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see how we live

Penguins

and other polar animals



 Orpheus

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Polar animals

Now why would any animal choose to live in the icy wastes and freezing waters near the Poles? Because during the summer months the oceans are full of tiny plants and animals. Fish and other sea creatures feed on them, and that's good news for us: penguins, other birds, seals, walruses and polar bears.

How do penguins survive the cold?

I have to survive in much colder conditions than you humans do. Luckily, my body fat and thick coat of feathers keep me warm—even in the freezing water.

I have four layers of feathers. They trap air inside them which helps to keep the warmth in. My outer feathers are oily. The oil makes them waterproof, so I can stay warm when I swim.

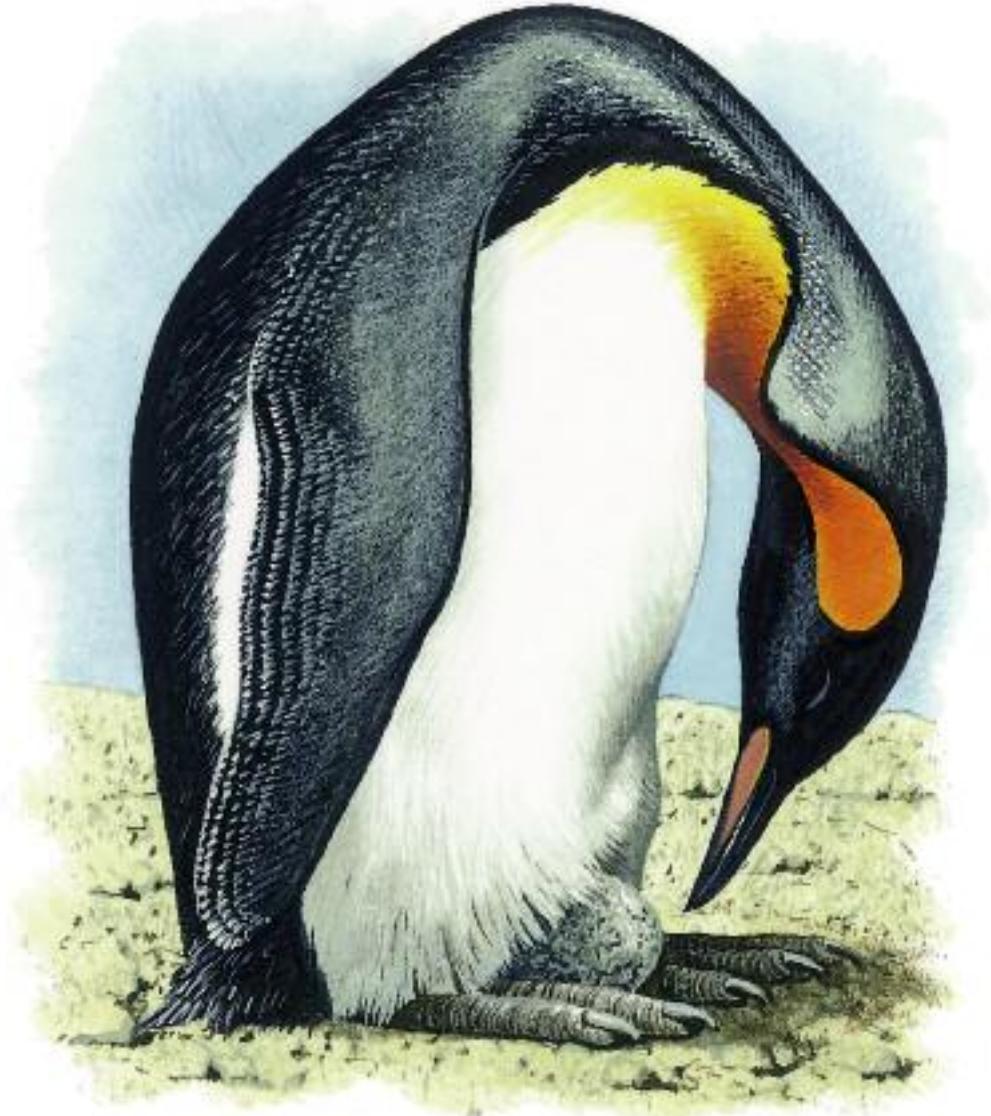
I'm a king penguin. Like all penguins, I can't fly. Instead, I use my strong wings as flippers to push my body through the water.

