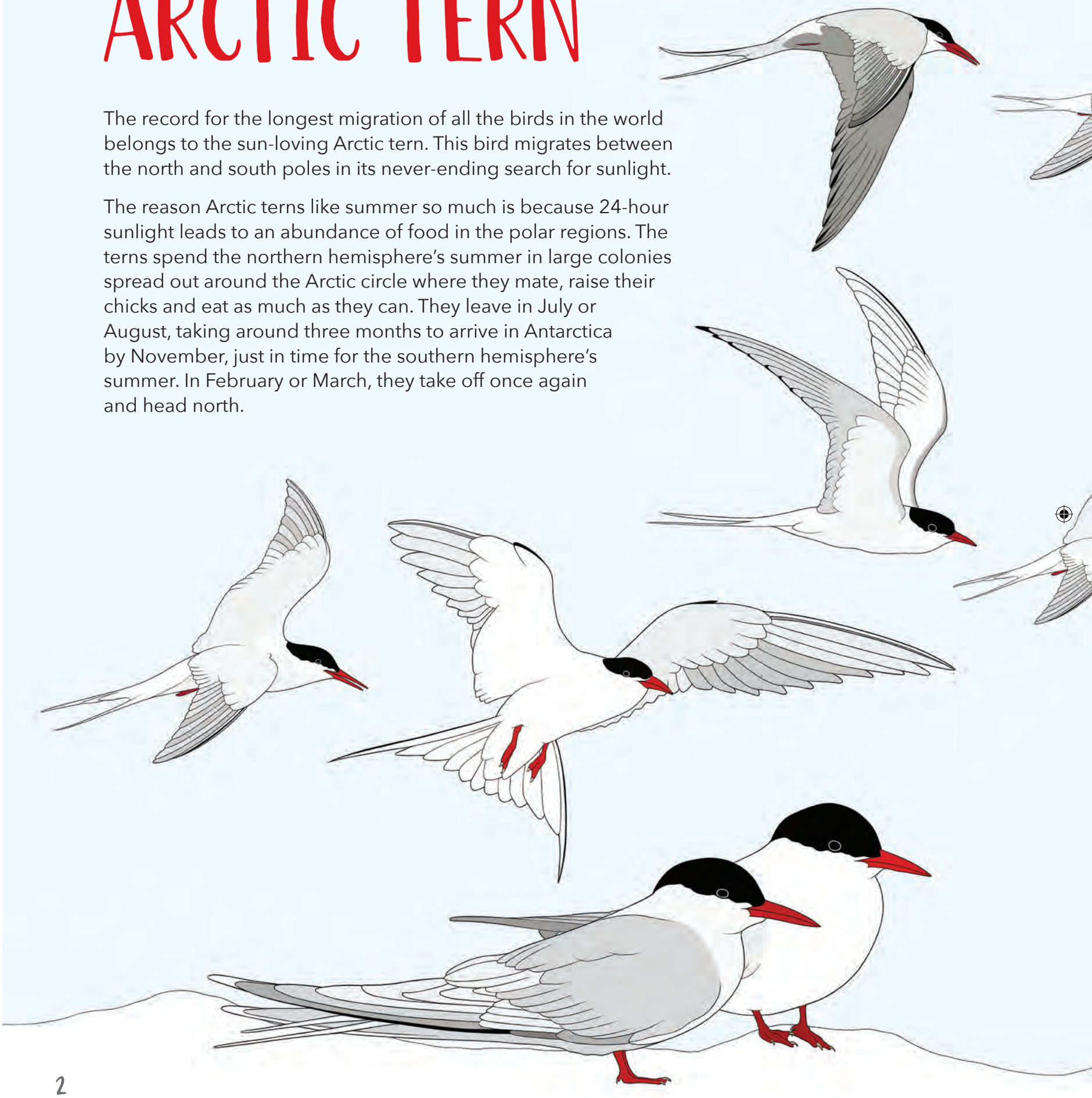
ARCTIC TERN

The record for the longest migration of all the birds in the world belongs to the sun-loving Arctic tern. This bird migrates between the north and south poles in its never-ending search for sunlight.

