

**MINIMUM APPROACH DISTANCES FOR  
OTHER NORTHEAST MARINE MAMMALS**

Dolphins, Porpoises & Seals: 150 feet



WDCS- Amanda White



NOAA

## Contact Information

To Request Whale Watching or  
Additional Information on Marine  
Mammal Protection  
978-281-9328

[www.nero.noaa.gov/whalewatch](http://www.nero.noaa.gov/whalewatch)

To Report Right Whale Sightings  
978-585-8473 (pager)

To Report Entangled, Injured, Stranded,  
Ship- Struck, or Dead Marine Mammals  
866-755-NOAA (6622)  
or USCG via CH-16

Please stand-by and keep the whale in sight until  
help arrives, or arrange for another vessel to  
maintain contact with the whale.

To Report Potential Marine Law  
Violations NOAA's Office of Law  
Enforcement Hotline:  
800-853-1964

NOAA Fisheries Service  
Northeast Regional Office  
978-281-9300  
[www.nero.noaa.gov](http://www.nero.noaa.gov)



# NORTHEAST REGIONAL WHALE WATCHING GUIDELINES

for Commercial & Recreational  
Whale Watchers  
from Maine through Virginia



WDCS/ Erica Magnusson

## Large Whales of the Northeast Region

### Fin Whale (*Balaenoptera physalus*)

Status: Endangered

Size: up to 72 feet in length, 80 tons

Western North Atlantic Population: approx. 2,000

Description: second largest whale species in the world; fast swimming; does not fluke when diving; asymmetrical coloration with lower right side of the head being white & left side dark; "chevron" or white streak that starts behind blow hole and continues along each side used for identifying individual. Feed on sand lance, herring, mackerel, other schooling fish, and krill.



### Humpback Whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*)

Status: Endangered

Size: up to 56 feet in length, 45 tons

Gulf of Maine Population: approx. 800

Description: stocky baleen whale; long, white pectoral flippers; lifts flukes, which have saw-toothed trailing edges, when it dives; variable black and white coloration on underside of each fluke used for identifying individuals; small dorsal fin; acrobatic behaviors including breaches, flipper and tail slaps. Feed on sand lance, herring, mackerel, other small schooling fish, and krill. Uses bubble clouds or "nets" to concentrate fish.



### North Atlantic Right Whale (*Eubalaena glacialis*)

Status: Endangered (\*See Right Whale Regulations)

Size: up to 55 feet in length, 70 tons

Worldwide Species Population: at least 325

Description: slow-moving; generally stays close to shore; robust body; long baleen; "callosities" on head and jaw used to identify individuals; usually lifts smooth-edged, triangular flukes when diving; lacks dorsal fin. Skim feed (surface and subsurface) on dense concentrations of zooplankton, particularly copepods.



### Minke Whale (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*)

Status: Protected

Size: up to 33 feet, 10 tons

Canadian East Coast Population: approx. 3,000

Description: smallest baleen whales in the northeast region; distinctive sickle-shaped dorsal fin; white bands on pectoral flippers; rarely lifts its flukes to dive; displays little or no visible breath or spout. Feed on prey similar to fin and humpback whales.



## MARINE MAMMAL PROTECTION & GUIDELINES

All whales, dolphins, porpoises, and seals in the North-east region are federally protected by the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). Most large whales in the area are also protected by the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Under these laws, it is illegal to harass any marine mammal. Harassment is defined as any act of pursuit, torment, or annoyance which has the potential to injure or disturb a marine mammal by interrupting/ changing behavioral patterns such as migration, breathing, nursing, and feeding.

Even if you have good intentions, the operation of vessels around whales has the potential to harass them. Guidelines have been developed to help boaters (commercial & recreational) avoid harassing marine mammals, inadvertently violating the law, and potentially injuring the whales. Violations of these laws can result in penalties such as fines and imprisonment. Adhering to NOAA's whale watching guidelines not only helps protect whales, but also helps keep boaters and their passengers safe.

### \*RIGHT WHALE REGULATIONS\*

North Atlantic right whales are especially vulnerable to ship strikes and therefore additional regulations are in



Illustration: Garth Mix

place to provide extra protection to this species. North Atlantic right whales are protected by regulations that prohibit approach within 500 yards (1500 ft.). Any vessel finding itself within the 500 yard (1500 ft.) buffer zone created by a surfacing right whale must depart immediately at a safe and slow speed. Only vessels with appropriate research permits, commercial fishing vessels in the act of hauling back or towing gear, or any vessel given prior approval by NOAA Fisheries Service to investigate a potential entanglement may remain within 500 yards of a right whale. **If you cannot identify the species of whale you are watching, assume it is a right whale and maintain a 500 yard buffer.**

