

# SPOTTED: *Sea Cows!*



WRITTEN AND  
PHOTOGRAPHED  
*by Todd Pusser*

*The Florida  
MANATEE  
sometimes  
SUMMERS  
in coastal  
NORTH CAROLINA.*

Slowly, the large shape materialized out of the murky green water and approached to within 2 feet of where I was floating. I was a bit apprehensive at first. After all, just inches in front of my face swam an animal that was larger than my living room sofa and weighed half a ton. The manatee swam closer still, as if inviting me to reach out and give it a scratch on the back. I extended my hand ever so slowly and gently scratched the manatee. Like an eager puppy, the large marine mammal turned around, eyes rolling back in its head, and actually leaned into my hand, wanting to be scratched more. Realizing that I had nothing to fear, I spent the next two hours swimming and enjoying the company of this manatee and others nearby.

I will never forget that first encounter with these large, docile creatures. I went to Crystal River, along the west coast of Florida, as part of my scuba-diving class at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill more than 10 years ago. The manatees of Crystal River left an indelible mark in my mind and encouraged me to pursue a career in marine biology.

*Manatees love the clear warm waters of Florida, but an instinct to expand their range may lead them to visit coastal North Carolina. (Manatees shown are in Florida waters.)*





I was surprised to learn recently that manatees also come to visit me—or at least my home waters. An increasing number of reported sightings indicate that manatees enter the coastal waters of our state frequently. In fact, they are not as uncommon in North Carolina waters as one might think.

The Florida manatee (*Trichechus manatus*), a subspecies of the West Indian manatee, inhabits coastal waters, estuaries and rivers

throughout the southeastern United States, with the greatest number recorded in Florida. During summer months, an unknown number of the population move north along the east coast of Florida into coastal Georgia and the Carolinas. Some have been recorded as far north as Rhode Island. In North Carolina, manatees have been recorded in every coastal county, primarily between the months of May and October. Sightings are reported each year

in the state, mainly in the coastal sounds and around the mouths of major rivers.

Larisa Avens, a sea turtle researcher based in Beaufort with the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, was out checking pound nets with a Carteret County fisherman in Core Sound on June 13 of this year. They were looking for stranded turtles but instead found a juvenile manatee swimming inside a 20-by-20-foot net.

“We approached the net, and to my surprise, I saw this snout poking out of the water,” Avens said. “The manatee appeared to be a juvenile. He was about 8 feet long and slender. We watched him for about 20 minutes, then we dipped the side of the net down, and he swam away.”

**Aquatic Bovines** The manatee belongs to the order Sirenia. Only four species of



**These large marine mammals** have been spotted in every coastal county in the state. With a broad, flat tail to provide swimming power, manatees have the ability to travel great distances in fairly short periods of time.

Sirenia exist: the Amazonian manatee (*Trichechus inunguis*) of the Amazon River and its tributaries; the West African manatee (*T. senegalensis*), found along the west coast of Africa; the Dugong (*Dugong dugon*) of the tropical Indo-Pacific oceans; and the West Indian manatee, with its Florida and Antillean subspecies.

Like all mammals, manatees give birth to live young, produce milk, have hair and must surface to breathe. Members of this order are fully aquatic, but their closest living relatives are land-dwelling mammals such as elephants and aardvarks. An adult Florida manatee averages 10 feet in length and weighs 800 to 1,200 pounds. Large adults can grow to 13 feet and 3,500 pounds. Females are generally larger than males.

Manatees have a torpedo-shaped body with no hind limbs. They propel themselves with a broad, paddle-shaped tail and maneuver with two modified forelimbs known as pectoral flippers. A manatee has thick and rough skin like an elephant's, with sparse hairs evenly distributed across its body, and brushy whiskers known as vibrissae on its large, flexible upper lip. As odd as it sounds, considering the marine mammal's size and ungainly appearance, it is believed that manatee sightings by sailors of old inspired tales of mermaids.

Nicknamed “sea cow” for good reason, manatees are herbivores and feed on sea grass and aquatic plants. Their teeth consist only of molars, which they use for grinding plant material. Teeth are continually replaced throughout the manatee's life, which can last as long as 70 years.

**An Urge to Explore** Once the ocean water begins to warm up in the late spring, some manatees feel the need to explore.

Mike Bryant, manager of the Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge, said many animals have an instinct to disperse and expand their range as far as they can. “They like to test the waters, so to speak,” Bryant said. “Nature sets the limits.”

Manatees have a low tolerance for cold water. Because they possess no blubber layer like that of whales and dolphins, their thick skin and thin fat layer provide inadequate insulation against the cold. And since their metabolic rate is lower than that of other mammals of similar size, manatees can die of hypothermia within a few hours of exposure to cold water. They generally will migrate toward a warmer climate when the water temperature reaches 68 degrees.

This explains why manatees are seen in North Carolina only during balmy months. There has been only one documented live manatee sighting in the state between the end of October and the beginning of April. Manatees appear to dawdle a bit: They make sure the water is warm enough to venture north in the spring, and they wait until the ocean begins to get chilly to migrate south.

The biggest dawdler and most prolific traveler on record is “Chessie,” a manatee that made headlines in 1994. When Chessie was spotted in the Chesapeake Bay in September of that year, scientists worried that the cool waters might harm him. They captured the wayward manatee and airlifted him to Florida, where he was released after being fitted with a radio tag monitored by a satellite.