The reason Arctic terns like summer so much is because 24-hour sunlight leads to an abundance of food in the polar regions. The terns spend the northern hemisphere's summer in large colonies spread out around the Arctic circle where they mate, raise their chicks and eat as much as they can. They leave in July or August, taking around three months to arrive in Antarctica by November, just in time for the southern hemisphere's summer. In February or March, they take off once again and head north.



As a result of its epic annual journey, the Arctic tern may experience more daylight than any other creature on Earth.

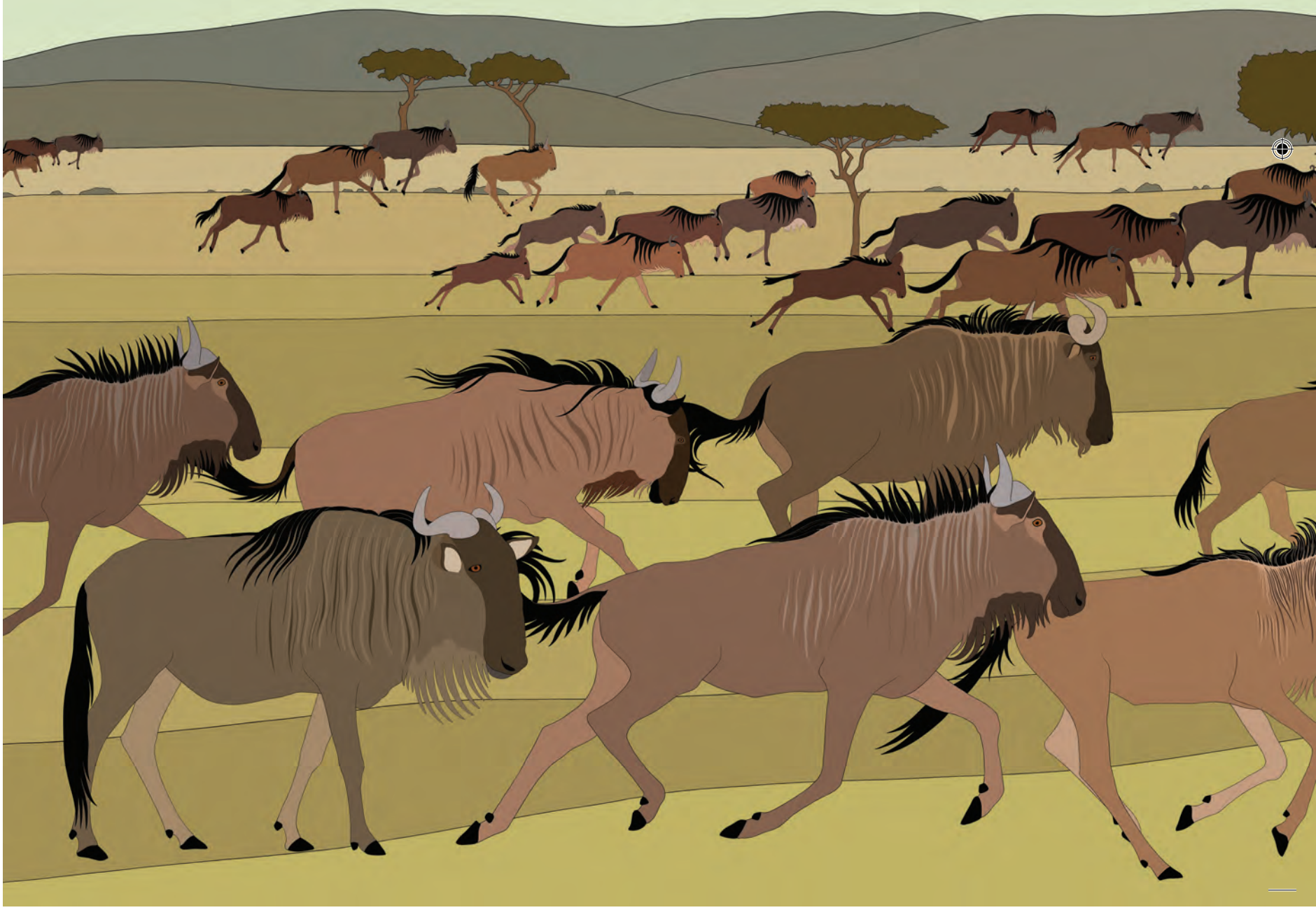
The small Arctic tern is perfectly built for this extreme lifestyle. They are about 30 centimetres long, with narrow wings and short bodies, which make them very light. This lightness helps them take advantage of the ocean breezes, gliding long distances without having to use energy flapping their wings. They can even sleep and eat while gliding effortlessly through the skies.

