



VESSEL STRIKE AVOIDANCE MEASURES, NOAA FISHERIES SOUTHEAST REGIONAL OFFICE

Background

Vessel strikes can injure or kill species protected under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). NOAA Fisheries Southeast Regional Office (SERO) Protected Resources Division (PRD) recommends implementing the following identification and avoidance measures to reduce the risk of vessel strikes and disturbance from vessels to protected species under our jurisdiction.¹

Protected Species Sightings

All vessel operators and crews should be informed about the potential presence of species protected under the ESA and the MMPA and any critical habitat in a vessel transit area. All vessels should have personnel onboard responsible for observing for the presence of protected species. All personnel should be advised that there are civil and criminal penalties for harming, harassing, or killing listed species and all marine mammals. To determine which protected species and critical habitat may be found in the transit area, please review the relevant [marine mammal](https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/find-species) and [ESA-listed species](https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/find-species) at Find A Species (<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/find-species>) and any ESA Section 7 consultation documents if applicable.

Vessel Strike Avoidance

The following measures should be taken when they are consistent with safe navigation to avoid causing injury or death of a protected species:

1. Operate at the minimum safe speed when transiting and maintain a vigilant watch for protected species to avoid striking them. Even with a vigilant watch, most marine protected species are extremely difficult to see from a boat or ship, and you cannot rely on detecting them visually and then taking evasive action. The most effective way to avoid vessel strikes is to travel at a slow, safe speed. Whenever possible, assign a designated individual to observe for protected species and limit vessel operation to only daylight hours.
2. Follow deep-water routes (e.g., marked channels) whenever possible.
3. Operate at “Idle/No Wake” speeds in the following circumstances:
 - a. while in any project construction areas
 - b. while in water depths where the draft of the vessel provides less than four feet of clearance from the bottom, or
 - c. in all depths after a protected species has been observed in and has recently departed the area.

¹ Manatees are managed under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

4. When a protected species is sighted, attempt to maintain a distance of 150 feet or greater between the animal and the vessel. Reduce speed and avoid abrupt changes in direction until the animal(s) has left the area.
5. When dolphins are bow- or wake-riding, maintain course and speed as long as it is safe to do so or until the animal(s) leave the vicinity of the vessel.
6. If a whale is sighted in the vessel's path or within 300 feet from the vessel, reduce speed and shift the engine to neutral. Do not engage the engines until the animals are clear of the area. *Please see below for additional requirements for North Atlantic right whales.*
7. If a whale is sighted farther than 300 feet from the vessel, maintain a distance of 300 feet or greater between the whale and the vessel and reduce speed to 10 knots or less. *Please see below for additional requirements for North Atlantic right whales.*

Injured or Dead Protected Species Reporting

Vessel crews should report sightings of any injured or dead protected species immediately regardless of whether the injury or death is caused by your vessel. Please see [How to Report a Stranded or Injured Marine Animal](https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/report) (<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/report>) for the most up to date information for reporting injured or dead protected species.

If the injury or death is caused by your vessel, also report the interaction to NOAA Fisheries SERO PRD at takereport.nmfsser@noaa.gov. Please include the species involved, the circumstances of the interaction, the fate and disposition of the animal involved, photos (if available), and contact information for the person who can provide additional details if requested. Please include the project's Environmental Consultation Organizer (ECO) number and project title in the subject line of email reports if a consultation has been completed.

Reporting Violations

To report any suspected ESA or MMPA violation, call the NOAA Fisheries Enforcement Hotline. This hotline is available 24 hours a day, 7 days week for anyone in the United States.

NOAA Fisheries Enforcement Hotline: (800) 853-1964

Additional Transit and Reporting Requirements for North Atlantic Right Whales

1. Federal regulation prohibits approaching or remaining within 500 yards of a North Atlantic right whale (50 CFR 224.103 (c)). All whales sighted within North Atlantic right whale critical habitat should be assumed to be right whales. Please be aware and follow restrictions for all Seasonal Management Areas along the U.S. east coast. These areas have vessel speed restrictions to reduce vessel strikes risks to migrating or feeding whales. More information can be found at [Reducing Vessel Strikes to North Atlantic Right Whales](https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/endangered-species-conservation/reducing-vessel-strikes-north-atlantic-right-whales) (<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/endangered-species-conservation/reducing-vessel-strikes-north-atlantic-right-whales>).
2. Ships greater than 300 gross tons entering the WHALESOUTH reporting area are required to report to a shore-based station. For more information on reporting procedures consult 33 CFR Part 169, the Coast Pilot, or at [Reducing Vessel Strikes to North Atlantic](https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/endangered-species-conservation/reducing-vessel-strikes-north-atlantic-right-whales)

[Right Whales](https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/endangered-species-conservation/reducing-vessel-strikes-north-atlantic-right-whales) (<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/endangered-species-conservation/reducing-vessel-strikes-north-atlantic-right-whales>).

3. From November through April, vessels approaching/departing Florida ports of Jacksonville and Fernandina Beach as well as Brunswick Harbor, Georgia are **STRONGLY RECOMMENDED** to use Two-Way Routes displayed on nautical charts. More information on [Compliance with the Right Whale Ship Strike Reduction Rule](#) can be found at (https://media.fisheries.noaa.gov/2021-06/compliance_guide_for_right_whale_ship_strike_reduction.pdf)
4. Mariners shall check with various communication media for general information regarding avoiding vessel strikes and specific information regarding North Atlantic right whale sighting locations. These include NOAA weather radio, U.S. Coast Guard Broadcast to Mariners, Local Notice to Mariners, and NAVTEX. Commercial mariners calling on United States ports should view the most recent version of the NOAA/USCG produced training CD entitled “A Prudent Mariner’s Guide to Right Whale Protection” (contact the NOAA Fisheries SERO, Protected Resources Division for more information regarding the CD).
5. Injured, dead, or entangled right whales should be immediately reported to the U.S. Coast Guard via VHF Channel 16 and the NOAA Fisheries Southeast Marine Mammal Stranding Hotline at (877) WHALE HELP (877-942-5343).

For additional information, please contact NOAA Fisheries SERO PRD at:

NOAA Fisheries Service

Southeast Regional Office

263 13th Avenue South

St. Petersburg, Florida 33701

Visit us on the web at [Protected Marine Life in the Southeast](#)

(<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/region/southeast#protected-marine-life>)

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