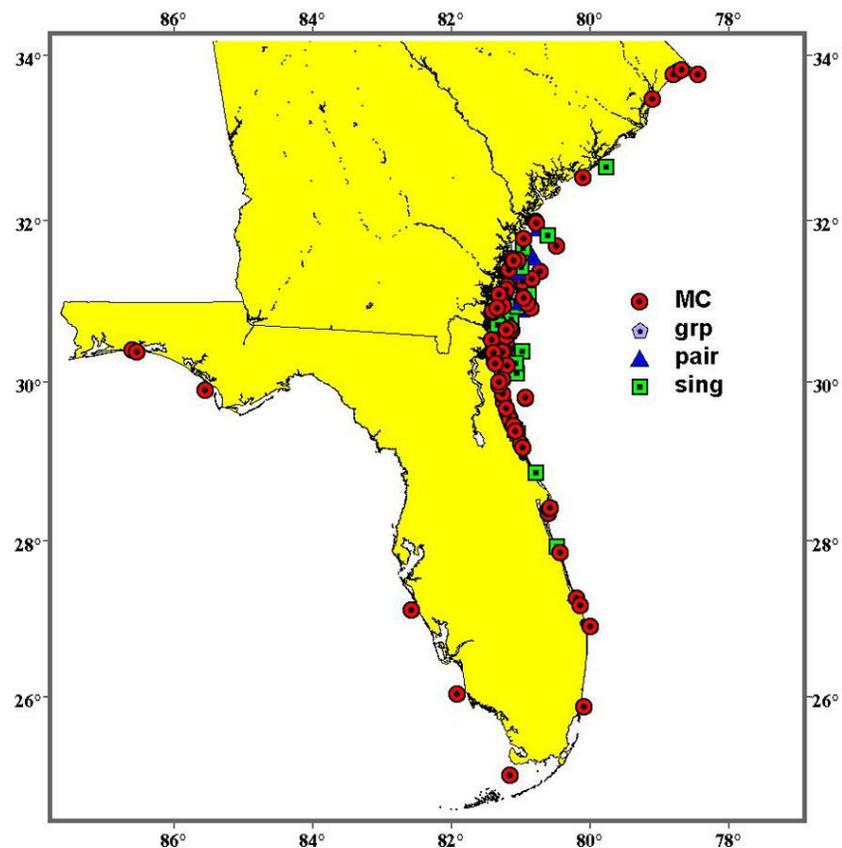
# RIGHT WHALE NEWS

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

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## The 2020 SEUS Season: Summary and Outlook



*Right whale sightings for the 2020 southeastern U.S. season. Density and distribution of sightings are influenced by sighting effort. Total number of sightings=153, total number of individual right whales=32. The symbols off southeastern Florida, off the panhandle, and off southwestern Florida are mother #3560 with her first calf and their incursion into the Gulf of Mexico. (Sightings data from Clearwater Marine Research Institute, Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Florida Fish and Wildlife Institute, Marineland Right Whale Project, and the Marine Resources Council.)*

The 2018 season in the southeastern U.S. was grim—zero calves were born. Following the 2019 season, *Right Whale News* (April 2019) reported a hint of a rebound for right whales in the southeastern U.S.—seven calves were born. The births included one from a first-time mother, Catalog #4180. The season provided a cautious promise of better things to come.

A year later, what can we say? Ten calves were born. Although small, this increase is the most in the past four years. The mothers were of varying ages, including one first-time mother (#3560). Noteworthy this season was the presence of seven males of varying ages, one juvenile female, and four yearlings that were born in the 2019 season. These demographics were more diverse than past years.