Chessie swam around the waters of South Florida that winter, then made a beeline north as water temperatures rose in the spring of 1995. He swam through North Carolina waters and continued his journey north back into Chesapeake Bay, but didn't stop

there. Chessie continued to swim north through Delaware Bay, into the coastal waters of New Jersey and Connecticut, within eyesight of the Statue of Liberty in Long Island Sound, and eventually to Point Judith off Rhode Island. Then he turned around and swam back to Florida.

“Chessie is a wonderful example of a manatee testing the waters,” said Jim Valade, a manatee expert with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Jacksonville, Fla. “Manatees are incredibly opportunistic. They are driven by food and fresh water. With all the rivers flowing to the coast, and the protected sounds inside the barrier islands, North Carolina is wonderful habitat for manatees.”

**Counting Sea Cows** Although few North Carolinians have seen manatees in the wild, the number of sightings appears to be increasing. Researcher Frank J. Schwartz

of the UNC Institute of Marine Sciences reported in a 1995 study that 68 Florida manatees had been spotted in 59 different sites. Schwartz’s report covered a period from 1994 back to the first report of a manatee in North Carolina waters—a sighting in Masonboro Sound near Wilmington in September 1919 recorded by C.S. Brimley, an accomplished naturalist at the N.C. Department of Agriculture. There are just 10 records from 1919 to 1980, when Schwartz initiated his study. After that, the study lists only three years without a confirmed manatee sighting.

Reports come in from all areas of the state’s coast, but the majority of manatee sightings are made in Coastal Plain rivers, where the animals feed on plentiful aquatic vegetation. Boaters have reported numerous sightings in the Trent, Neuse, Pamlico and Cape Fear rivers. Some have been reported

quite far inland, such as in the Tar River near Washington and Greenville. One was even seen slurping down fresh water from a running water hose that boaters left dangling from a dock along the Intracoastal Waterway.

The waters around Wilmington seem to attract manatees. Conditions at the mouth of the Cape Fear are similar to manatee habitats in Florida’s coastal rivers. On June 16, just three days after Avens freed the manatee in the Core Sound pound net, two manatees were spotted in the Lee’s Cut/Banks Channel area on the Intracoastal Waterway side of Wrightsville Beach. Seaman Apprentice Daniel Darnell of the U.S. Coast Guard Station at Wrightsville Beach didn’t see those two, but he saw one a year ago underneath the station’s pier. He observed the manatee closely enough to notice that it had scars on its back that appeared to have been made by boat propellers.

#### *What to Do If You See a Manatee*

- Leave it alone: Although manatees have a reputation for being friendly and docile, treat it as you would any other wild animal in its habitat. Do not bother the animal or try to feed it.
- Report its presence: Call your local wildlife enforcement officer and ask them to contact biologist John Hammond of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at (919) 856-4520, Ext. 28. Hammond keeps a list of all manatee sightings in North Carolina.
- Enjoy a unique opportunity: Sightings are still fairly uncommon, so if you see one, take advantage. Watch the manatee as long as you like from the shore or a boat and take photos if you like. Then leave it be.



Why the sudden increase in sightings during the last 10 to 20 years? It would be natural to assume that because the manatee has been listed as an endangered species since 1973, the population might be increasing. Experts agree that the Florida populations seem to be increasing very slowly, but not at a rate as great as the increase in sightings. It is likely that since public awareness has been raised by activist groups such as the Save the Manatee Club, people are better educated about manatees and are more likely to report sightings. Historical accounts suggest that manatees have visited the waters of the mid-Atlantic states for years. Europeans who arrived at the shores of the Chesapeake Bay in Virginia during the 16th century reported encounters with manatees.

**Amiable and Unafraid** Manatees have no natural enemies, with the possible exception of ignorant humans. The greatest threats they face are habitat degradation, entanglement with fishing gear and collisions with motorboats—all problems caused by people. Slow-moving, curious manatees tend to gravitate toward humans, a trait that is often detrimental to the animals. Each year, dozens of manatees are injured and killed by watercraft. Waterways up and down the

*Like all mammals, manatees nurse their young. Many of the manatees spotted on the Carolina coast are juveniles.*

eastern seaboard are becoming increasingly congested, and coastal human population growth is rampant.

Conservation measures for manatees have increased considerably over the last 20 years. Regulations on coastal development and restrictions on the speed of watercraft in manatee habitat are just two steps that have been taken to protect this endangered marine mammal. And all the while, manatees keep wandering up to North Carolina.

Wildlife enforcement Master Officer Anthony Cox was quite surprised in early October 2002 when he got a call that a manatee was visiting a park in Washington. He drove to the park to check it out; sure enough, a manatee was munching on vegetation where Havens Gardens city park overlooks the Pamlico River, 20 miles upstream from the Intracoastal Waterway. “I thought it was a prank,” Cox said of the manatee call, “but I got there, and John Brown, there it was.”

Cox monitored the animal for a few minutes to make sure it was OK and then resumed his regular duties. After his shift ended, he brought his children back to the park and watched the 8-foot manatee for another 45 minutes. “It was not afraid at all,” Cox said. “You could stand 3 feet from it on the bank.”

So the next time you are out in your boat in summer in a coastal river or sound, keep your eyes peeled. You might encounter a Florida manatee taking a summer vacation in coastal Carolina. ☒