

Preliminary Results from FY2011 Southeast U.S. Right Whale Aerial Surveys

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The FY2011 right whale EWS aerial survey for the Southeast calving grounds officially ended on March 31, 2011. Additional aerial surveys continued until April 15, 2011 off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina. A total of 164 unique right whales were sighted during the survey, including 20 right whale calves, and just over 300 sighting alerts were distributed to marine users. Monitoring results from the southeast U.S. are as follows:

Right whale mother/calf pairs observed:

*FY2011 = 20 m/c pairs *current year preliminary results**

FY2010 = 19 m/c pairs

FY2009 = 39 m/c pairs

FY2008 = 23 m/c pairs

FY2007 = 23 m/c pairs

FY2006 = 19 m/c pairs

Entangled right whales:

A total of five right whales were observed in the SEUS calving grounds entangled in fishing gear. None of the five whales were previously known to be entangled.

- One entangled right whale, 3911, was observed on December 25, 2010, off Jacksonville Beach. Numerous disentanglement attempts were made, but the animal ultimately died (see Dead right whales). Gear was consistent with floating groundline from trap/pot gear.
- One entangled right whale, 3010, was observed on January 19, 2011 when she and her calf were seen off St. Augustine. RW 3010 was observed with her calf on Dec. 31, 2010 off Jacksonville Beach prior to being entangled. No disentanglement was attempted; although, subsequent sightings suggest this animal may now be gear-free.
- One entangled right whale, 3712, was observed off St. Augustine, FL, on January 30, 2011, with unknown gear trailing out of the left side of its mouth. No disentanglement was attempted. This animal was sighted on Stellwagen Bank on April 10, 2011 and may now be gear-free.

¹ Data Sources: EcoHealth Alliance, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Georgia Department of Natural Resources, New England Aquarium, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Fisheries Service, Provincetown Center for Coastal Studies, University of North Carolina at Wilmington, and Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute.

- Two entangled right whales were observed on February 13, 2011.
 - Right whale 3760 was observed off Brunswick, GA. The animal was not observed in the SE prior to its entanglement. RW 3760, was entangled in monofilament gillnet and a small sample of gear was removed.
 - Right whale BK01SEUS10 was observed southeast of Savannah, GA. Green line was seen trailing from the animal which was in extremely poor health. No disentanglement was attempted since crews were busy responding to entangled right whale 3760.

Vessel struck right whales:

One right whale was observed on January 20, 2011 with approximately 14 propeller cuts across the body. This whale had been spotted uninjured five days earlier off South Carolina.

St. John's River Incursion:

On January 24, 2011 at 0840(L), a North Atlantic right whale entered the St. John's River and proceeded upstream. EWS aerial survey teams responded and remained on-scene during the entire nine-hour event providing aerial surveillance to NOAA and USCG decision-makers. Commercial marine traffic, Navy flight operations, and ACOE dredging activities were closely monitored and suspended as necessary to ensure safe passage of the right whale back to the open ocean at 1751(L).

Dead right whales:

A total of four dead right whales were detected in the SEUS. Additionally, two calves (one found abandoned and one from a deceased mom) are likely dead.

1) February 1, 2011 off St. Augustine. Right whale 3911 was subject of a sedation and disentanglement attempt (see Entangled right whales). Entanglement ultimately led to this animal's demise.

2) February 20, 2011 off Charleston, SC. A right whale was floating approximately 80NM offshore; it was not retrieved for necropsy due to a number factors.

3) March 16, 2011 Cape Island, SC. A highly decomposed right whale was found stranded on a remote beach. Rope was found severely entangling the right pectoral fin. The entanglement, which caused bone damage, likely contributed to the animal's demise.

4) March 27, 2011 Nags Head, NC. A large decomposed right whale, 1308, was reported stranded on a Nags Head beach. Right whale 1308 was observed in the southeast U.S. with a newborn calf earlier in the year. Multiple skull and vertebral fractures were found. Cause of death was skull fractures consistent with ship strike.