Arctic terns cover a distance of around 30 000 kilometres with every round-trip migration, but because they don't fly in a straight line they can actually fly as much as 90 000 kilometres in a year. A true wanderer, these elegant terns are one of only a few animals on the planet that can be seen on every continent.

WILDEBEEST

Wildebeest, or gnu, are an antelope species with large heads and curved horns. Between December and April, they are found across the southern plains of the Serengeti National Park in Tanzania, East Africa, where they give birth to their calves. Around half a million calves are born each year.

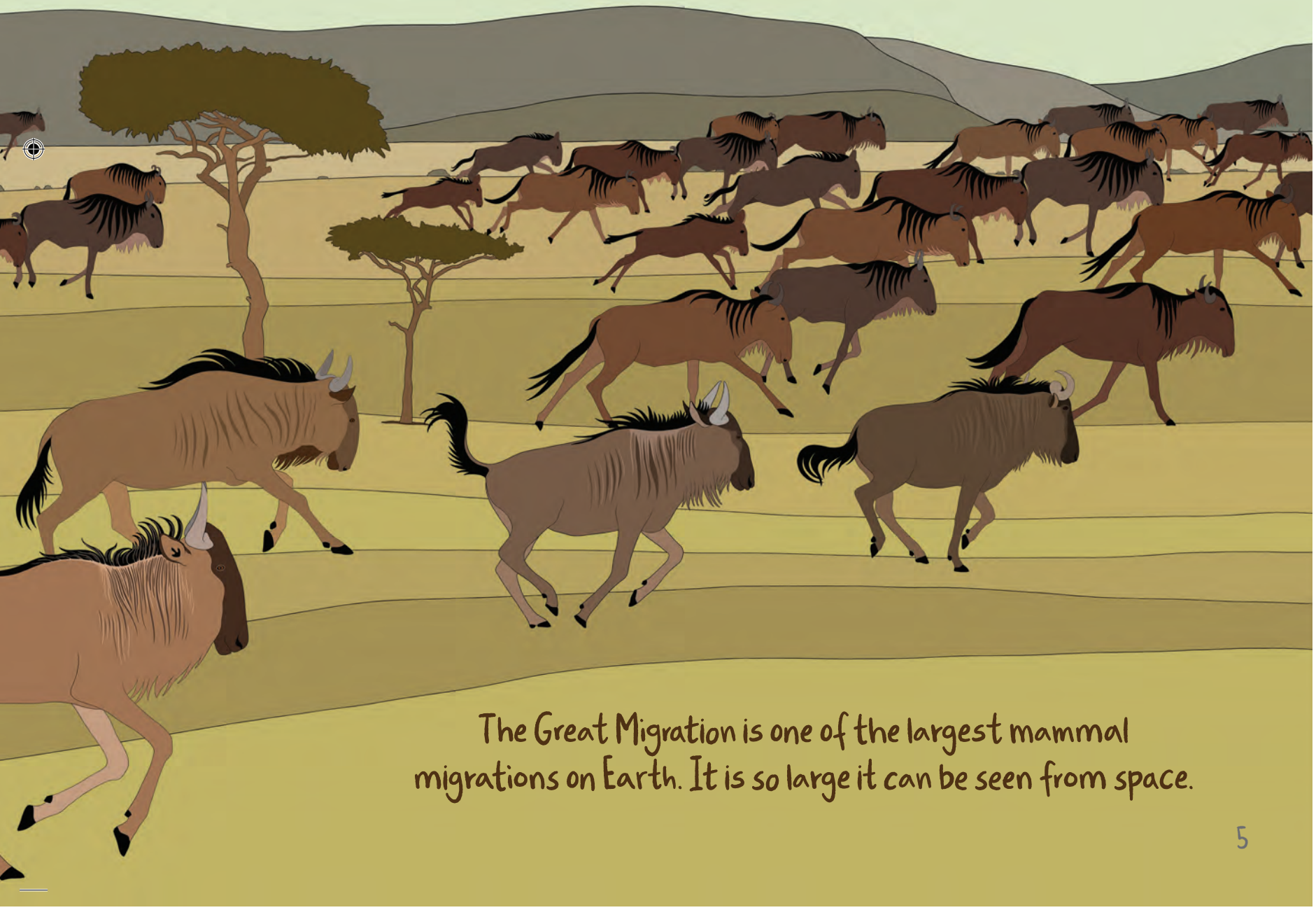
In May or June, when the rainy season ends, the wildebeest gather and begin to move north on the hunt for fresh grass and water. About 1.5 million wildebeest make up the herd, and they are joined by several other animals, such as zebras and gazelles. Together, they follow an enormous clockwise circuit hundreds of kilometres long known as the Great Migration.



