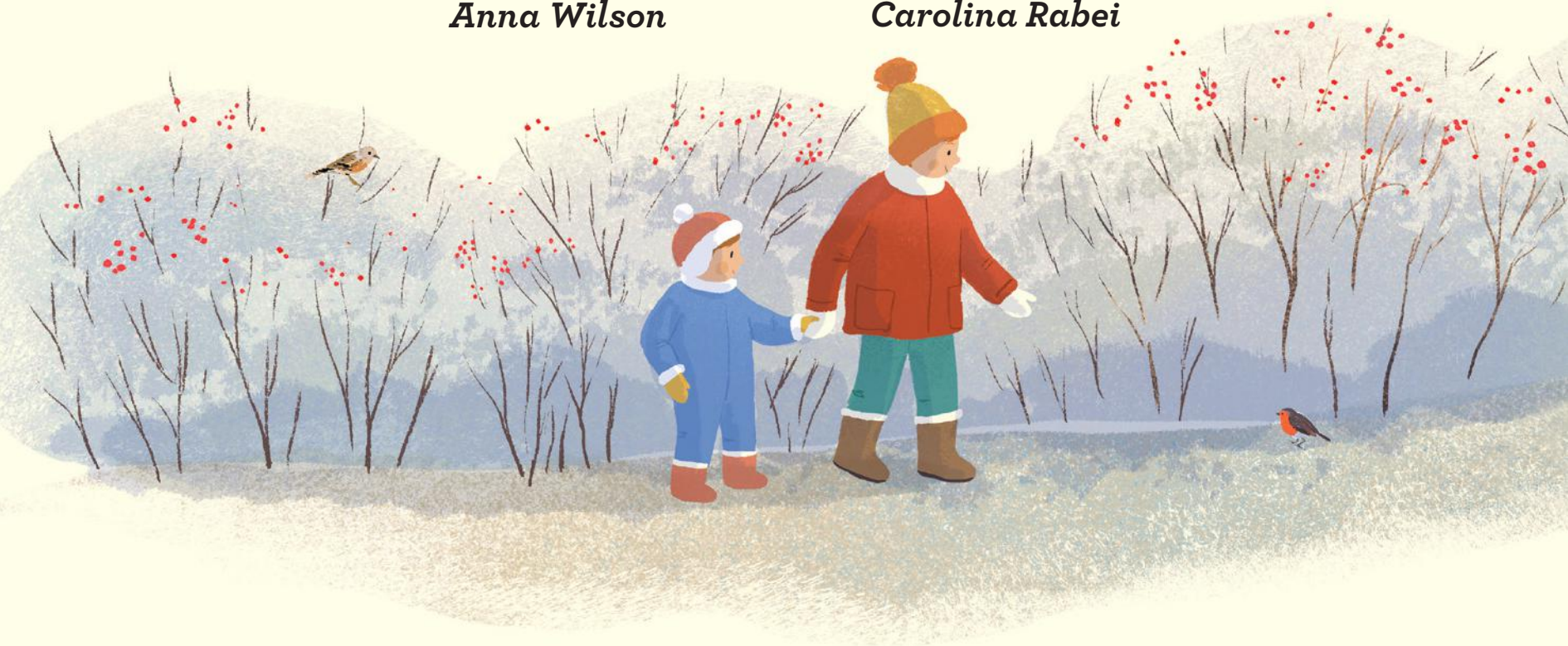


A STORY OF THE SEASONS

Written by
Anna Wilson

Illustrated by
Carolina Rabei



To Cat, who has walked and swum
with me through all seasons.
A.W.

To my aunt Dorina and uncle Pavel,
with gratitude for nurturing my passion
for drawing since I was a small child.
C.R.



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INTRODUCTION

The natural world is always changing – which means there are always new things to discover when you are out and about! In this book you'll explore eight different habitats throughout the four seasons, including city parks, woodland, rivers, the coast and the mountains.

You'll see how the habitats change through spring, summer, autumn and winter. In each habitat there are many surprising things to find out about. You'll see how animals sometimes change their appearance to keep themselves safe, or even to keep themselves warmer in winter or cooler in summer!

You'll discover the life cycles of eels, seals and puffins, find out why some animals hibernate and learn how bees know where to find the best pollen. You might recognise some of the plants and animals – see if you can spot them when you are out on a walk.

Wherever you live, take a moment to look and listen at different points during the year. There's so much going on – even in winter when we think the world is quieter. In fact, there's a whole story to discover in every season!