I'll dive down 300 metres to catch fish. That's 100 times deeper than the deep end of a swimming pool! When I am swimming I build up speed then leap out of the water to breathe.

I can hold my breath underwater for seven minutes. This gives me more time to catch my favourite food: fish and squid.



I eat fish head first because they are easier to swallow that way. When I was a chick, my parents swallowed them, then sicked them back up for me.



While I was inside my egg, my dad kept me warm under a special flap of feathers. When I was a week old, I had already grown soft, brown feathers. But if I had stood on the ice I would have quickly frozen to death. So I stayed on my dad's feet.





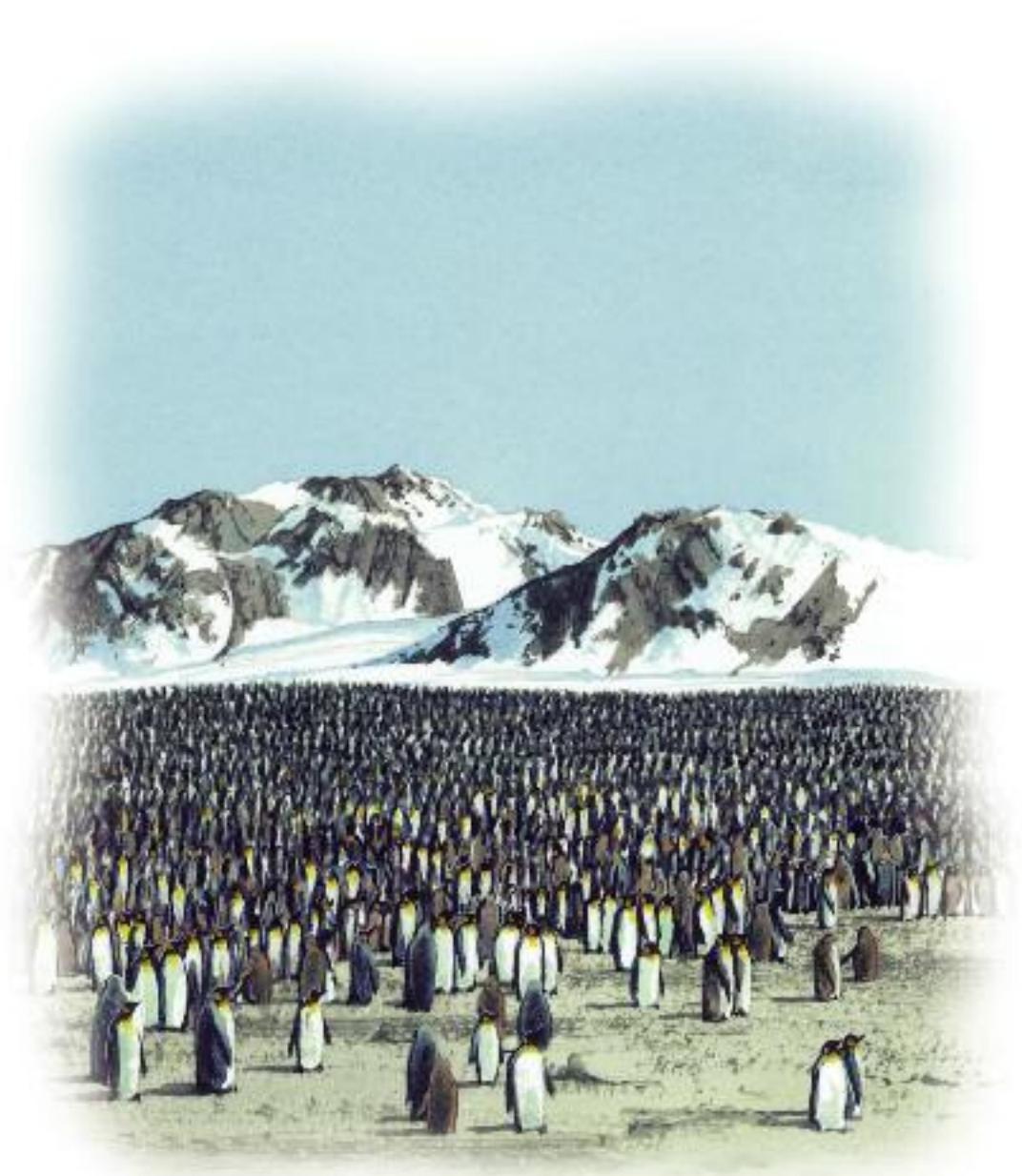
At two months old, my feathers thickened and grew fuzzy. While our parents were out hunting, we chicks huddled together to keep warm.



