

A boater's guide to living with

# Florida Manatees



The Florida manatee is the state's official marine mammal.  
Photo from FPL.



© Kit Curtin

## About Manatees

The Florida manatee is a large aquatic mammal, with thick gray wrinkled skin often harboring a growth of algae or barnacles. The ancestors of manatees lived 45 million years ago and their fossils have been found in Florida. Nicknamed “sea cows” because of their grazing habits, manatees eat seagrasses and other aquatic plants.

Manatees are found in salt, brackish, and fresh water, including navigable canals. Manatees are often slow moving and spend much of their time eating and sleeping. On average they swim three to five miles an hour, but can swim 15 to 20 miles per hour for short distances.

Manatees cannot tolerate cold water temperatures for extended periods of time and often begin to seek warmer water when water temperatures drop below 68 degrees Fahrenheit. When exposed to those low temperatures, they can develop “cold-stress syndrome” that is evident from whitening of their face, flippers and tail edges and may lead to death. During winter months, manatees migrate to warmer waters found in natural springs or power plant discharge canals. The rest of the year, manatees are found throughout Florida, even getting through boat locks to move far upriver and into canal systems.

Manatees can live over 60 years. However, only about half of the wild manatees that reach adulthood will survive into their twenties.

Manatees reproduce at a low rate. Since a calf is dependent upon its mother for at least two years, manatees can only give birth to a calf every three years. It is because of this low rate of reproduction that high death rates slow the long-term recovery of the manatee population.



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Because they are mammals, manatees must breathe air. They typically surface to breathe every two to four minutes, but can stay submerged for 20 minutes or more when resting.



A manatee surfaces to breathe. Photo by Karen Parker.



Scars from boat propellers mark this manatee's back. Photo from USGS, SE Ecological Science Center, Sirenia Project.



Manatees nurse their young under their flippers. © Patrick M. Rose, Save the Manatee Club.



Manatees are curious and often approach boats. © David Schrichte.

## Watercraft Collision

The largest cause of human-related manatee mortality in Florida is watercraft collision. Manatee deaths from watercraft are caused by propeller cuts, impact of the boat or a combination of both. However, these injuries are not always lethal. Most manatees have scars or a pattern of scars on their backs or tails after surviving collisions with boats.

## How Boaters Can Help

- Have someone on your boat look out for manatees while you are underway. Give a manatee plenty of room—even if you only see one animal, it is likely traveling with other manatees (possibly even a calf) that you may not see.
- Look for a circular wave pattern left on the surface of the water by the manatee's tail as it swims underwater. These circles are known as “manatee footprints.”
- Try not to pass directly over manatees. Try not to separate mothers and calves.
- Wear polarized sunglasses, which reduce glare and help you see manatees under the water.
- Be aware that manatees in shallow areas will frequently move into the channels when they hear boats approach. Although this behavior provides deeper water for manatees, it may put them in the path of traveling boats.
- Do not provide food and water to manatees, as doing so teaches them to seek out human interaction and brings them into close contact with boats.



"Manatee footprints" are left by the manatee's tail.  
Photo from Mote Marine Laboratory.



Look for manatee noses, backs, and tails. First photo © Kit Curtin.

Manatees may not always detect approaching boats and also may not be able to successfully evade or avoid a boat that is detected. Some circumstances, such as those listed below, can increase the chances of a manatee-boat collision:

- Manatee mothers with calves may not be able to move very quickly.
- When part of a mating herd, manatees are less likely to pay attention to surrounding boat traffic. There is no specific mating season or mating areas; if you see a large group of manatees, it is likely a mating herd.
- If there is a red tide outbreak in the area, manatees may become disoriented, move slower, and be unable to swim normally.
- Manatees experiencing cold stress syndrome may move slower or be unable to swim normally.
- If there are several watercraft in motion at the same time, manatees can become confused. While trying to avoid one boat, they can swim into the path of another.

Manatees average 10-12 feet long and typically weigh 1,200-1,800 pounds.



Keep unwanted plastics, monofilament line, rope, and other fishing gear out of the water by discarding them properly in trash or recycle bins provided at many marinas. These items frequently injure, entangle, and kill manatees.



A monofilament line recycle bin



A manatee is tangled in discarded rope.  
Photo from USGS, SE Ecological Science Center, Sirenia Project.

You will not be cited if you accidentally collide with a manatee while obeying speed restrictions. Please report collisions with manatees, because early rescue efforts may save the manatee's life. In many cases injuries do not kill manatees immediately.

**Call the FWC Wildlife Alert Hotline at  
1-888-404-FWCC (3922)**

**#FWC or \*FWC on cell phone, or text  
Tip@MyFWC.com to report:**

- **Accidental boat strikes to manatees**
- **Injured, distressed or dead manatees**
- **Orphaned baby manatees**
- **Entangled or trapped manatees**
- **Harassment of manatees**
- **Manatees caught in fishing gear**

If you see an entangled or distressed manatee, please do not try rescuing it by yourself. Biologists trained in disentanglement can do so without further injuring the animal. Call the Wildlife Alert Hotline, and a biologist will respond. If possible, please stay with the manatee until the biologist arrives so you can provide more information on the distressed manatee.



Floridians can purchase a specialty "Save the Manatee" license plate from the county tax collector's office. Proceeds directly benefit manatee research and conservation.

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