INCREDIBLE JOURNEYS

As winter approaches, many Canadian species prepare for their annual migrations. You won't believe just how far some of them will go to escape the winter

Story by Natalie Gillis Photographs by Wayne Lynch

Have you ever wished, in the middle of a blizzard in February, that you could move somewhere warmer for winter to escape the snow and ice? Many animals across Canada are starting to do just that as they prepare for their annual migrations.

Animals migrate for many reasons: to avoid bad weather, to find food or to reproduce. Some, like garter snakes, may only migrate a few metres from their summer grounds to their winter grounds. Others, like the Arctic tern, go around the world in their search for food and better weather. Read on to learn about some of Canada's wildest journeys.

Quick fact

The North American caribou is the same species as the European reindeer

Caribou

BARREN-GROUND CARIBOU

About 1.2 million barren-ground caribou spend the summer on the treeless tundra across Canada's north, from Alaska to Baffin Island. They make one of the most spectacular animal migrations in North America, travelling in herds of hundreds of thousands of animals, for up to 1,500 kilometres each way.

In summer, the caribou feed on tundra grasses and seeds, storing up fat for winter. After the autumn mating season, they migrate to the taiga—the thin coniferous forests just south of the tundra. There they take shelter in the forest and survive on lichens, their main winter food, which they find under the snow using their excellent sense of smell.

During the winter, males and females stay in separate herds. As spring arrives, the herds recombine and make their way hundreds of kilometres back across the tundra to the calving grounds, where the caribou calves will be born. Pregnant cows lead the way.

Barren-ground caribou are the most efficient walkers of all ungulates (members of the deer family) in North America. They can even keep a steady direction across large frozen lakes. Some barren-ground caribou migrate more than 300 kilometres across sea ice between mainland Canada and Victoria Island in the Arctic Ocean.

LEATHERBACK SEA TURTLE

The leatherback sea turtle is the biggest sea turtle in the world, growing to more than two metres long. Adult leatherbacks can weigh as much as 900 kilograms. They are impressive swimmers, too: an adult leatherback can swim up to nine kilometres per hour and cover 95 kilometres in a single day. They can also dive deeper than 1,200 metres—more than a whole kilometre.

Because leatherbacks migrate across entire oceans, they are found in more parts of the world than any other reptile. Their range spans the tropical, temperate and boreal waters of the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian oceans, as well as the Mediterranean Sea. In Canada, the leatherback can be found off both the Atlantic and Pacific coasts.

Male leatherbacks never return to land after hatching. Females come ashore only to lay eggs once every few years. These turtles spend their entire lives at sea making incredible migrations of thousands of kilometres each year. They swim back and forth between the warm waters off their tropical nesting beaches and the cooler Canadian waters where they feed on jellyfish, their main prey. Because these turtles are always at sea, we are only starting to learn about the routes they take to get from one part of an ocean to another.