By the time I was 10 months old, I had built up a thick layer of fat called blubber. This stored food kept me warm. I didn't need to eat so often as when I was a young chick.

Penguins live only in the southern hemisphere. We king penguins live on islands close to Antarctica. We gather in huge groups called rookeries. There are thousands of us in each rookery. We can all keep each other warm! We also feel safer from predators such as leopard seals and killer whales. So long as we keep away from them, we can live for about 15 or 20 years.

The rookery is an ideal place for us to find a mate. The males give out a special call to try and attract females. They also do a kind of dance, or courtship display.

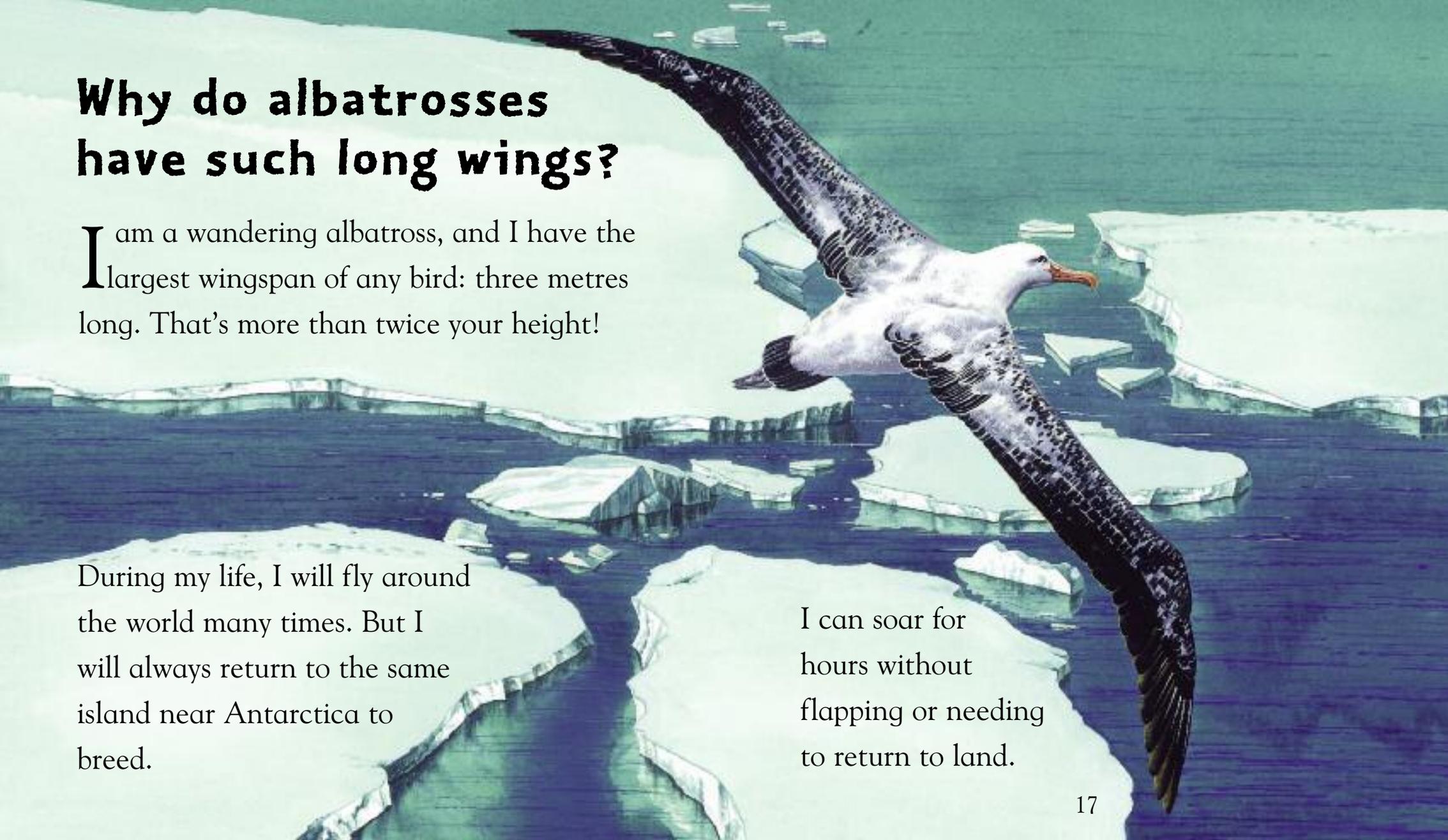


Why do albatrosses have such long wings?