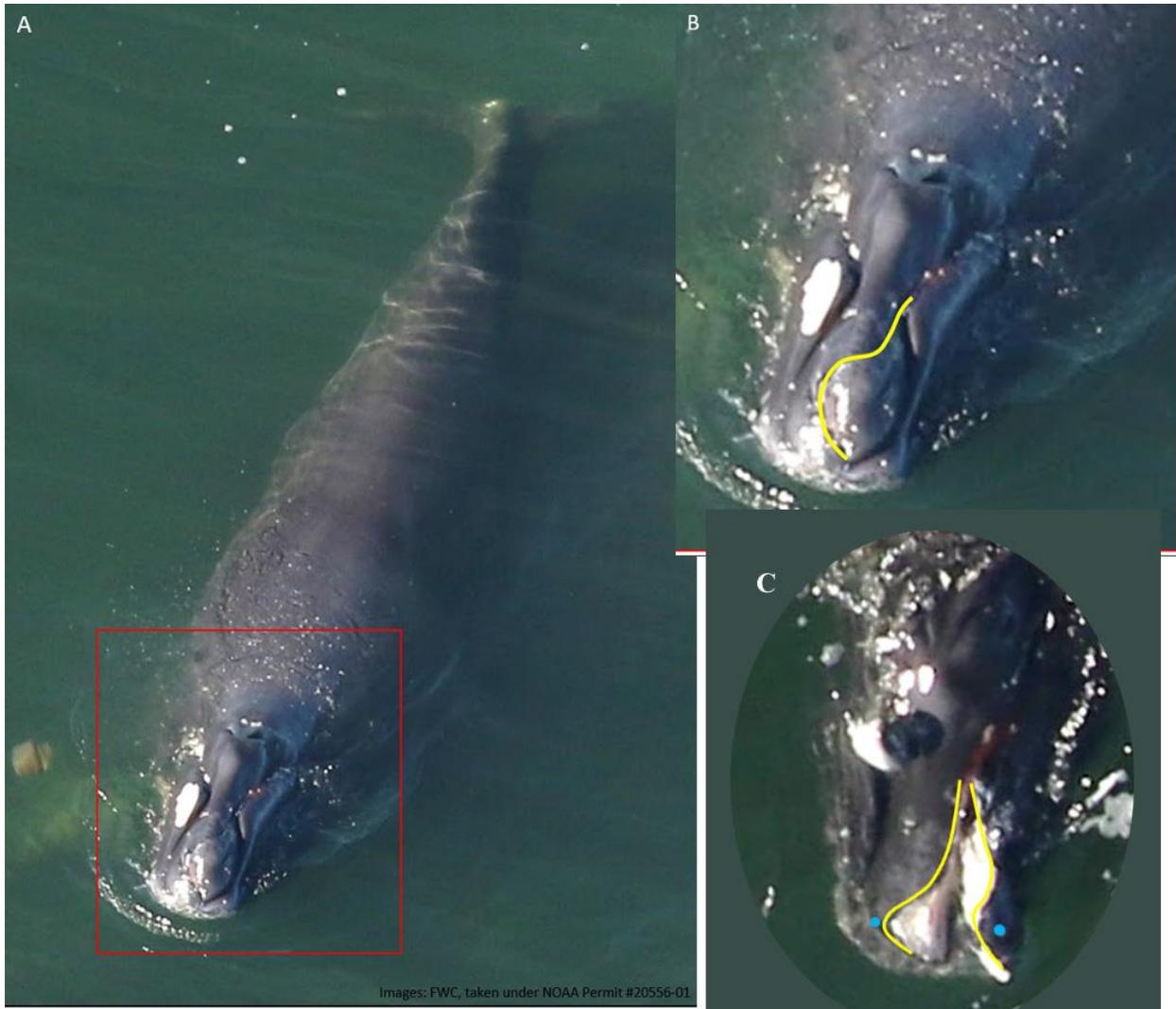
The current season started early. During the third week in November, sightings began to be reported. The first mother-calf pair, #3560 and her first calf, were sighted off Georgia on 16 December. They were also the first mother-calf pair reported for Florida waters; they were sighted there on 1 January 2020, and labelled the “New Year’s Whales” by the reporting Volunteer Sighting Network. This pair meandered throughout much of the season, until passing south of Cape Canaveral and then, on 20 February, south of Miami. Then, after a quiet period, they appeared off the Florida Panhandle in the Gulf of Mexico on 11 March. During 20–23 March, they traveled south down the west coast of Florida, and by 27 March they were south of the Florida Keys. This Gulf of Mexico occurrence is unusual—only two other mother-calf pairs have made similar excursions.

