

Eyes on the Water



Creating Safer Seas for Everyone:
A Guide for Responsible Boaters



Learning Goals

- Identify whales in our area
- Recognize signs of whale presence
- Understand vessel strike & entanglement risks
- Follow safe & legal boating practices
- Report whale sightings (when & how)



"At Risk" Neighbors



Dolphins



Sea Turtles



Seals

And, of course,
various species
of fish!

Sturgeon



Giants Below

Why it Matters

- Whales are protected by federal law
- Some species are critically endangered
- Understanding whale behavior keeps everyone safe
- Your actions directly impact whale survival



Humpback Whales



Key Features

- Length: 60 feet
- Distinctive knobs on head & snout
- Long pectoral fins (mostly white)
- Individually unique tail markings

Behaviors

- Frequently observed chasing bait fish nearshore
- May enter inlets, bays & harbors
- Spectacular lunge feeders
- Known for breaching & acrobatic displays

Fin & Minke Whales



Fin Whales

- Length: 85 feet
- Curved dorsal fin far back on smooth, shiny gray body
- Right jaw lighter than left jaw
- Fast! Tail rarely surfaces

Minke Whales

- Length: 35 feet
- Tall, crescent-shaped dorsal fin
- Pointed snout & white band on flippers
- Smallest baleen whale species



North Atlantic Right Whales

Key Features

- Length: 52 feet
- Distinctive V-shaped spout spray
- Broad, deeply notched tail
- No dorsal fin, short flippers
- Black body, white patches on head



Critical Status: Less than 400 left globally

- Found near NY from nearshore out to the Hudson Canyon

Keep Your Eyes on the Water

Bait

Baitfish schools showing nervous behavior often signal nearby whales feeding on them.

Birds

Many seabirds & whales feed on the same food, so if you see birds, chances are, whales are near.

Buddies

Many whales are social feeders—seeing even one whale or other marine life feeding can signal others are close.

Boats

Look for clusters of fishing & wildlife viewing boats, which signal nearby whales.

Any object breaking the surface of the water can be a navigation hazard, including the back of a whale!

Blows

Whale spouts are visible from far away on a clear day, so keep an eye out for them!

Bubbles

Humpback whale bubble clouds signal that the whales are about to feed near the surface.

Blows

Vessel Strike Dangers

Why right whales are especially vulnerable

- Dark coloration & lack of a dorsal fin make them hard to spot, even for experienced boaters
- Spend much time at or just below the surface
- Less "splashy" than other whale species

Prop Scars on
Mother

Nursing Baby



 **The Reality: Close calls are common. When whales are feeding, resting or nursing, they cannot move quickly or escape.**

For Feeding Whales, It's Always: “Eyes on the Prize”



- Give feeding whales extra space & time
- Slow down when you see signs of feeding activity
- Never assume a whale can get out of your way
- Respect their need to feed in peace



All Vessels Pose a Risk



- Fast-moving boats are dangerous!
- Both large commercial and small recreational vessels can injure or kill whales.
- Even sailboats pose a risk.
- Many injured and dead whales were hit by small, recreational boats.

The Bottom Line: **ANY** vessel—big or small—can cause serious injury or death to a whale.



Operating Safely Around Whales

1. Power Down



Slow down or come to a complete stop, and bring gear & lines into vessel.

2. Keep a Lookout

- Alert your crew to help watch for whales.
- Ensure good visibility from your vessel.

3. Wait Patiently

- Don't rush—assess the situation carefully.
- Treat whales with the same caution you'd use around other hazards or swimmers.

4. Resume Course Safely

- Only proceed when you're confident it's safe.

Operating with Whales in Sight

Pull in Your Gear

- Remove anything that could entangle the whale.
- Reel in fishing lines immediately.



Follow These Rules

- Keep Your Distance: Do not chase, follow, or crowd the whale.
- Do Not Feed: Feeding marine mammals is illegal.
- Avoid Threatening Moves: Don't place yourself directly in front of the whale or approach head-on.
- Proceed Cautiously: Move slowly, pay attention to your surroundings, and depart when it's safe.

If a Whale Approaches You

Immediate Actions

- Put your engine in neutral to avoid accidental harm.
- Do not re-engage your engine until you see the whale surface and determine which direction it's moving.



Departure

- Proceed slowly and cautiously away from the whale.
- Maintain a safe distance before resuming normal speed.
- Move parallel to or toward the rear of the whale.

Entanglement

One of the leading causes of harm and death to whales in our waters. The consequences:

- Exhaustion
- Infection
- Increased risk of vessel strikes
- Restricted movement and inability to dive
- Drowning
- Starvation

Recreational
Fishing Gear



Commercial
Fishing Gear



85% of all North Atlantic right whales have scars showing they've been entangled at least once in their lives.

Fishing Responsibly Around Whales

- Today's monofilament and braided lines are much stronger than older gear
- They're harder to break—great for fishing, but dangerous for marine life
- Even recreational hook-and-line gear can inflict life-threatening wounds



No Run & Gun

Don't race toward diving birds or bait schools when whales are near

No Bubble Casting

Don't cast into or troll over bubbles in the water



No Dead Sticking

Don't leave unattended lines when whales are close

Pull Gear In

Reel in lines immediately if a whale gets close

Legal Requirements

Federal Law Prohibits

- Harassing, feeding, chasing or disturbing marine mammals
- Violations can result in significant fines
- 100 feet minimum: Most other whale species (federal guidance)
- Give more room for active whales: A breaching whale can sink your boat!

Required Distances

- 150 feet minimum: Seals, dolphins and sea turtles
- 1,500 feet minimum: North Atlantic right whales (legal requirement)



Pro Tip: Use your boat length to gauge distance. For example, if you have a 25-foot boat, 4 boat lengths equals 100 feet.

Best Practices

Limit Viewing Time

- Spend ≤ 30 minutes observing a particular group
- Don't approach if other vessels are nearby—multiple boats increase stress
- Alert other boaters via VHF radio

Avoid Disturbing Whales

- Don't touch or feed
- Don't chase, pursue or encircle
- Never trap whales between your boat & shore
- Stay far away when calves are present—never separate mothers from calves

Proceed Cautiously

- Slow down if a whale is nearby
- Put your engine in neutral when whales approach
- Steer parallel to or toward the rear of animals
- Never change direction abruptly



Report Whale Sightings

Make these 3 calls immediately if you see whales that are dead, injured, entangled or sick:

1. U.S. Coast Guard via VHF Radio Channel 16
2. Marine Mammal and Sea Turtle Stranding Hotline
In NY: 631-369-9829
3. NOAA's Stranding Hotline: 866-755-6622

Dead



Injured



Entangled



Sick



 **Pro Tip: Add these contacts to your phone now!**

Your Role in Ocean Conservation

- Keep your eyes on the water & watch for whale signs
- Maintain safe distances & follow all federal regulations
- Use the Whale Alert app for real-time information
- Report sightings of entangled, injured or distressed whales
- Teach your family & friends what you've learned
- Model responsible boating practices every time you're on the water



Resources

State-Specific Marine Stranding Numbers

ME: 800-532-9551

NH: 603-997-9448

MA: 800-900-3622

RI/CT: 860-572-5955 x 107

⚡ NY: 631-369-9829

NJ: 609-266-0538

DE: 302-228-5029

MD: 800-628-9944

VA: 757-385-7575

NC: 910-515-7354

SC: 800-922-5431

GA: 912-269-7587

FL: 888-404-3922

24-hour NOAA Stranding Hotline for all of the Atlantic: 866-755-6622



Scan QR code to download the Whale Alert App
or go to www.boatingwithwhales.com



Android



iOS

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