IN THIS BOOK, YOU WILL EXPLORE EIGHT DIFFERENT HABITATS THROUGH THE SEASONS:



Woods



Pond



Meadow



Hedgerow



Park



River



Mountains



Coast



Spring IN THE WOODS

If you go down to the woods today, you might get a big surprise! After a long, cold winter it can sometimes feel as though spring arrives overnight. One minute the wind is howling and you have to wear big coats, gloves and hats to go outside; the next, the sun is so warm that it seems like a summer's day. And the flowers, trees and wildlife seem to be thinking the same thing . . .

Flowers

Look at all the colour on the woodland floor! Wild daffodils are popping out of the ground. The pretty white flowers of wild garlic plants are blooming under the canopy of trees.

In among the bigger flowers, you can find tiny, common dog violets, dainty white greater stitchwort and pink herb-robert.

Can you spot the blossom on the blackthorn? The buds on the bigger trees are getting fatter as well, ready to burst into fresh new leaves.

Birds

The birds are much noisier now than they were in winter. They are busy building nests and singing to defend their territories and attract mates. Soon they'll be laying eggs and hatching chicks.

Once their chicks hatch, the birds will still be very busy as they need to gather enough insects and grubs to feed their young. But luckily, now that the weather is warmer, there is a lot more food to be found here.

Fresh food

All this new plant life attracts more animal life! The buds and fresh leaves provide food for small rodents, such as mice and voles. Deer like to nibble on fresh roots and shoots.



Summer ON THE RIVER

A river estuary next to the sea is a fascinating place to visit, because each time you come, it might look completely different! You might arrive at low tide one day in winter and find a sea of mud rather than water. But look at this estuary on this bright summer evening as the tide comes in. The water is shimmering in the sunshine while flocks of wading birds are flying overhead like fast-moving clouds.

Look out for big ducks with red bills called shelducks, and you might spot a bright white egret or two. Shorter-legged wading birds walk along the shallow edges of the water, looking for food.

Where the river meets the sea
The estuary is a special place where freshwater from upstream flows down to meet salty sea water.

These two different kinds of water do not mix easily. Often the freshwater floats on top of the denser salty water. This means that there is a vast range of creatures and birds in this habitat, as some prefer the freshwater and some like the sea water.

For example, some creatures migrate through estuaries – eels move downstream from the river out into the sea to have their babies, while salmon travel the other way, moving inland from the cold North Sea to go back to the places in the river where they lay their eggs.

There are also millions of worms and tiny shellfish hiding in the mud and water!

Estuary birds

Big flocks of birds stop to feed in estuaries while they are migrating too. This makes the estuary a brilliant place for birdwatching. Look at how easy it is to spot the birds while they wade in the water, looking for shellfish to eat. There is very little plant life in which to hide or shelter, so the birds can be seen clearly. Be careful not to disturb them while they feed, though!

