

THE RETURN OF THE RIGHT WHALES

In June last year an Airforce surveillance flight over the New Zealand subantarctic recorded one of the largest congregations of southern right whales seen anywhere in the world this century. TIM HIGHAM reports on the fall and rise of one of the world's rarest whales.

FROM THE ANDOVER plane above the Auckland Islands observers spotted 50 whales in the harbour of Port Ross. Others were seen in the island's eastern bays and fiords – a total of 70 including seven calves.

Unusually clear and calm conditions made the historic flight possible, the only mid-winter census since coast watchers occupied Auckland Island during World War II and the Hardwicke whaling and farming settlement of 1849-52. Only

several whales were recorded during these periods of earlier occupation.

Two months later, in August, I flew over the Auckland Islands in conditions more typical of the subantarctic winter. Gale-force westerlies caused the Airforce Orion to shudder violently as it banked to low altitude around Enderby Island. Despite uncertain footing in the crowded cockpit and squalls whipping the sea surface we managed to make out the distinctive broad backs of numerous right whales still in Port Ross. Thanks to the



Head of a right whale in Te Waewae Bay, Southland. Scientists have developed techniques which enable individual whales to be identified by the pattern of callosities on their heads. These naturally occurring markings are raised patches of whitish, rough skin infested with whale lice, parasitic worms and barnacles. The size, positioning and shape of the markings can be identified in photographs taken from a small plane or helicopter and have enabled scientists to build up an identity record similar to that of thumb-prints in humans.

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