Of the 10 calves born this season, one, that of #2360, *Derecha*, was injured, apparently within days after its birth. The calf was spotted off Georgia on 8 January with two parallel injuries that are consistent with a vessel’s propeller. One of the injuries (the S-shaped cut) appears to include damage to the calf’s mouth that could hamper its ability to nurse and feed (images next page).

In a coordinated multi-agency effort, on 15 January, antibiotics were administered remotely using a ballistic syringe and a specialized air-powered rifle (the “projector”). The medication was delivered through the skin and blubber and into the muscles. It was hoped that the medication would be absorbed into the bloodstream quickly and stave off infection. The mother and calf have not been seen since. The calf’s prognosis is listed as poor.

Remote delivery of medications to large whales is an evolving field. There is some previous experience. Sedatives (helps calm the whale during disentanglement procedures) were injected into two severely entangled right whales (#3311 in 2009 and #3911 in 2011). Antibiotics were also injected into a pair of humpback whales that went up the Sacramento River in 2007. Further details may be addressed in a future issue of *Right Whale News*.

A video is available at <https://videos.fisheries.noaa.gov/detail/videos/b-roll:-whales-and-dolphins/video/6134391661001/b-roll:-injured-right-whale-calf-remote-delivery-of-antibiotics-post-delivery-behavior?autoStart=true>. Or, alternatively, search on injured right whale calf.



*Panel A.* The 2020 calf of Catalog #2360. *Panel B.* The head of the calf, the propeller cut is outlined in yellow. *Panel C.* The cut on the rostrum created a loose “chunk” of tissue. As the calf swims forward, the water resistance causes the cut to separate. The pair of yellow lines and the pair of blue dots shows the degree of separation. (Images by FWC taken under NOAA Research Permit #20556-01.

As to the outlook for the future, the past two seasons provide us with cautious hope. But, as Yogi Berra said, “Making predictions is hard, especially when it’s about the future.” With the current level of attention and effort, combined with some resilience on the part of the whales, will some working optimism be rewarded?

## **A Familiar Lesson: Limit Human Impacts**

*Contributed by Scott D. Kraus, New England Aquarium, Boston, Massachusetts*

During the last three years, 30 right whales are known to have died (see also *Right Whale News* September 2019). For every whale where the cause of death could be determined, they died from ship kills or entanglements. Worse, recent analyses indicate that the actual number of mortalities is more than twice this. For this small population, these are devastating numbers. Despite claims to the contrary, this is a bilateral problem in both the U.S. and Canada. The unpredictability of right whale movements makes managing human/whale conflicts challenging, and the recent right whale aggregations discovered in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and south of Cape Cod and the Islands are occurring in areas neither fishermen nor the shipping industry have ever needed to worry about before.

Although North Atlantic right whales are declining rapidly, we must resist the notion that they



are destined to go extinct. In the 1980s there were fewer than 300 whales, and by 2010 there were nearly 500. As long as we can stop the killing, they will come back again. The deaths of well-known animals, especially the female *Punctuation*, who represented the future for calving and the population, represents a serious setback. However, it does not mean we are without hope. Instead, we must remain proactive about preventing further whale deaths, while also celebrating recent successes. For example, the Canadians led the way in reducing risk from shipping in the Bay of Fundy by moving shipping lanes. The United States followed suit, first by moving shipping lanes over Stellwagen Bank, and then by instituting slow ship-speed rules along the U.S. east coast. New areas of whale and shipping co-occurrence in Canada and the U.S. require attention, but we know what works to prevent ship kills.