Brilliant bills

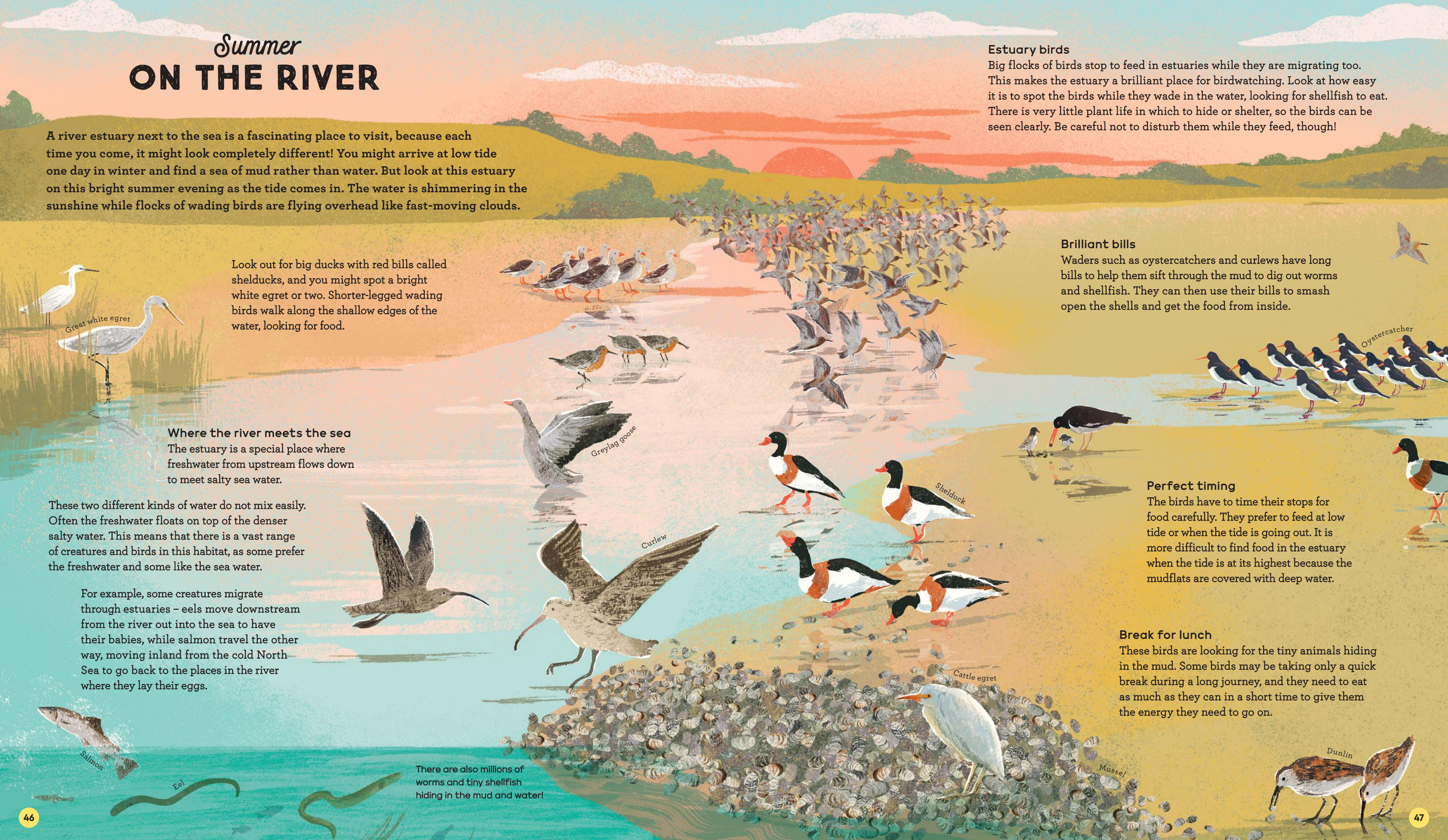
Waders such as oystercatchers and curlews have long bills to help them sift through the mud to dig out worms and shellfish. They can then use their bills to smash open the shells and get the food from inside.

Perfect timing

The birds have to time their stops for food carefully. They prefer to feed at low tide or when the tide is going out. It is more difficult to find food in the estuary when the tide is at its highest because the mudflats are covered with deep water.

Break for lunch

These birds are looking for the tiny animals hiding in the mud. Some birds may be taking only a quick break during a long journey, and they need to eat as much as they can in a short time to give them the energy they need to go on.



Autumn IN THE HEDGEROW

HEDGEHOGS

These amazing mammals are famous for their coat of sharp spines. When in danger or going to sleep, they can curl into a tight prickly ball, protecting themselves from attack by predators. They are called hedgehogs because they are often found living in hedges, and can make a grunting or snorting sound a bit like a pig!

Hedgehogs are nocturnal animals, which means they are mostly awake at night rather than during the day. They can travel up to two kilometres in a night, looking for food. It is important that they are able to roam like this, so if you have a garden fence or hedge, you can help hedgehogs by making sure there are gaps for them to pass through! It's also better for hedgehogs if gardens and parks are not kept too tidy, as they prefer scrubby undergrowth in which to hide and make their nests.

The population of hedgehogs has been declining for a while. In the 1950s, there were as many as 30 million hedgehogs in Britain, but now there may be fewer than a million.

A year in the life of a hedgehog:



JANUARY AND FEBRUARY: Most hedgehogs will be hibernating (page 110). They may wake up from time to time, but they will stay quiet and still unless they are disturbed or if the weather suddenly turns much warmer.

MARCH: Hedgehogs begin to come out of hibernation. They will have lost about one third of their body weight while resting, so they will be extremely thirsty and hungry. This is a good time to look out for them as they start to search for food.



APRIL: They are out and about, hunting for slugs, beetles, earwigs, caterpillars, earthworms, millipedes and other invertebrates to eat to build up the body fat they lost over the winter. They will also be looking for good places to build their nests, such as under thick brambles or hedges, in log piles or even in garden sheds!