The yearly journey is packed with danger. The large size of the herd provides some safety, but thousands of wildebeest still die. Any struggling members of the herd, often the very young or very old, are targeted by predators such as lions or hyenas.

By July, the herd meets its biggest obstacle: the crocodile-infested Mara River. This crossing can be as spectacular as it is risky, as the wildebeest attempt to cross the gushing water in panic and confusion. Many wildebeest are lost to the choppy waters, fall victim to the hungry crocodiles or are taken by the lions that patrol the riverbanks, looking out for an easy meal of injured, weak or slow animals.

Around September, the herd heads east and must face the Mara River once more on their circular journey. They turn south in November, returning to plains full of fresh grasses, ready for another season of feeding and birthing.

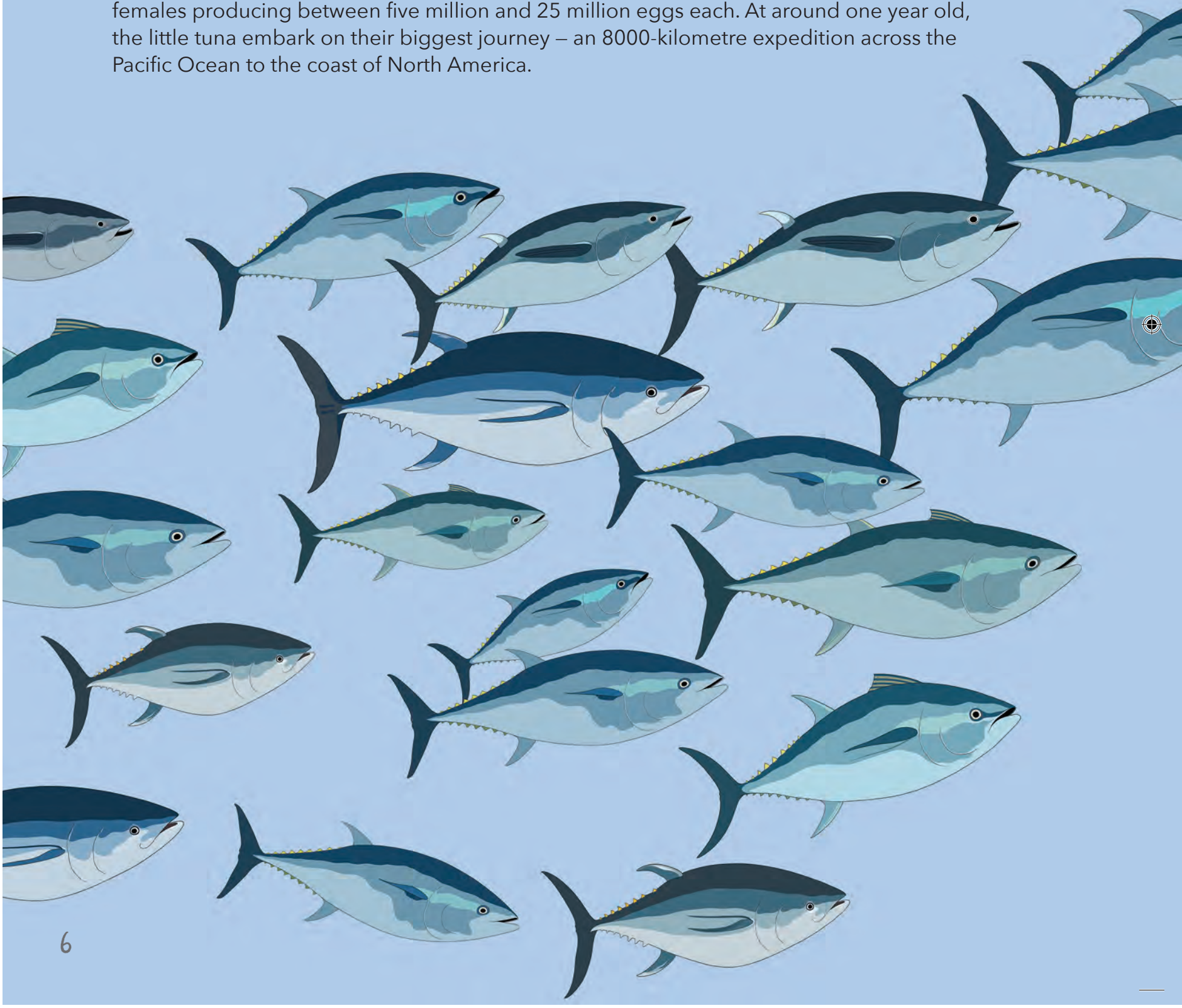


The Great Migration is one of the largest mammal migrations on Earth. It is so large it can be seen from space.

PACIFIC BLUEFIN TUNA

The large, aggressive Pacific bluefin tuna usually grows to around 1.5 metres long and weighs around 60 kilograms, though much larger ones have been seen. The largest reported Pacific bluefin was three metres long and a whopping 450 kilograms!

