

Winter Occurrence of North Atlantic Right Whales in the U.S. Mid-Atlantic

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Purpose

Assess the winter occurrence of large whales, particularly endangered NARWs, in the Mid-Atlantic to inform measures that reduce impacts from fishing, vessel traffic, & offshore wind development

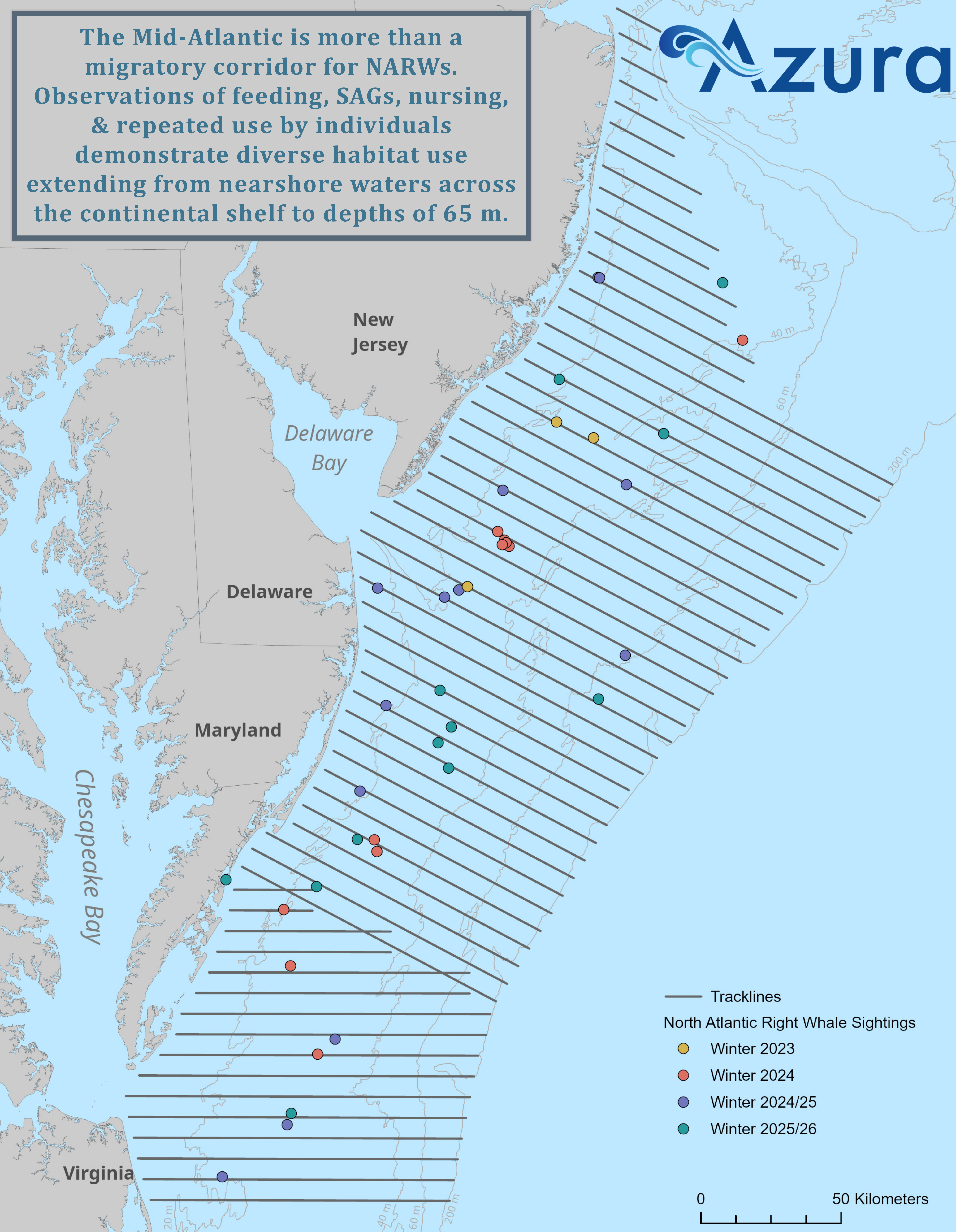
Methods

- Aerial line transect survey
- 4 winter seasons:
 - Winter 2023: 4 Feb-4 Mar | 7,267 km
 - Winter 2024: 5 Jan-6 Mar | 15,586 km
 - Winter 2024/25: 3 Dec-4 Apr | 34,803 km
 - Winter 2025/26: 3 Dec-4 Apr | 25,782 km
- Total 83,438 km on-effort
- 2023 surveys limited to lines off Chesapeake & Delaware Bays
- Survey altitude increased from 305 to 457 m** after Winter 2024

Results

- 39 total NARW sightings
- 74 individuals identified incl. 30 females, 41 males, 1 cow-calf pair
- 8 resights within same season
- 5 resights across seasons
- Group size = 1–14
- Water depth = 12–65 m
- Distance from shore = 7–96 km
- Behaviors incl. feeding, defecation, nursing, logging, traveling, diving, SAGs
- Recurring cryptic surfacing behavior:
 - Prolonged dive intervals, often exceeding 30–60 minutes
 - Brief surfacings lasting only seconds
 - Limited or no above-water head exposure

The Mid-Atlantic is more than a migratory corridor for NARWs. Observations of feeding, SAGs, nursing, & repeated use by individuals demonstrate diverse habitat use extending from nearshore waters across the continental shelf to depths of 65 m.



Caterpillar (#3503) with calf
Winter 2024/25
Nursing off NJ/DE



Taffy (#3903) – female
3 sightings:
Winter 2024
Winter 2024/25
Winter 2024/25
SAGs off MD & NJ/DE



Scorpion (#3892) – male
2 sightings:
Winter 2023
Winter 2024
SAGs off VA & NJ/DE



Eternity (#3650) – female
2 sightings:
Winter 2024
Winter 2024/25
SAG off NJ/DE

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Abbreviations: DE = Delaware; km = kilometer(s); m = meter(s); MD = Maryland; NARW = North Atlantic right whale; NJ = New Jersey; SAG = surface-active group; VA = Virginia

**Survey altitude increased to 457 m to safely operate around offshore wind infrastructure. Photos: Top (Azura); all others (North Atlantic Right Whale Catalog)