MAY: This is the month for mating, so you might hear lots of hedgehogs snuffling and grunting at night! Males circle around a female, trying to persuade her to mate. This dance can go on for hours! After mating, the male goes away from the female's nest – he doesn't stay to help look after the babies.



JUNE: The female has her babies after about four weeks. She normally has a litter of up to six or seven hoglets, which she feeds with her milk in the nest while they are too small to survive on their own. When they are first born, their spines aren't prickly, but very short and soft!

JULY: After three or four weeks, once the hoglets have opened their eyes, and their spines are much harder, sharper and longer, they can safely go out with their mother to look for food – although they are still drinking her milk as well.



AUGUST: The hoglets start to explore on their own. Hedgehogs don't live in groups, so once they have left the nest they don't stay with their brothers and sisters.

SEPTEMBER: Some older females may have mated for a second time. If so, they will be looking after a second litter of hoglets now.



OCTOBER: As the weather begins to get colder, adult hedgehogs eat as much as possible to build up their body fat and give them a store of energy for hibernation. They also start to build nests for hibernation, too.

NOVEMBER AND DECEMBER: Most hedgehogs begin hibernating. They will normally stay tucked up in their nests until March, when the hedgehog year begins again.



Autumn ON THE COAST SEALS

There are two types of seal in the seas around the UK: the grey seal and the common seal. But the grey seal is actually the most common, just to be confusing! There are about 110,000 grey seals in UK waters, compared with only 33,400 common seals. Autumn is a fantastic time to spot seals along our coastline.

An easy way to tell a grey seal and a common seal apart is by looking at their nose, or snout. Grey seals have longer snouts than common seals. In Latin, grey seals are known as *Halichoerus grypus* which means 'hook-nosed sea pig'! Common seals have rounder faces than grey seals and their snout is more dog-like, with V-shaped nostrils.

Grey seal

The grey seal is larger than the common seal and can weigh up to 200 kilograms – that's the same weight as a small car! The male seals are bigger than the female seals, but they don't live as long. Females can live for 30–40 years, whereas males usually only live up to 25 years.

Over 60 per cent of a grey seal's time is spent at sea hunting for crabs, lobsters, fish and squid. After they have eaten, they come back to the shore and lie on the beach, waiting while their food digests.

Even though grey seals form groups (called 'colonies'), they are not very sociable animals and stay away from each other until the breeding season begins.



The largest male seals – which are over 10 years old – will compete with other males to breed with groups of females. Occasionally, males fight each other. Look closely and you might see deep scars on their necks from these battles.