I am a wandering albatross, and I have the largest wingspan of any bird: three metres long. That's more than twice your height!

During my life, I will fly around the world many times. But I will always return to the same island near Antarctica to breed.

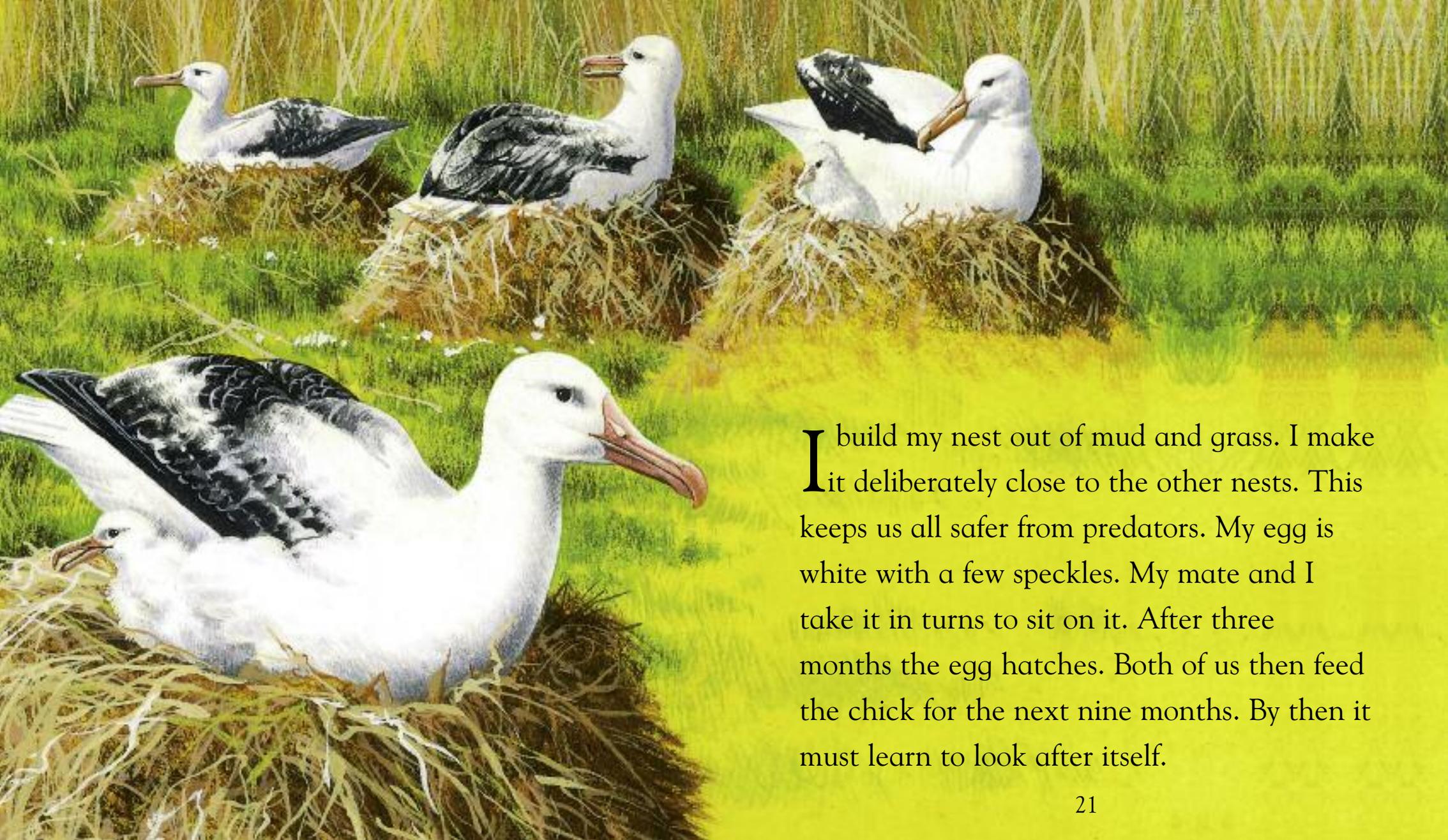
I can soar for hours without flapping or needing to return to land.



