



SPECIES INFORMATION SHEET

NORTHERN RIGHT WHALE IN UK WATERS

DESCRIPTION

The northern right whale, *Eubalaena glacialis*, is a robust medium sized whale. In the North Pacific they reach lengths of up to 18.3m in the females and 17.1m in males. The female is larger than the male, they have a large head, 30% of the body size, a strongly arched upper jaws and strongly bowed lower jaws, and a narrow rostrum with white, grey or yellow callosities which extend to around blowholes, on chin and lower lips. They have no dorsal fin. The body is generally black, dark grey or dark brownish, sometimes mottled, with white patches on throat and belly, and less frequently on other parts of the body. The flippers are large, broad and with angular outer edges.

At sea the northern right whale is identified as having a finless back, a huge head and a bushy V-shaped blow rising to 5m.

The southern right whale, *Enbalaena australia*, is found in the southern hemisphere and is estimated at having a much larger population than the northern right whale, some three to five thousand, as oposed to three to six hundred. The two species differ, apart from the distribution, in minor cranial differences.

DISTRIBUTION

The northern right whale is a very rare species. Its distribution is restricted to the northern hemisphere, between 20° and 65°N (mainly temperate zone), primarily in Northwest Atlantic, with a handful of sightings near the continental shelf edge west of Scotland & Ireland and off Iberian Peninsula.

After centuries of over-exploitation, the North Atlantic population is a relict of its former size. Current estimates indicate somewhere between 400 and 1,100 in the NW Atlantic. Numbers in the NE Atlantic are so small that it is not possible to estimate population size. However, with so few sightings reported, it is likely that the population numbers no more than tens of individuals.

SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

Right whales are seen most often in small groups, less than 12 animals, but most often in singles or pairs. Right whales may be seen waving their flippers above the surface, breaching, flipper-slapping, and lobtailing. Larger groups may form on the feeding or breeding grounds. During apparent court ship activity right whales aggregate in groups of as many as 14 individuals, and engage in what appears to be efforts by several males to mate with one or more females. These groups, which may continue for an hour or more, are normally oblivious to boats and do not respond to vessels even at close range.

REPRODUCTIVE BIOLOGY

Northern right whales move to warmer waters in the summer to calve. Females are sexually mature between four, and probably twelve years, and produce a single calf on average every three to four years. They mate between December and March and this is also when most of the calves are born as the gestation period is from 13-14 months. Calves nurse from between 8-12 months. In winter during calving, cows may segregate with their newborn calves from the rest of the population.

DIET

Right whales are specialised feeders. In the North Pacific they feed primarily on several species of calanoid copepods and, to a lesser extent on euphausiids.

THREATS

The northern right whale was the first large whale to be hunted systematically on a commercial basis. It is now critically endangered throughout its range. This species appears to suffer from human induced mortalities more than any other. In the western north Atlantic, entanglement in fishing gear and ship strikes are known to have caused numerous right whale deaths in recent years. The population's major calving ground in the coastal waters of Florida and Georgia have also recently been the site of increased military traffic increasing the risk of ship strikes.

FURTHER READING

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