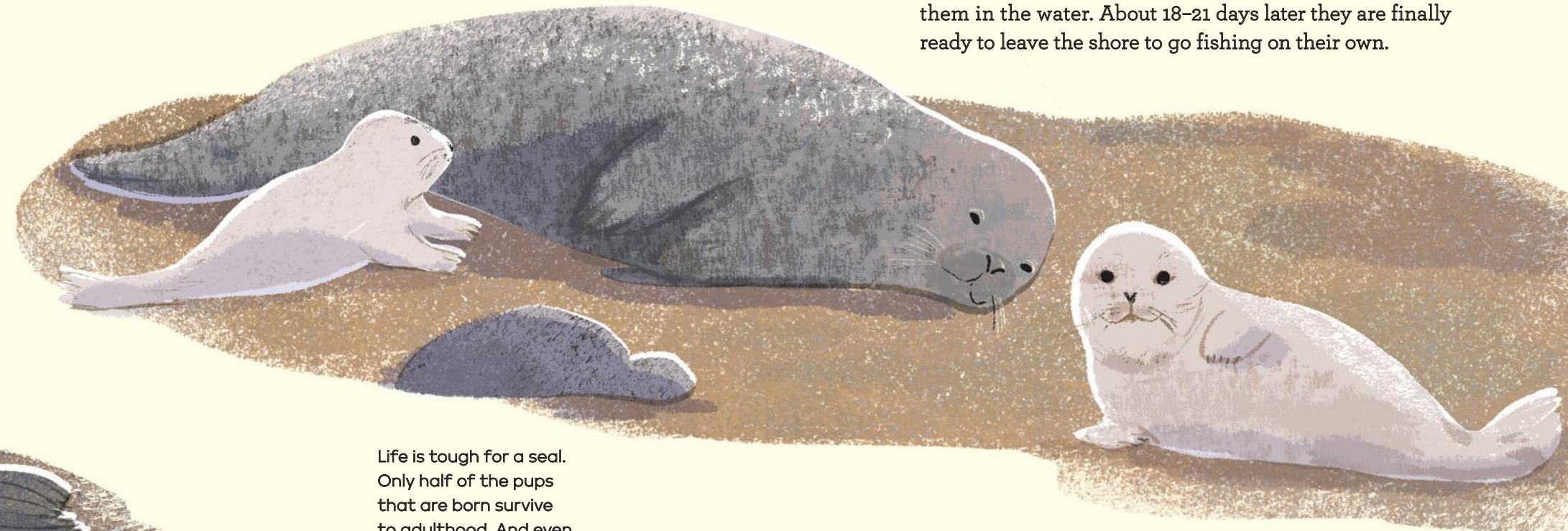
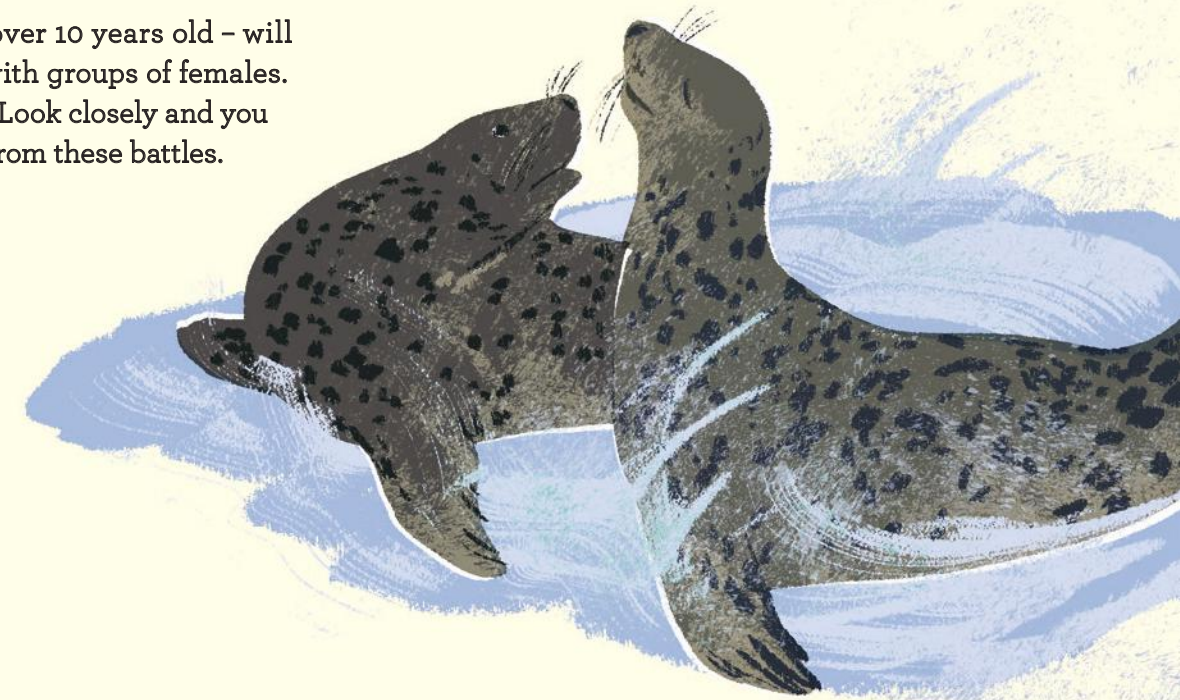
Every autumn, around mid-September, the seals go back to the same breeding sites to mate. Between December and February, the female seals drag themselves ashore again to give birth on rocky outcrops and in coves around the western Atlantic Ocean. The pups are born with fluffy white fur coats and weigh around 14 kilograms at birth – about the same as a cocker spaniel.

At first, the pups need protection. They stay on land with their mothers, drinking milk until they have trebled their body weight, to about 50 kilograms. Once the pups are big enough to survive on their own, the female seals leave them and mate again, before returning to the sea to find food.

