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THE FIRST PHOTOGRAPHIC DOCUMENTATION OF  
A NORTHERN RIGHT WHALE OFF WASHINGTON STATERICHARD A. ROWLETT, GREGORY A. GREEN,  
C. EDWARD BOWLBY, AND MARI A. SMULTEA

We made the first photographic documentation of the occurrence of the northern right whale (*Eubalaena glacialis*) in coastal waters off Washington state during extensive aerial surveys for delphinids (Green et al. 1993) on 24 May 1992 (Fig. 1). The single *E. glacialis* was initially sighted by RAR over Quinault (submarine) Canyon ( $47^{\circ}17.2'N$ ,  $125^{\circ}11.1'W$ ; 1200 m depth), 65 km west of Cape Elizabeth, Washington. This same whale was subsequently resighted by MAS approximately 6 hours later 48 km west ( $47^{\circ}38.0'N$ ,  $125^{\circ}07.4'W$ ; 500-m depth) of Destruction Island, having traveled 38 km north between sightings at an average rate of approximately 6.3 km/hr.

The resight was later confirmed by comparing video and 35-mm photographic images. Distinctive markings included callosity and/or barnacle patches on both dorsal and ventral surfaces of the tip of the right fluke lobe, and a long white scratch on the right side of the caudal peduncle. Total body length was estimated at about 13-14 m. There were no other cetaceans or seabirds associated with either sighting. This whale did not match the *E. glacialis* sighted by Carretta et al. (1994) two months earlier (24 March 1992) off San Clemente, California, based on photographic comparison.

The historic and present distribution of *E. glacialis* has been thoroughly reviewed by Scarff (1986, 1991). Scarff presented a complete summary of all known landings and published sighting records in the southeast North Pacific south of  $50^{\circ}N$  from 1855 through 1990. Scarff's (1986) summary lists six sightings of *E. glacialis* in coastal and slope waters off the Washington coast between 1959 and 1983. None of these sightings were photographically documented and Scarff (1986) raised some skepticism regarding four sightings by Niggol (in Fiscus and Niggol 1965) between 8-19 April 1959.

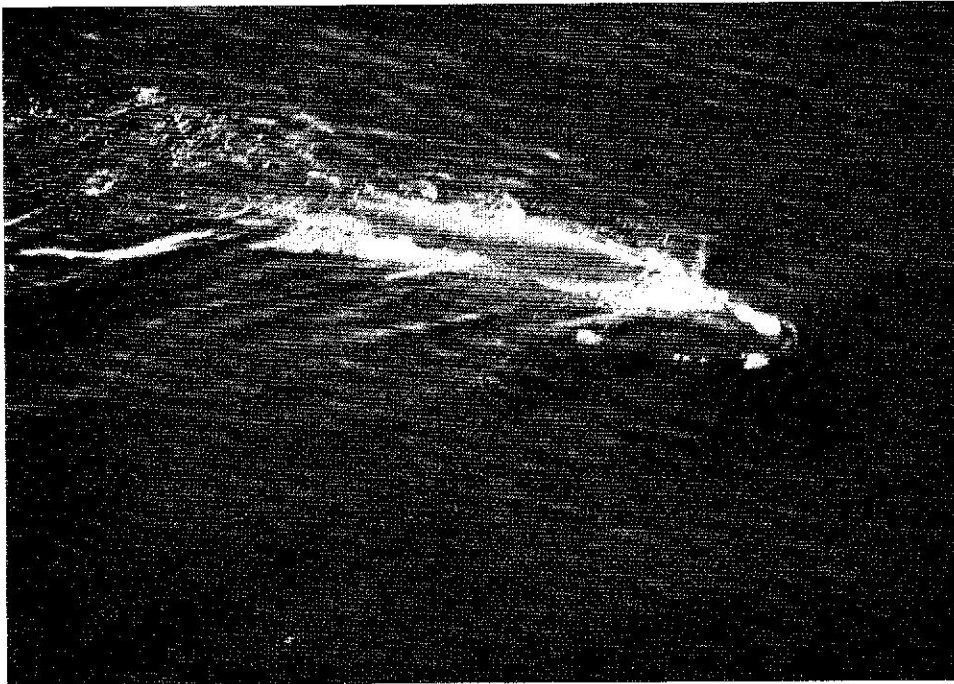


FIGURE 1. Aerial photograph of a northern right whale sighted approximately 65 km west of Cape Elizabeth, Washington, showing distinctive arched jawline and head callosities.

Another sighting of 5-7 *E. glacialis* near Cape Flattery on 20 March 1973 was documented in the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Platforms of Opportunity Program database but lacked substantiating details or verification, has never been published, and was officially entered as "tentative" by NMFS. We are reasonably confident of the remaining record (Rice and Fiscus 1968): a group of three *E. glacialis* sighted on 17 January 1967, 28 km WSW of Cape Flattery (48°20'N, 125°06'W). In addition, two probable *E. glacialis* were sighted at Swiftsure Bank (on the Canadian side of the mouth of the Strait of Juan de Fuca) on 28 August 1983 by R. T. Paine, an ecologist with extensive marine experience (Reeves and Leatherwood 1985, in Scarff 1991).

Controversy remains regarding whether this region was ever a significant wintering ground for *E. glacialis* (Braham and Rice 1984; Hay 1985; Scarff 1986; Gaskin 1987, 1991). Although *E. glacialis* were found on the coast of Oregon (Rice and Fiscus 1968) occasionally in large numbers (Scammon 1874), extensive shore-based and pelagic commercial whaling south of Vancouver Island never took this species in large numbers. However, Gilmore (1956) postulated that the main wintering ground of *E. glacialis* in the eastern North Pacific was off the coast of Oregon and possibly northern California, an area where inclement weather discouraged winter whaling (Rice and Fiscus 1968). Furthermore, archaeological excavations near Cape Flattery (Ozette) unearthed parts of 11 separate *E. glacialis* from Makah Indian middens (Scarff 1986), although these represented only 2.3% of the total bones recovered.

Whether or not the coastal Pacific Northwest represented a significant wintering ground for *E. glacialis* may never be resolved. However, despite increased aerial and shipboard research activities and amateur pelagic bird and whalewatch trips during the past two decades, < 10 sightings of *E. glacialis* have been documented in the near-shore waters of the southeastern North Pacific.

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