



**NOAA** NATIONAL OCEANIC AND  
ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION  
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## **Woods Hole Scientists To Conduct Whale Study off Massachusetts Coast**

### *North Atlantic Right Whales Congregate for "Spring Fling" in Great South Channel*

A three-week study of North Atlantic right whales (*Eubalaena glacialis*) next month east of Cape Cod will provide researchers with more information about the whales' diving and foraging behavior, genetics, vocalizations and the composition of their population. Autonomous gliders, underwater robots of sorts, will also be tested to determine their feasibility for conducting remote acoustic surveys in the future.

The whale survey, undertaken annually by the Woods Hole Laboratory of NOAA's Fisheries Service, includes shipboard and aerial observations, measurements of environmental conditions, and zooplankton sampling tows to collect copepods, the primary prey of North Atlantic right whales. This year, attempts will be made to tag both right whales and larger sei whales (*Balaenoptera borealis*), and to obtain acoustic recordings and biopsy samples from smaller minke whales (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*) in the area.

Lisa Conger, a member of the Protected Species Branch at the Woods Hole Laboratory and chief scientist for the May cruise, says the survey is focused primarily in the Great South Channel because North Atlantic right whales historically arrive in that area in large concentrations at this time of year.

"The North Atlantic right whale is the rarest large whale species in the Atlantic Ocean, with an estimated living population of around 400 animals," Conger said. "We are interested in learning more about how these whales use the Great South Channel habitat, one of five key habitat areas for the species and potentially important for individual animals that don't seem to use the other four areas. Obtaining photographs and genetic samples from individual animals will help us determine the structure of the population as a whole."

The scientists also hope to collect information about sei whales and their prey, and obtain acoustic recordings from minke whales. "All these data will provide insight into how these whale species are using this particular region of the ocean," Conger said.

Biologists from the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution (WHOI) and a marine mammal specialist from the Georgia Department of Natural Resources will also be part of the scientific team aboard the NOAA Ship *Delaware II*, based in Woods Hole. The WHOI scientists will be testing autonomous gliders and their potential use in monitoring the distribution and habitat of marine mammals and in collecting both acoustic recordings and high-resolution oceanographic measurements.

Each winter during the past few years, Conger and NOAA colleague Richard Pace have collected biopsy samples from North Atlantic right whale calves and their mothers in waters off Florida and Georgia, their only known calving ground. These samples, or “genetic fingerprints”, are important in determining reproductive success and paternity identification in this endangered population. Previously unidentified juveniles are also sampled as part of an ongoing genetic study of the North Atlantic right whale’s family tree.

The *Delaware II* survey will be coordinated with NOAA aerial surveys of marine mammals conducted year-round by the Woods Hole Laboratory in waters from the Gulf of Maine to Long Island, N.Y. Information collected during the aerial surveys is used for a variety of research and conservation purposes, including updating the North Atlantic right whale photo identification catalog maintained by the New England Aquarium and NOAA’s Right Whale Sighting Advisory System for mariners.

The Woods Hole aerial survey team observed a record high 98 North Atlantic right whales on April 20 during a routine survey of Rhode Island Sound. The previous sighting record for this area was 25 animals in 1998.

NOAA’s Fisheries Service protects North Atlantic right whales and other marine mammals under both the federal Marine Mammal Protection Act and the Endangered Species Act. The Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC), headquartered at the Woods Hole Laboratory, is a primary source of information on North Atlantic right whales in the northeast U.S. region, which extends from Cape Hatteras, N.C. to the U.S.-Canada border.

NEFSC conducts collaborative research on marine mammals with other federal and state agencies, universities, non-government research organizations, and international organizations. NOAA Fisheries also funds marine mammal research, conservation, and stranding response efforts at many other scientific institutions.

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Related links:

2009 Marine Mammal Stock Assessments:

<http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/nefsc/publications/tm/tm213/>

North Atlantic Right Whale:

[http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/species/mammals/cetaceans/rightwhale\\_northatlantic.htm](http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/species/mammals/cetaceans/rightwhale_northatlantic.htm)

Northeast U.S. Right Whale Sighting Advisory System: <http://rwhalesightings.nefsc.noaa.gov/>

Sei Whale: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/species/mammals/cetaceans/seiwhale.htm>

Minke Whale: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/species/mammals/cetaceans/minkewhale.htm>

NOAA Protected Species Branch in Woods Hole:

<http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/read/protsp/mainpage/>

High Numbers of Right Whales Seen in Gulf of Maine (news release):

[http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/press\\_release/2008/SciSpot/SS0818/](http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/press_release/2008/SciSpot/SS0818/)

NOAA Researchers Take right Whale “Genetic Fingerprints” off Florida Coast (news release):

[http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/press\\_release/2008/SciSpot/ss0801/](http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/press_release/2008/SciSpot/ss0801/)

Monitoring Baleen Whales with Autonomous Underwater Vehicles (news release):

<http://www.whoi.edu/page.do?pid=39139&tid=282&cid=10547&ct=162>