Pacific bluefins spawn in the Sea of Japan or the north-western Philippine Sea, with the females producing between five million and 25 million eggs each. At around one year old, the little tuna embark on their biggest journey – an 8000-kilometre expedition across the Pacific Ocean to the coast of North America.



The journey is a long way for a young fish, but the tuna are super-fast – shaped for speed, they tuck in their fins and zip through the water at speeds of over 65 kilometres per hour.

Tuna are one of only a few warm-blooded fish, which means they can cope with the icy cold waters in the north Pacific Ocean just as well as the tropical waters of Mexico.

Once they reach the coast, the tuna will spend several years travelling up and down the coasts of Mexico and California, eating as much as they can and growing into the large predators they were born to be. At around seven years old, the tuna are fully grown. They cross the ocean again, returning to the region where they were born in order to reproduce.

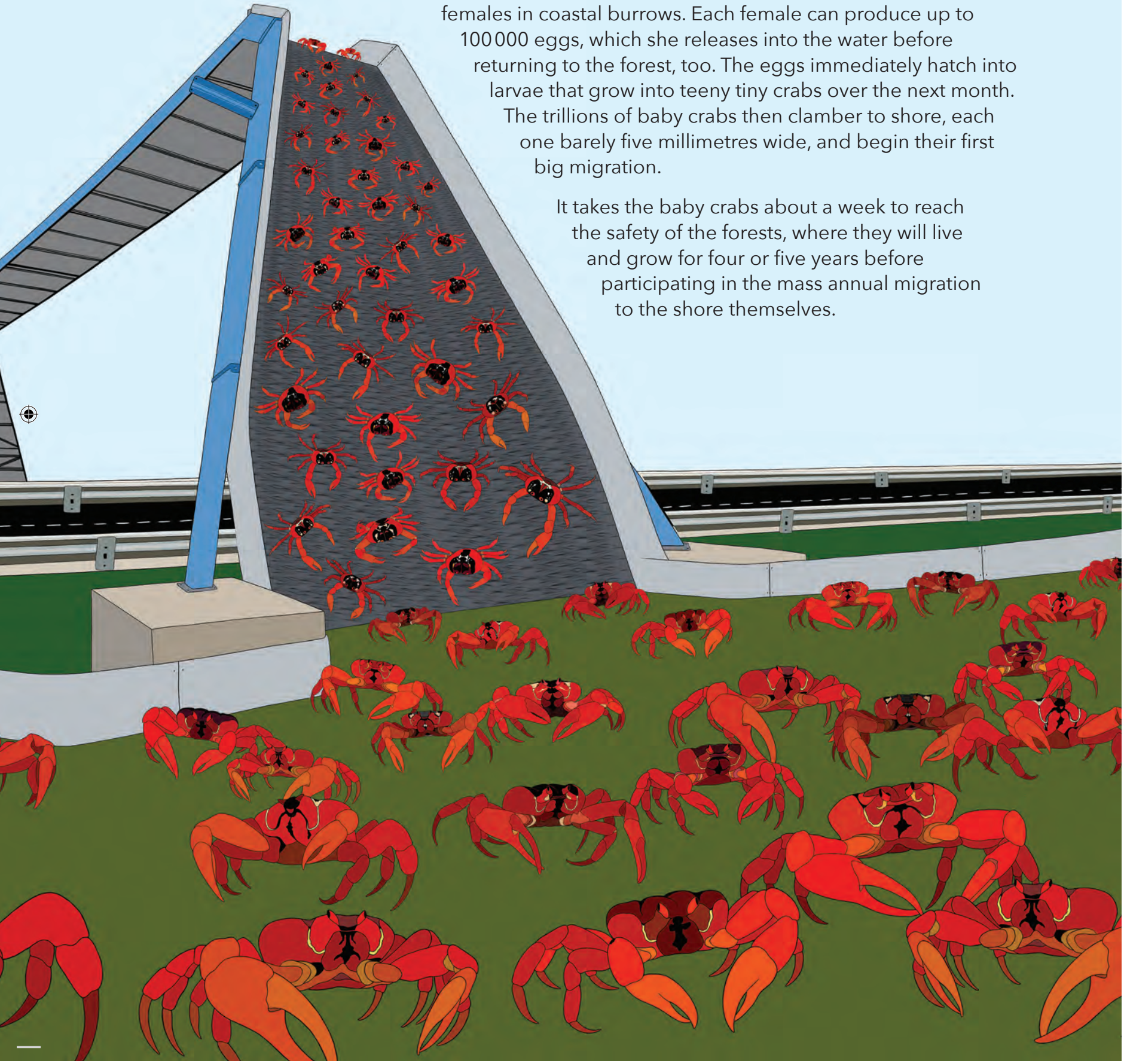
After these two big migrations from one side of the Pacific Ocean to the other, the tuna tend to roam the western Pacific for the rest of their lives.