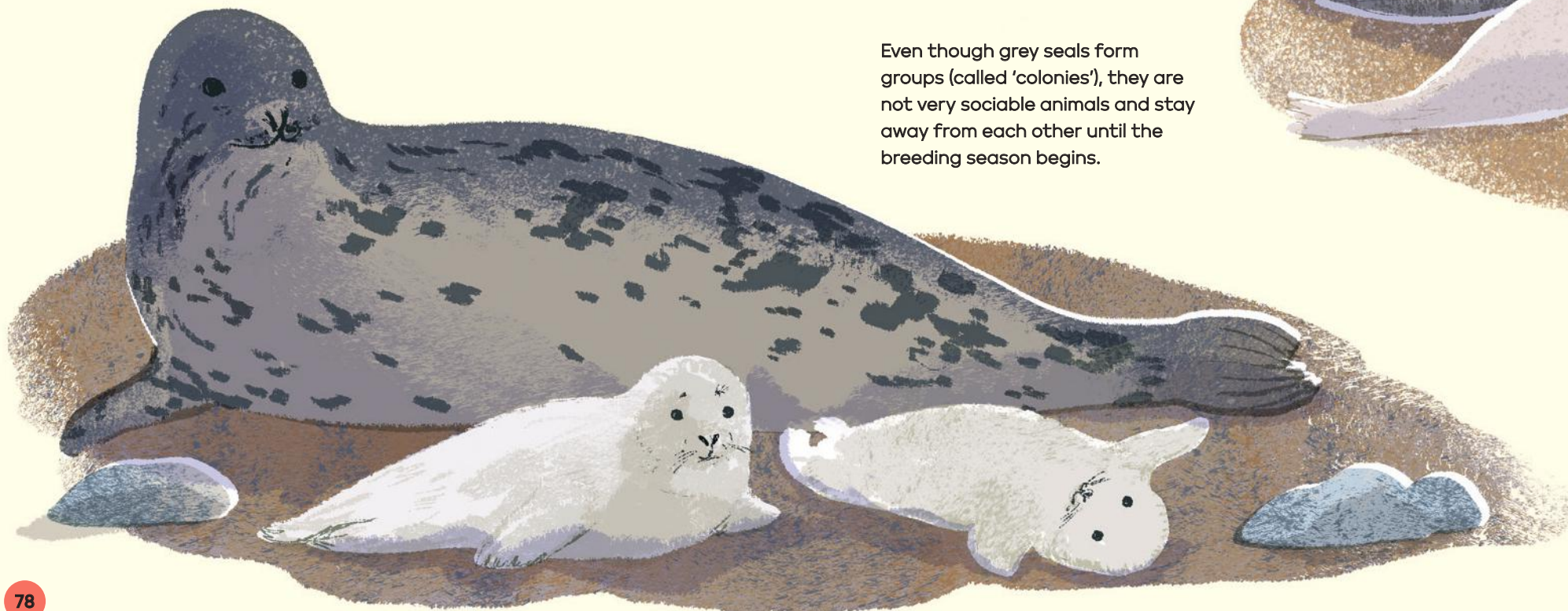
Meanwhile, the pups rest on the shore, losing their fluffy white coats and growing new waterproof coats to protect them in the water. About 18–21 days later they are finally ready to leave the shore to go fishing on their own.

Common seal

Common seals, also known as harbour seals, give birth in the summer instead of the winter. Unlike grey seal pups, common seal pups can swim when they are only a few hours old! They grow to only 80–100 kilograms, so about half the size of a grey seal. Most common seals are pale grey with blotches of darker grey, but look out for some blond and black seals too.



Life is tough for a seal. Only half of the pups that are born survive to adulthood. And even when they are fully grown, they can get eaten by orcas or sharks, or caught in people's fishing gear.



Winter IN THE PARK

Winter is here. The days are short and dark, and there are no leaves on the trees. It might look like there's not much to see when you go to the park. There are not many flowers in the flowerbeds, the animals seem to have disappeared – you might even feel like hiding away yourself and not going out at all! But take a closer look . . .

Winter birds

Can you see the blackbird quietly hopping around in the undergrowth? He's not singing right now because he's busy searching for worms and insects to eat. This is so that he can survive until the spring, when he'll start looking for a mate.

Once you have spotted the blackbird, your eyes will sharpen and you'll start to become a bird detective. Which other birds can you see? You might notice some winter visitors, such as fieldfares, which have flown over from other countries to spend the winter here. We might think it's cold here right now, but the places these tough little birds have travelled from are even colder!

You might be lucky enough to see deer. They like to root through the grass and dead leaves to find tasty chestnuts to munch on.

Squirrels skip from tree to tree, hurrying to bury the nuts they have gathered to eat during the long, cold months.

Hedgehogs scurry in and out from under bushes, eating their last meals before they snuggle down to sleep through the winter.

Early dusk

At this time of year, it gets dark early. Look out for badgers and foxes creeping around in the darkness, going through litter bins to forage for food.

Badgers and foxes often eat mice, rats and insects, but they have learnt that people in towns and cities often leave out tasty treats in their rubbish bins too!