I start to look for a mate when I am about seven. To impress each other we do a special dance.

We pair for life. This can be for up to 80 years. Every other year I will lay a single egg.





I build my nest out of mud and grass. I make it deliberately close to the other nests. This keeps us all safer from predators. My egg is white with a few speckles. My mate and I take it in turns to sit on it. After three months the egg hatches. Both of us then feed the chick for the next nine months. By then it must learn to look after itself.

My favourite foods are squid, octopus and fish. I catch them by flying low over the water and scooping them up into my beak. I must be careful not to eat too much, otherwise I get too heavy to fly! I rest on the sea for a while, until I am ready to take to the air once again.



I often follow ships so I can feed on the scraps thrown over the side. But I have to be wary. Some fishing boats use bait on long lines. If I go after it I could get pulled underwater. Quite a few of us drown like this each year.

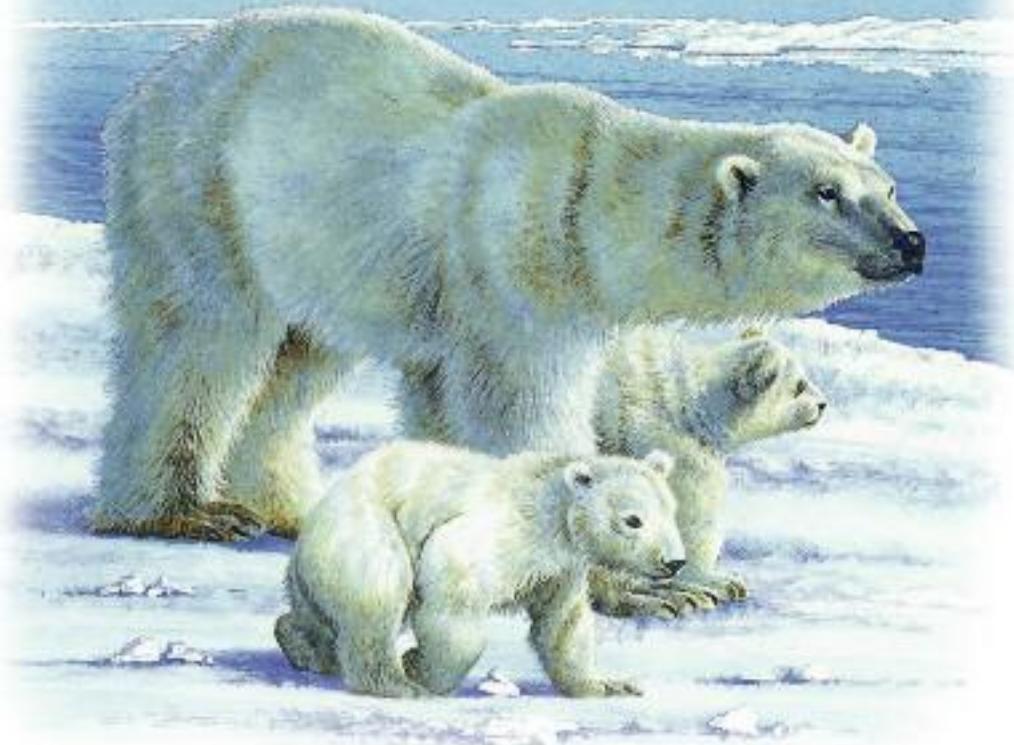
How does a polar bear hunt?

I go hunting on the ice in the Arctic Ocean. My excellent sense of smell helps me to catch tasty seals for my supper. I use it to sniff out a breathing hole in the ice. (When a seal breathes out, I can smell its breath from more than a kilometre away.)