CHRISTMAS ISLAND RED CRAB

One of the most incredible migrations on Earth belongs to the Christmas Island red crab. Christmas Island sits in the Indian Ocean about 380 kilometres south of Java, Indonesia. Once a year, millions of red crabs emerge from the island's forests in a synchronised swarm, marching for the shore with unstoppable determination.

These bright-coloured crabs, whose bodies grow to about 12 centimetres wide, dislike sunlight and spend most of their lives tucked away in burrows deep in the forests. Around October or November, the first rain of the wet season prompts the crabs' migration to the ocean to mate and spawn.

It's a dangerous journey for the crabs, so local communities have built crab bridges and tunnels, and sometimes even close roads, to help them safely reach the ocean.



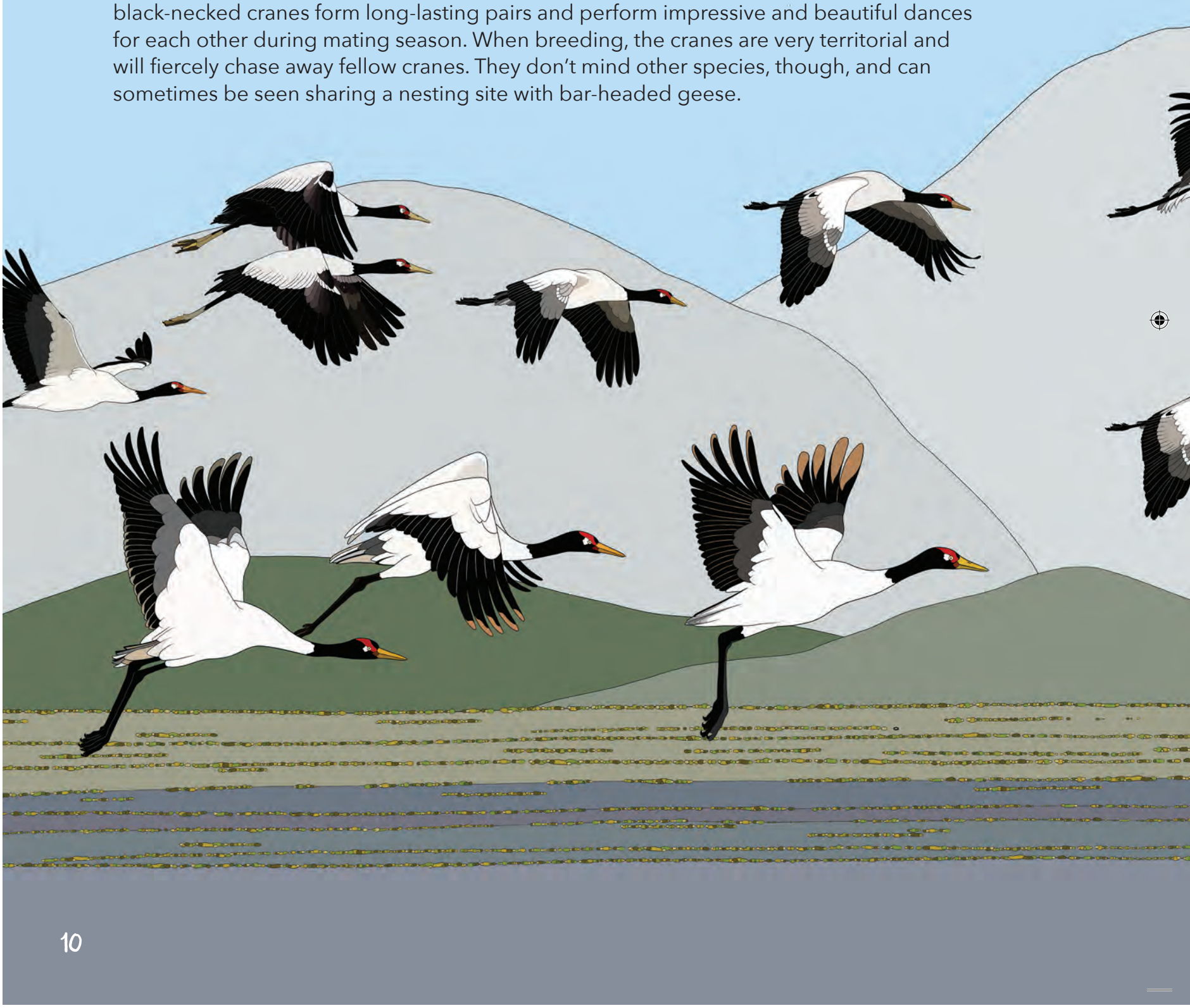
After mating, the males head back to the forests, leaving the females in coastal burrows. Each female can produce up to 100 000 eggs, which she releases into the water before returning to the forest, too. The eggs immediately hatch into larvae that grow into teeny tiny crabs over the next month. The trillions of baby crabs then clamber to shore, each one barely five millimetres wide, and begin their first big migration.

It takes the baby crabs about a week to reach the safety of the forests, where they will live and grow for four or five years before participating in the mass annual migration to the shore themselves.

BLACK-NECKED CRANE

The elegant and endangered black-necked crane is the world's only alpine crane species. Like their alpine goose friends the bar-headed geese (on page 24), black-necked cranes can fly at very high altitudes, allowing them to soar over the Himalayas when migrating.

In summer, they are found in wetlands high in the Himalayas. Like many crane species, black-necked cranes form long-lasting pairs and perform impressive and beautiful dances for each other during mating season. When breeding, the cranes are very territorial and will fiercely chase away fellow cranes. They don't mind other species, though, and can sometimes be seen sharing a nesting site with bar-headed geese.