In contrast, efforts to reduce fisheries entanglements and mortalities have not been effective anywhere. With only 400 right whales, the probability that any individual fisherman's gear will kill one is extremely low. It is therefore difficult to convince some individuals that commercial fishing is collectively responsible for their decline. Inadequate gear-marking and the low level of gear retrieval from entangled whales means that evidence that any particular fishery is responsible for a right whale death will always be lacking. Still, between 50 and 100 right whales each year get entangled in fishing gear, which kills some whales and inhibits reproduction in many females. With climate change altering ocean ecosystems, right whales are

now travelling everywhere, and that means fixed fishing gear everywhere is a risk. Fishermen depend upon historically proven methods and gear types, but fishing ropes have gotten stronger over time, so this gear has become lethal to whales that get entangled. Fortunately, many fishermen are investing time and money into developing and testing alternatives, and some will prove economically viable. The future survival of right whales is likely dependent upon the adoption of reduced breaking strength rope and ropeless fishing, and while the transition to it may not be fast, it is probably inevitable.

Conservation biologists try to create some places on the planet where a species or an ecosystem can survive relatively intact. In the process, there are always unforeseen tragedies and setbacks, like the large numbers of right whale deaths in the last three years. Extraordinary efforts are required to help both the wildlife and their human stewards through those events. Nevertheless, we know how to fix this. We can reduce entanglements, we can reduce ship strikes, and we can give right whales the break they need to recover. The next challenges may be more subtle. Ocean developments in aquaculture, oil and gas exploration, and wind energy are all encroaching upon right whale habitat and migratory corridors in both the U.S. and Canada. Still, from decades of work on right whales, one lesson stands out. We must remain both persistent and steadfast in the belief that collectively, we can limit human impacts on oceanic wildlife, and that our descendants will get to enjoy right whales in our waters for generations to come.

## **The Year of the Right Whale 2020**

*Contributed by Jen Kennedy, Blue Ocean Society for Marine Conservation,  
Portsmouth, New Hampshire*

Several years ago, scientists and educators decided to have a Right Whale World Year to celebrate the right whale species. Much was accomplished, but the Year itself didn't quite get off the ground. In 2018, we were asked to chair the project with Cynde McInnis of The Whalemobile, Topsfield, Massachusetts, a New England-based experiential enrichment program utilizing a life-sized inflatable humpback whale. Cynde and I have worked in education and as whale-watch naturalists for more than 20 years, and were eager to help spread the word about the plight of right whales. The Right Whale World Year project coordinators thought 2020 would be a perfect year to celebrate right whales.

Soon after this request, there came the string of horrifying months when 17 North Atlantic right whales were found dead in 2017. We renamed the project the Year of the Right Whale and decided to focus mainly on North Atlantic right whales. The mission of the project is to protect

the species through celebration, education, and action. The main goal is to inform more people about right whales so that there will be more progress in protecting them in 2020.

The project has several key components. One of our most unique initiatives is our Booth in a Box. This is a compact box of tools that anyone can use to set up an information table about right whales. It comes complete with instructions and talking points (available in writing or by video)—so it can be used not only by scientists and educators, but also by any interested individual or group. We will also be providing annotated curriculum and information about initiatives that protect right whales to whale-watch naturalists and other interested parties.

We were excited to share the project at the North Atlantic Right Whale Consortium meeting in Portland, Maine, this past fall. From there, we sent our Booths off to organizations in Maine, New Hampshire, Florida, Illinois, and Canada. These organizations have already started setting up the Booth at their facilities and loaning it out. Most recently, we were at the World Marine Mammal Conference in Barcelona, Spain. There, we met many other potential partners.



*Cynde McInnis (right) talks with a Booth in a Box visitor at the World Marine Mammal Conference in December 2019.*

As funding allows, we will create at least 30-40 more Booths and send them to locations across the U.S. and around the world. We have the materials for the Booths, but there has been a pause in sending them out due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the meantime, we have refocused some of our energy to developing more online content.