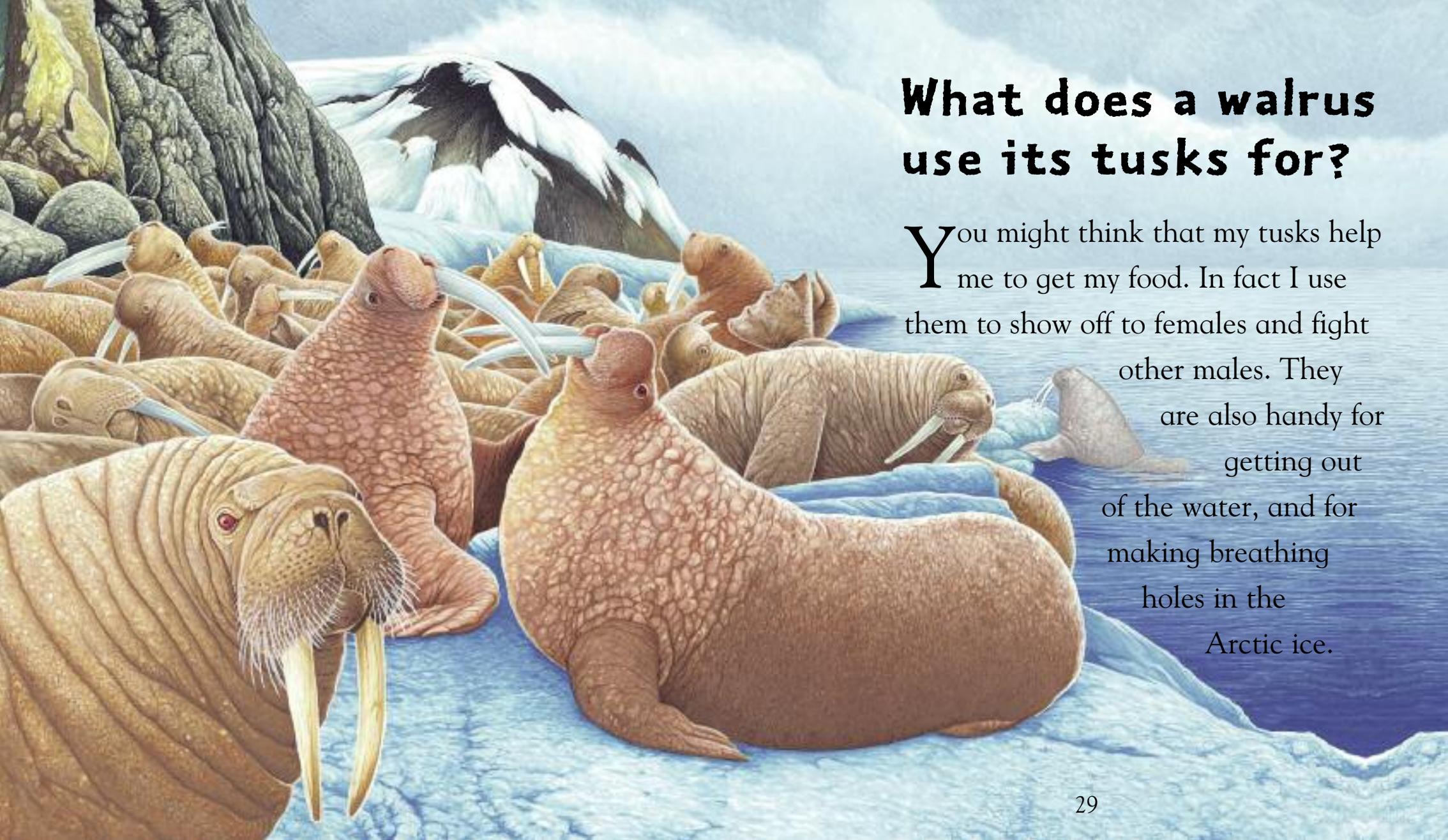
I crouch near the hole in silence, waiting for the seal to appear. Then, quick as a flash, I grab it with my paw and pull it out on to the ice. One bite to the head and it's a goner. I either eat it there and then, or drag it home to share with my hungry family.



My young love the delicious red meat of the seal. I prefer the skin and blubber. After eating, we wash ourselves in the water or snow.



Unlike the brown bear, I do not hibernate. But when I am pregnant I need to have a long rest. Through the summer, I eat lots of food. When autumn comes, I dig a den in the snow where I stay for the whole winter. I don't sleep all the time, but my heartbeat slows down a lot. When my cubs are born, they stay in my den with me until spring comes.



What does a walrus use its tusks for?

You might think that my tusks help me to get my food. In fact I use them to show off to females and fight other males. They are also handy for getting out of the water, and for making breathing holes in the Arctic ice.