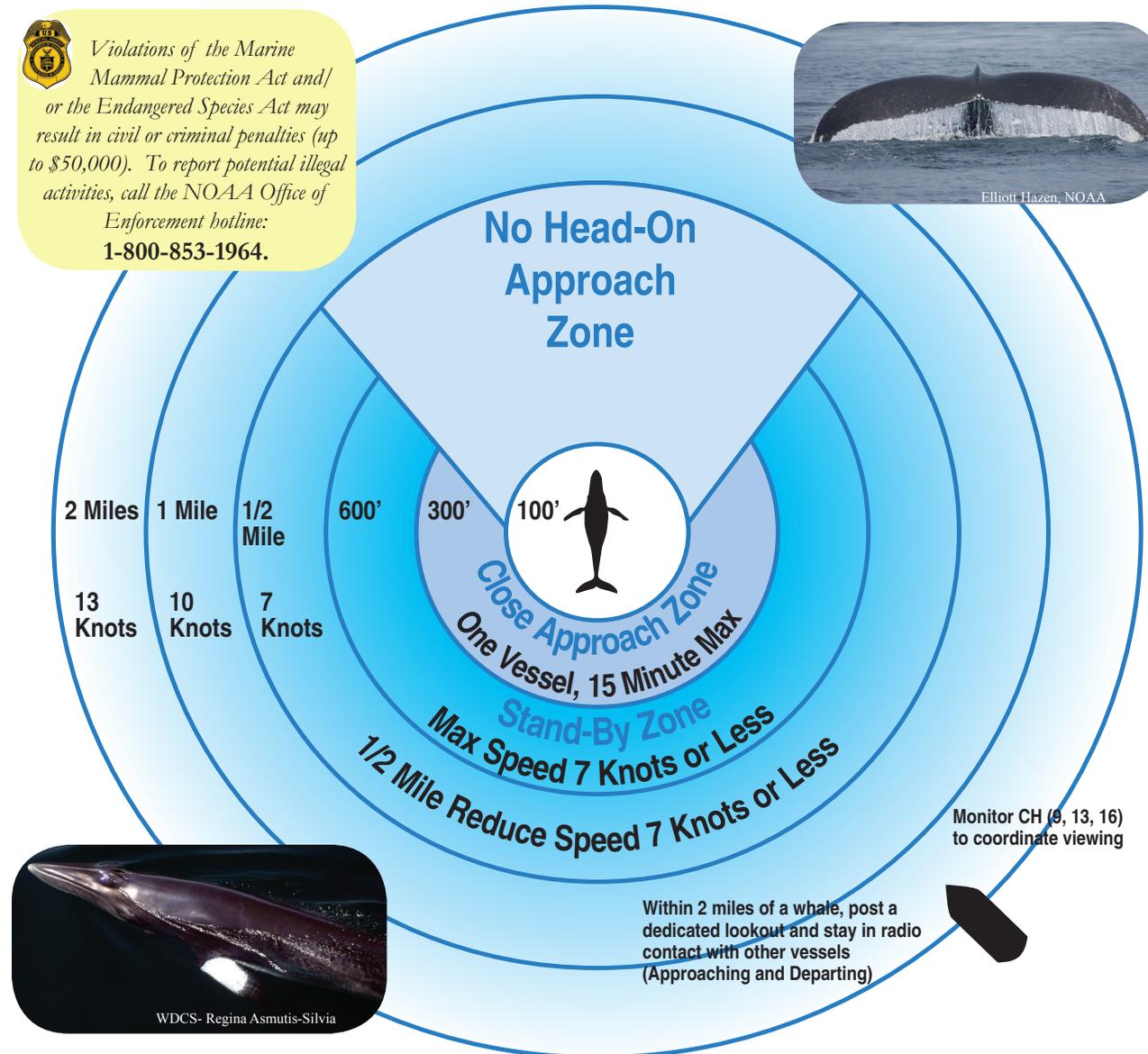
Additionally, mandatory vessel speed restrictions of 10 knots or less also apply to vessels, 65 feet in length or greater, in certain areas and times along the US east coast. For more information:

[www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/shipstrike](http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/shipstrike)

## OPERATIONAL GUIDELINES WHEN IN SIGHT OF WHALES



Violations of the Marine Mammal Protection Act and/ or the Endangered Species Act may result in civil or criminal penalties (up to \$50,000). To report potential illegal activities, call the NOAA Office of Enforcement hotline: **1-800-853-1964.**



WDCS- Regina Asmutis-Silvia

### 2 MILES - 1 MILE AWAY FROM WHALES

- Reduce speed to 13 knots.
- Post a dedicated lookout to assist the vessel operator in monitoring the location of all marine mammals.
- Avoid sudden changes in speed and direction.
- AIRCRAFT: maintain a minimum altitude of 1,000 ft. over water.

### 1 MILE - 1/2 MILE AWAY FROM WHALES

- Reduce speed to 10 knots.

### 1/2 MILE OR LESS FROM WHALES other than Right Whales\*

- Reduce speed to 7 knots.
- Maneuver to avoid head-on approach.

### CLOSE APPROACH PROCEDURE

The following procedures apply to both the Stand-By & Close Approach Zones for all whales except right whales.\*

- Always parallel the course and speed of moving whales up to the designated speed limit within that distance.
- Never attempt a head-on approach to the whale.
- Approach and leave stationary whales at no more than idle or "no wake" speed, not to exceed 7 knots.
- Do not intentionally drift down on whales.
- Vessels in multi-vessel approaches should maintain communication with each other (via channels 9, 13, or 16 for hailing) to coordinate viewing.
- Take into account the presence of obstacles (vessels, structures, fishing gear, or the shoreline). All vessels in close approach must stay to the side or behind the whales so they do not box in the whales or cut off their path

### STAND-BY ZONE

**300 feet - 600 feet away from whales:**

- Two vessel limit within the 300- to 600- ft Stand-By- Zone at any one time.

### CLOSE APPROACH ZONE

**100 feet - 300 feet away from whales:**

- One vessel limit.
- Other vessels stand off (up to two vessels in Stand-By Zone - others outside 600 feet).
- If more than one vessel is within 600 feet, the vessel within 300 feet should limit its time to 15 minutes in close approach to whales.

### NO INTENTIONAL APPROACH WITHIN 100 FEET OF WHALES

If whales approach within 100 feet of your vessel, put engines in neutral and do not re-engage propulsion until whales are observed clear of harm's way from your vessel.

### DEPARTURE PROCEDURES

All vessels should leave the whales following the same speed and distance procedures described above. In order for vessels to be clear of whales before dark, vessels should cease whale watching and begin their return to port 15 minutes before sunset.