

WHALE *of a* WINTER

RARE NORTH ATLANTIC RIGHT
WHALES MAKE THEIR ANNUAL
MIGRATION TO THE GEORGIA COAST.

BY BRET LOVE

There are very few animal species on the planet of which a mere glimpse—a brief flash of a tail or the crest of an arched back—produces the overwhelming sense of wonder that whales do. Maybe it's the remarkable intelligence of the animals that captivates us. Perhaps it's their sheer size and majestic movements that are awe-inspiring. Regardless, there aren't many wildlife encounters that can rival the impact of facing a massive whale in the wild. Georgia residents are closer to the experience than they might realize. In the winter months, the official state marine animal and only great whale native to the state's waters, the North Atlantic right whale, makes its annual swim south.

Great Migration

The Gulf of Maine serves as the North Atlantic right whale's feeding grounds and the starting point of their annual trek, which ends in Georgia's waters, where they birth their calves. Because of the scarcity of the North American right whale and few documented sightings over the course of the 20th century, scientists didn't notice this East Coast migratory pattern until the 1980s. Even today, many of the state's residents don't know about the massive animals that swim toward the Golden Isles every year.

The big discovery was made in 1979 when biologists from the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR) stumbled across a mother and calf while doing research off the coast. They documented the sighting with photographs and notes, which eventually made their way back to Scott Kraus, a luminary in the movement to conserve North Atlantic right whales.

"He is, in many ways, the father of the North Atlantic right whale research," says Clay George, the wildlife biologist who currently leads the DNR's right whale research and monitoring efforts. "The NOAA [National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration] started doing research in the Northeast in the late '70s and had built up a small catalog of whales they could identify based on the patterns on their heads. Lo and behold, they were able to match the mother whale [found in Georgia] to their work in the Northeast."

Known in cetacean conservation circles as the Georgia match, this was the first scientific finding to suggest that the massive marine mammals were making a 1,000-mile migration down to southeastern wintering grounds. Although much has been learned in the last few decades, one important question still remains to be answered: Why Georgia?



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Right whale calves can double in length in their first year.



Right whales typically feed in the Gulf of Maine and migrate south to birth their calves.

“There’s a fair amount of speculation involved,” George acknowledges. He explains that the southeast Atlantic waters are shallow and protected, and not as rough as the waters around Cape Hatteras or Cape Canaveral. In addition, the cool water that pools out of the coastal rivers ensures that the ocean remains an ideal temperature for the whales during the wintertime, and the surrounding environment lacks the predatory species that would pose a threat. “All of those things come together to make Georgia a good nursery ground.”

The “Right” Whale

Averaging between 45 and 52 feet in length and weighing 44 to 77 tons, the large mammals are easily recognizable. Their heads are often dotted with callosities, white with cyamides, or small crustaceans often called whale lice. The corners of their mouths arch above their eyes and their broad, dark backs lack a dorsal fin. As part of the baleen whale group, the North American right whale lacks teeth—instead using bristle-like plates to filter feed on small

invertebrates, such as krill, by slowly skimming water near the surface of the ocean.

The calves that are born off of the Georgia coast typically measure in at 5,000 pounds and about 14 feet long. Most females mature around 9 or 10 years of age, after which they have their first calf after a yearlong gestation period. They continue to breed every three to six years subsequently. There’s no hard data on their life span, but it’s believed that the whales typically live to be at least 50 years old, and scientists have suggested that some may live to be 100.

The right whale received its name from whalers who considered them the “right” whale to hunt because of their slow swimming speed, surface-skimming feeding methods, docile nature, preference for living close to the coast and high blubber content, which means that they continue to float after being hunted.

Whale hunters sought them commercially for their meat and whale oil as early as the 11th century. In 1935 it was discovered that there were less than 100 right whales left in

the world. The practice of hunting them was banned globally in 1937, and they are still protected by the U.S. Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act today.

Cause for Conservation

Thanks to conservation efforts, North Atlantic right whales have made an impressive comeback over the past 70 years, more than quadrupling in population size. According to Clay Fordham, Sea Island Yacht Club captain, guests occasionally spot them while out on fishing trips or nature excursions.

“I’ve worked with Sea Island for eight years now,” he says. “I might go a year or two without seeing any whales, and then some years I might see seven or eight in a season. Typically, we see mothers with their calves in the fall or winter, during their migratory route 6 to 18 miles off shore. We call NOAA or the DNR and give them their coordinates, and then they will check the whales and make sure everything is OK.”

North Atlantic right whales currently rank among the world’s most endangered cetacean



Distinguishing features of right whales include patterns of white crustaceans, called whale lice, that dot the animals’ heads; the lack of a dorsal fin; two rows of baleen plates that hang from their upper jaw; and a strongly bowed lower lip.

species, with total population estimates of 400 to 450. The continued risk of extinction for the whales is real. Despite the Endangered Species Act and Marine Mammal Protection Act prohibiting the hunting of right whales, there are still numerous threats that impact the species’ population today. Chief among them are ship strikes, due to the whales’ preference for coastal areas with heavy shipping traffic, and entanglement in commercial fishing gear.

There are significant efforts in conservation circles to address these issues. The East Coast has ship speed zones that remain active during the right whales’ migratory season, from Nov. 15 to April 15. During that time, ships measuring more than 65 feet are limited to speeds of 10 knots or less, which has lowered the chance of collision from an average of one per year to just one in the last six years. There’s also a federal law prohibiting boaters from approaching within 500 yards of right whales, but the regulation has sparked debate.

“On one hand, we want people to be educated and appreciate these whales,” George says. “On the other hand, it’s difficult to do that when they can’t legally approach and see these animals. That has created a Catch-22 regarding right whale education, outreach and conservation in Georgia.”

Sightings that have occurred since the law was made have been spontaneous accidents.



North Atlantic right whales are among the most endangered species in the world.

George recalls seasons in which more than 100 right whales have been sighted several miles offshore in the Southeast. Most people who witness the animals in their natural habitats are out on fishing charters or eco-tours like the ones offered by the Sea Island Yacht Club. He urges anyone who spends time in Georgia’s coastal waters to drive slowly, be on the lookout for right whales, give them space and report sightings to the Georgia DNR as soon as possible.

Fordham describes seeing a North Atlantic right whale as one of the most awe-inspiring experiences of his life. “Whales are the largest animals in the world,” he says. “And there’s just something majestic about them. I tend to take a lot of the things I see on a daily basis ... for granted. But the right whales are special, because there aren’t many left. Seeing whales in an aquarium is one thing, but seeing them in their natural habitat is another. It’s just something you don’t get to see every day.” ○

A WHALE TALE

Clay Fordham, Sea Island Yacht Club captain, describes his most memorable North American right whale encounter.

“The most memorable experience I’ve ever had was when I carried a couple of teenagers out for Sheepshead fishing about 17 miles offshore. I was anchored up, and we were actively fishing when a mama right whale and her calf surfaced about 20 to 30 yards from the boat. It nearly scared me to death!

“You’re not supposed to be within 500 yards of them, so the first thing that crossed my mind was that we were too close to these animals, and I didn’t want to get turned over. The kids had obviously never seen anything like it. These whales were massive. The adult was about twice the length of my [27-foot] boat. I just had to stand there for a minute to look at them and gather my thoughts. I pulled anchor and backed off of them, and then I called the Georgia Department of Resources to let them know their location. It was a really cool experience because I’ve never been that close to one before or since.”

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