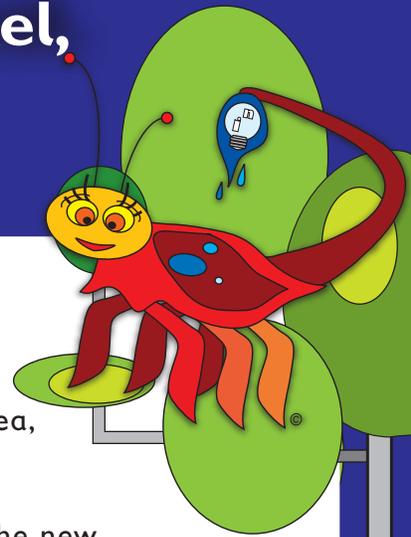




The Adventures of Pixel, the Stowaway



Right Whales

“Hi, everyone! Pixel, the Stowaway, here. A couple of weeks ago, my human friend Al, the photographer, went to the Smithsonian Institution Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C. to see the Hall of the Sea, and I hopped aboard his camera for the ride.



Al says the coolest part of the new hall is the world’s biggest portrait. A portrait is a picture or sculpture of a real person—although this portrait isn’t of a person. The museum calls it a model because the subject is an animal not a person. The model is of Phoenix, a real Atlantic Right Whale, but Al prefers to call it a portrait anyway. The real Phoenix lives off the coast of the Eastern United States. Phoenix’s model is 45 feet long, the same length as the real Phoenix, and is suspended from the ceiling, so it looks like she is swimming down

the exhibit hall. Her model was made in seven sections and had to be put together in the exhibit hall because it is so big. When you see films of whales on TV, it’s hard to tell how big they really are, but when you get up close to Phoenix’s model you can see that whales are REALLY huge.

Researchers know Phoenix was born in the winter of 1987 in the warm waters off Georgia or northern Florida. When spring came, she swam with her mother north to Cape Cod and the coasts off Maine and Nova Scotia to feed. She migrated south that autumn and has been making the same round trip every year since then.



Courtesy of Wikipedia

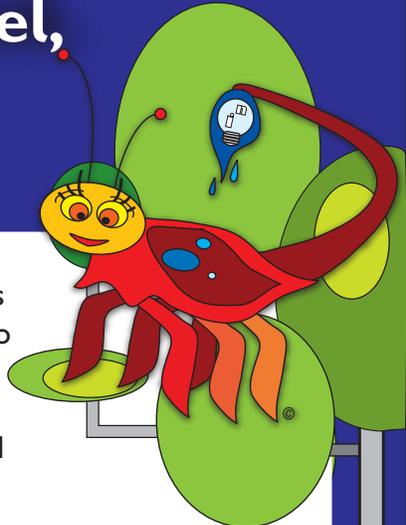


In 1997, Phoenix became tangled up in fishing nets off the Georgia coast where she was spending the winter. Entanglement in gear such as nets and lines is a major cause of death in Right Whales. Nearly three out of every four Right Whales have scars from entanglements. Phoenix carried the gear around for two years

All photos courtesy of Al Girdali unless otherwise noted.



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leading researchers to believe she would drown. She was found in 1999 free of the lines with only a couple of scars to show for it, so researchers named her *Phoenix* after the mythological bird, a phoenix, that seemed to rise from the dead. The model Phoenix has scars on her chin and flukes (the tail fins on a whale) just like her real entanglement scars. Al says that scientists are working with fishermen to make safer fishing gear and to be extra careful when Right Whales are moving through the area.

Since Right Whales swim slowly and feed near the surface, they are at risk for colliding with ships. Unfortunately, they live in some of the world's busiest shipping lanes along the east coast of the United States and Canada. The U.S. and Canadian Coast Guards radio alerts to ships nearing the shores, and advise them on how to avoid areas where whales have been spotted.

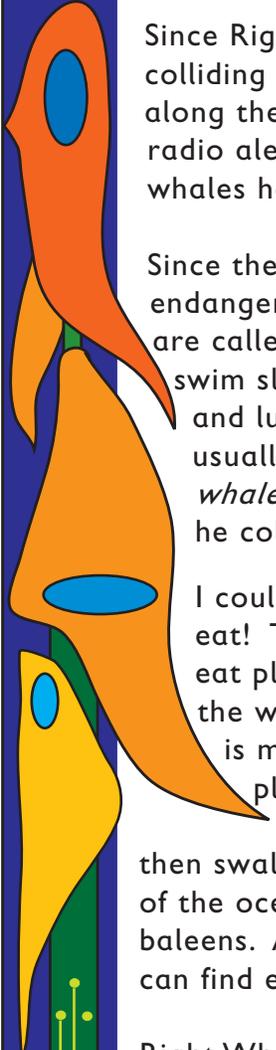
Since there are only about 400 Atlantic Right Whales left in the world, Al says they are an endangered species. The U.S. and Canada are trying to protect them. I wondered why they are called Right Whales, and Al said it was because they were the *right* whales to hunt. They swim slowly, feed at the surface, have a lot of blubber (fat layers) which were used for fuel and lubricants before oil was discovered, and float when they are killed. Right Whales usually swim within 50 miles of the coast, so some researchers call them *urban or city whales*. One, named Shakleton, even swam 40 miles up the Delaware River in 1994 where he collided with a tug boat before he turned around and swam back to sea.

