



Where I work Christin Khan

Photographed by Allison
Henry/NOAA/NEFSC.

I am fortunate to spend many of my work days in a small aeroplane with two other scientists and two pilots searching for North Atlantic right whales (*Eubalaena glacialis*). When we spot one, we fly overhead and photograph it from above. That angle lets us identify individual whales, which is important in a species this rare: there are thought to be only 409 animals left, according to the North Atlantic Right Whale Consortium (NARWC), a data-sharing group.

The aircraft, a De Havilland Twin Otter, is owned by my employer, the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. We need to fly 'low and slow' over the ocean to spot and photograph the whales, so we fly at just 305 metres. The aircraft's design also lets us fly 'slow' at 185 kilometres per hour. The view from the bubble window under the high wing, where I'm peering from in this picture, is phenomenal.

The photos and data we collect become part of a widely used data set that is shared among researchers in the NARWC. And when we find three or more whales together,

outside their protected gathering areas, it triggers a warning for ships to slow down to avoid lethal collisions.

I have never had an emergency in the air, although there have been tragedies in the close-knit right-whale research community. I thought about the risks in 2009, before the birth of my first child. The pandemic has grounded us since 16 March, and I'm having similar thoughts about risk as we talk about resuming aerial surveys. I'm not risking only myself. My exposure could affect my family and my community.

I've devoted my whole career to this species and it's hard to watch them careening towards extinction. I'd rather live life to its fullest and protect these whales from human harm than not take the risk.

Christin Khan is a fishery biologist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration at its Northeast Fisheries Science Center in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. **Interview by Madeline Bodin.**