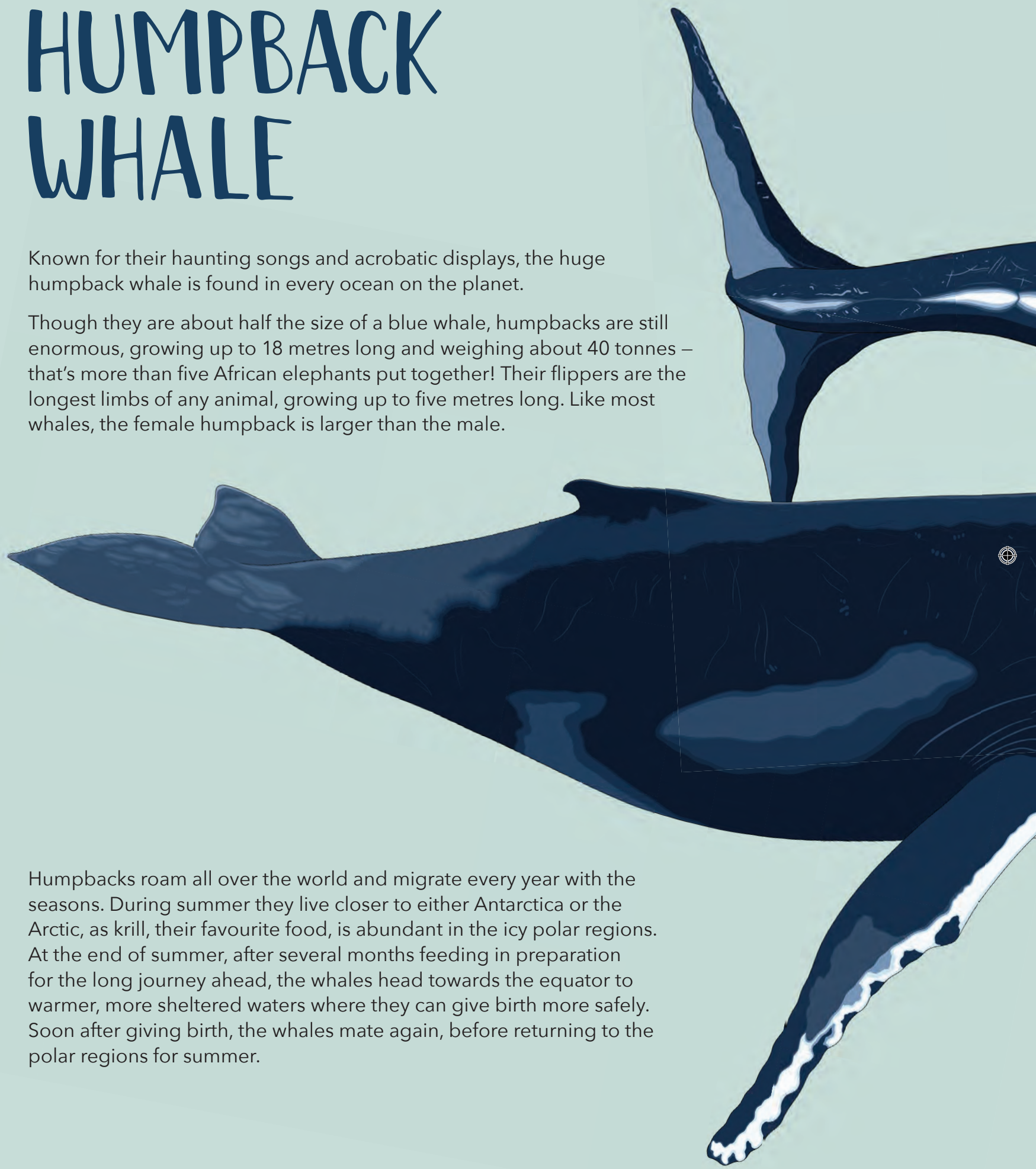
Every year as the weather cools in October, 10 000 black-necked cranes migrate south to spend the winter in sheltered valleys at lower altitudes. Most of the population stays close to the Himalayan mountains, but a few adventurous cranes fly further, wintering in Bhutan, India and even as far away as Vietnam. Their return trip to the northern nesting grounds in late March takes up to a week.

One particular flock of black-necked cranes announces its arrival and departure in Bhutan by looping over the Gangtey Monastery three times every single year!

HUMPBACK WHALE

Known for their haunting songs and acrobatic displays, the huge humpback whale is found in every ocean on the planet.

Though they are about half the size of a blue whale, humpbacks are still enormous, growing up to 18 metres long and weighing about 40 tonnes – that's more than five African elephants put together! Their flippers are the longest limbs of any animal, growing up to five metres long. Like most whales, the female humpback is larger than the male.



Humpbacks roam all over the world and migrate every year with the seasons. During summer they live closer to either Antarctica or the Arctic, as krill, their favourite food, is abundant in the icy polar regions. At the end of summer, after several months feeding in preparation for the long journey ahead, the whales head towards the equator to warmer, more sheltered waters where they can give birth more safely. Soon after giving birth, the whales mate again, before returning to the polar regions for summer.