I couldn't believe it when Al told me what those BIG Right Whales eat! They usually swim at or near the surface of the water and eat plankton-like copepods, (tiny shrimp-like crustaceans) that the whales filter out of the water with their baleens. The baleen is made of keratin, the same stuff as fingernails, and these long plates of baleen hang like curtains in the whale's mouth and trap plankton which the whale licks off with its tongue and then swallows. Different species of whales sharing the same part of the ocean eat different foods, and they have different types of baleens. A Right Whale can eat up to a ton of plankton a day. I don't know how the whales can find enough plankton to get enough to eat, but the whales sure know where to find it!



Baleen
Courtesy of Wikipedia

Right Whales grow up to 55 feet long and can weigh up to 160,000 pounds. (Let's see, if a ton is 2,000 pounds, how many tons could a Right Whale weigh? – see answer at the end.) Phoenix weighed one ton when she was born! Right Whales can live for 70 years with some reaching 100 years old. Whales mature faster than humans. In 1996 when Phoenix was only 9 years old, she had her first calf (baby), a female named Smoke. Phoenix had another calf, a female named Fuse, in 2004. Right Whales often have calves every three to five years. In





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2007, at the age of 20, Phoenix became a grandmother when Smoke had her own calf.

When a whale surfaces after a dive, it blows out the air in its lungs and up goes a spout of air. Every whale species has a different shaped

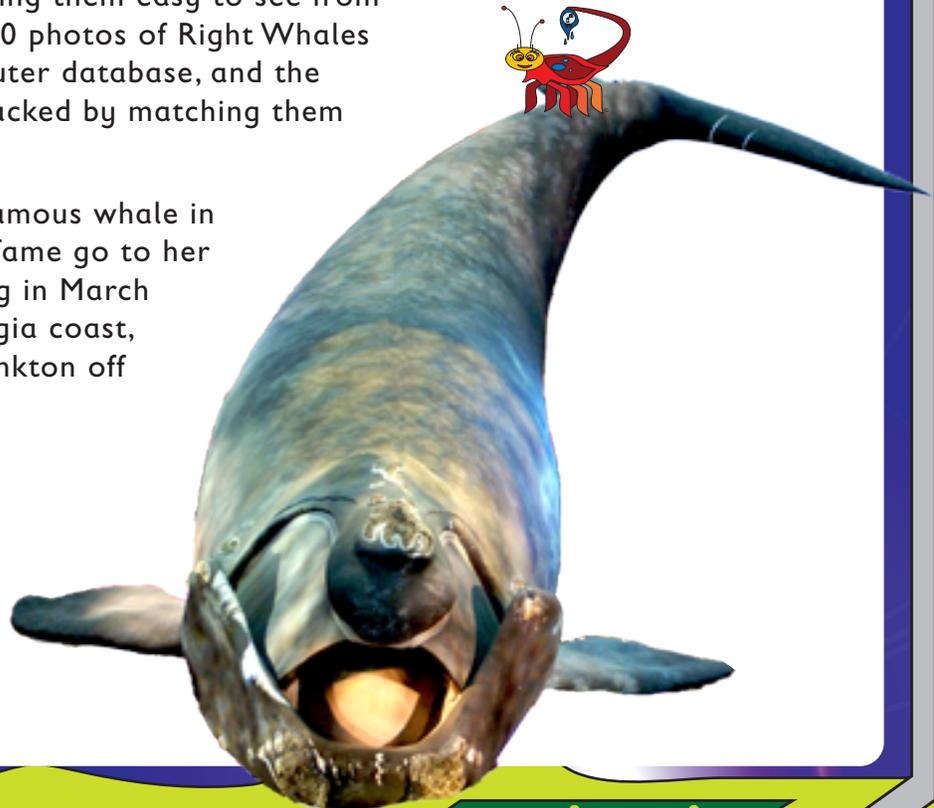


spout, and Right Whales can be identified from other whales at sea by their V-shaped spout. Scientists can also tell individual Right Whales apart too in order to give them names. When Al was taking a picture of the model of Phoenix, I noticed some funny things on Phoenix's head. Al told me that Right Whales have rough patches of skin called callosities (cal-OS-i-tees) on the tops of their heads. Every whale has a different pattern of callosities that researchers use to identify them – sort of like how fingerprints are used for people. Callosities

are black like the whale's skin and are usually hard to see, but tiny crab-like animals called cyamids (sigh-AM-ids) live in them. Cyamids do not harm the whale, but turn the callosities white or yellow, making them easy to see from a boat or plane. Nearly 200,000 photos of Right Whales have been entered into a computer database, and the whales can be identified and tracked by matching them with their pictures.

Phoenix is probably the most famous whale in the world, but she hasn't let fame go to her head. She still swims along in March somewhere off the Georgia coast, ready to head north to feed on plankton off Cape Cod and the coast of Maine.

I'd love to spot Phoenix one day, wouldn't you?"



Do you think it is important to save whales from extinction? Why?