Interested in being involved? We are looking for help with the project, and for organizations, individuals, and whale-watch companies to serve as “base camps” that host the project. For more information, email [info@yearoftherightwhale.org](mailto:info@yearoftherightwhale.org), or visit:

Year of the Right Whale: [yearoftherightwhale.org](http://yearoftherightwhale.org)

Blue Ocean Society for Marine Conservation: [www.blueoceansociety.org](http://www.blueoceansociety.org)

The Whalemobile: [thewhalemobile.com](http://thewhalemobile.com)

## **The Georgia Aerial Surveys**

One of the several groups monitoring and studying right whales in the southeastern U.S. is the Clearwater Marine Aquarium Research Institute team (formerly Sea2Shore Alliance), under contract to the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. This team flies in the NOAA Twin Otter, and is based on St. Simon’s Island, Georgia. Surveys for the season began on 7 December 2019 and ended on 15 March 2020. A video describing these efforts has been posted at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=shhIabiAG4U&fbclid=IwAR12yhJBjLgW69ZBh393Yct0zTuWPGMq4A709LwCu7tus2rL71Z6Bcrb51o>

Alternatively, you can go to YouTube, and search on North Atlantic Right Whale Aerial Surveys.

## **Book Review**

*Jim Hain, Editor*

*Kraus, S.D., M. Marx, H. Pettis, A. Knowlton, and K. Mallory. 2020. The North Atlantic Right Whale: Disappearing Giants. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, Brighton, Massachusetts, 124 pp.*

Two recent volumes on right whales (Kraus and Rolland, 2007, *The Urban Whale*; and Laist, 2017, *North Atlantic Right Whales*) provide valuable references for scientists, managers, and conservationists. This current book fills an important niche—an agreeable and streamlined telling of the right whale story for the general public and students everywhere. The book has a clearly stated slant—it is from the perspective of the New England Aquarium’s research team. This having been said, there is acknowledgement along the way for the many contributors to the decades-long effort.

The parsimonious treatment of the story is broken out into nine chapters—each just a few pages in length. This is concise writing indeed. Yet, despite this, all the key facts and events are included.

The outstanding feature of the book is the excellent selection of more than 100 photographs and illustrations. A picture is worth a thousand words—certainly true in this case. For example, the photo of feeding right whales in Cape Cod Bay on page 36 is spectacular, and one that at least I have never previously seen. (I queried the authors and learned that the photo date was 30 April 2015.) There is one small quibble: the whalebone (baleen) shown on page 14 is likely from bowhead whales rather than right whales.

The final page of the book ends with the thought, “As long as we can stop the killing [from human impacts], they will come back again.” The readers, the stewards, are encouraged to carry the torch for recovery of the species.

Authors Kraus, Marx, Pettis, Knowlton, and Mallory have produced a useful and well-crafted book. To those with a love of, and dedication to, the healthy recovery of right whales—run, swim, or walk to your bookseller.

## **People and Changes**

On 3 February, Vineyard Wind announced that Dr. Christopher Clark will be partnering with the Company as a Senior Scientist. (See *Right Whale News*, July 2018, for a description of the Vineyard Wind area(s)). Chris is well-known to the right whale community as a bioacoustician studying the potential influences of man-made noise on endangered species. The announcement describes that the addition of Dr. Clark will advance Vineyard Wind’s commitment to protecting all marine life and builds on an agreement with conservation groups to protect the endangered North Atlantic right whales.

## **Calendar**

20–21 May 2020. Meeting of the Southeast U.S. Implementation Team (SEIT). Due to the CoVid-19 virus, there is uncertainty. It is unlikely that there will be an in-person meeting. A remote webinar is likely, whether for the entire group or for the team alone. In addition, the normal two-day meeting may be scaled back to a single day. Meeting facilitator Tom Pitchford ([tom.pitchford@myfwc.com](mailto:tom.pitchford@myfwc.com)) will send out a notice as the time draws near.

27–28 October 2020. Annual meeting of the North Atlantic Right Whale Consortium, Halifax Convention Center, Halifax, Nova Scotia. Preceded on 26 October by the Ropeless Consortium Workshop and Meeting. For registration and abstract submission, see [www.narwc.org](http://www.narwc.org).

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## Right Whale News

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