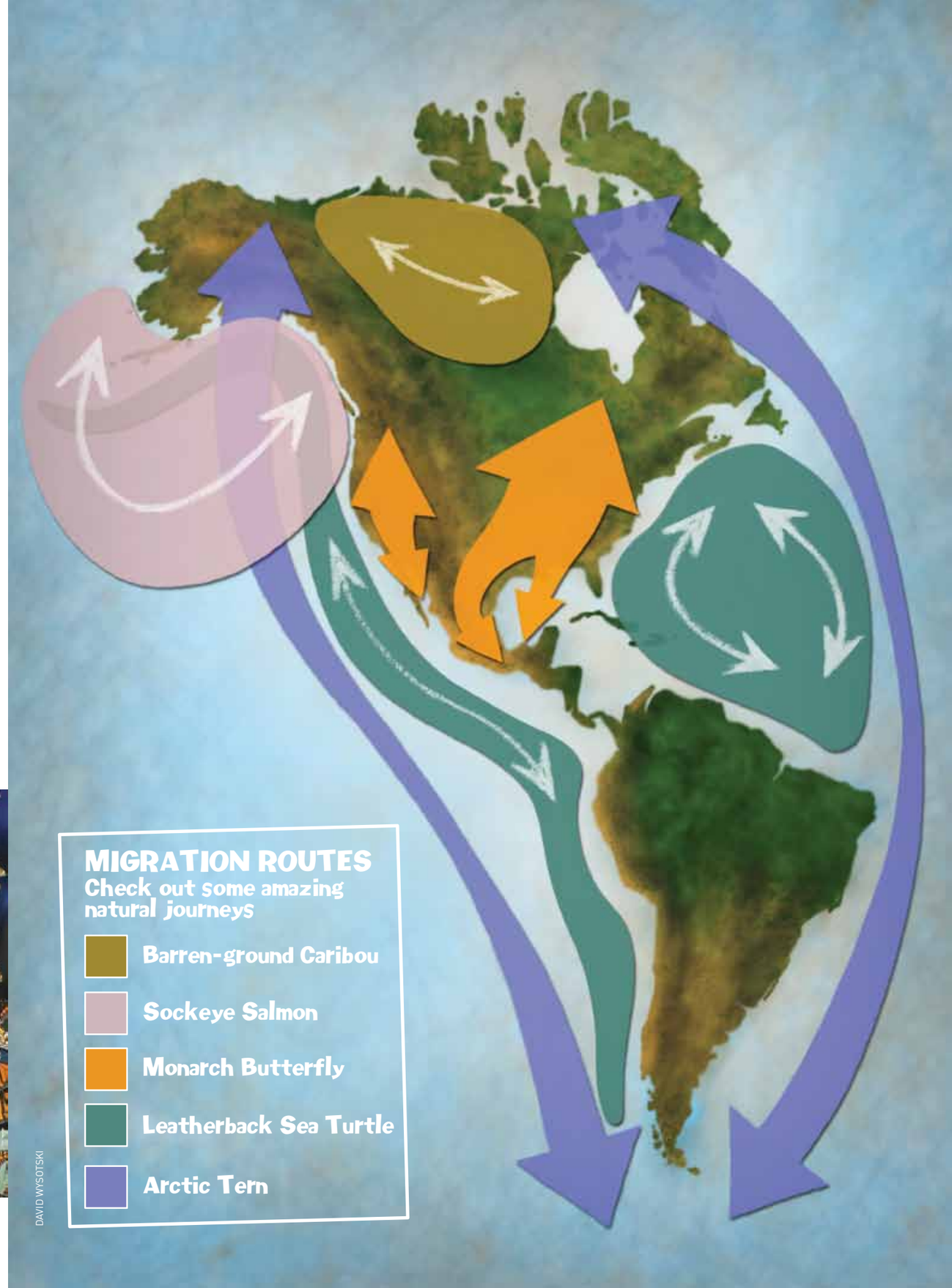
MONARCH BUTTERFLY

Monarch butterflies make one of the longest insect migrations on Earth. Each autumn, they travel up to 4,000 kilometres, one-way, from Canada to wintering grounds in Mexico or southern California. It's a dangerous journey that takes up to two and a half months.

There are two populations of monarchs in North America, and they migrate separately. All monarchs east of the Rocky Mountains make their way to Mexico in early August. Monarchs west of the Rockies head to the pine forests and eucalyptus groves along the coast of California. The butterflies spend the winter tightly bunched together, hanging from tree branches. There are so many of them that the branches sometimes bend and break from their weight.

Monarchs begin their return trip to Canada in the spring, laying eggs on milkweeds along the way. Most of the monarchs that arrive in Canada in late May and early June are the children or grandchildren of the butterflies that left the year before.

Wintering Monarchs



SOCKEYE SALMON

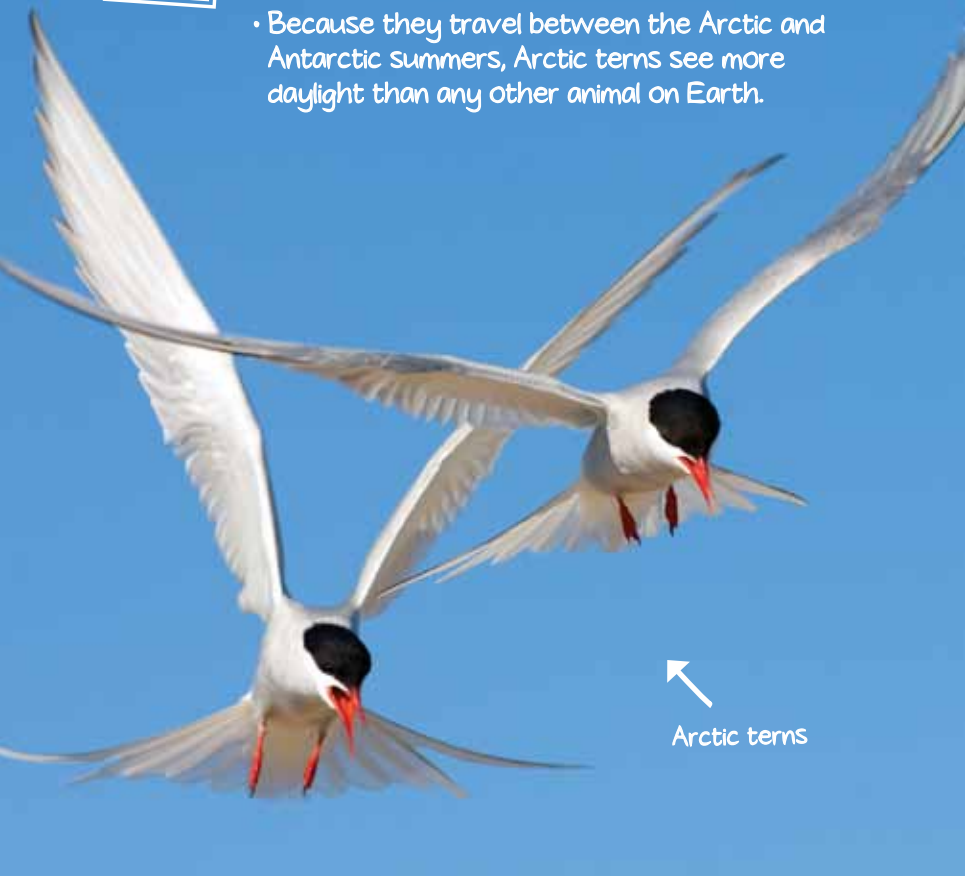
Every year in July and August, sockeye salmon leave the Pacific Ocean and make their way hundreds of kilometres up coastal rivers in Canada to reach the gravel beds of their spawning grounds. Sockeye salmon can swim up to 55 kilometres a day and return to the exact stretch of gravel they were spawned in. They also change colour during the journey, turning from silver to bright red with a green head.

After spawning, the adult sockeye die. Their offspring, called "fry," emerge in the spring and stay in their freshwater nurseries for at least a year before they head to the Pacific Ocean. As they migrate, their colours change. They lose the vertical bars that camouflage them in inland waters and become silver with black speckles. Their gills and kidneys also change to be able to handle salt water.

The salmon spend two or three years maturing in the ocean, travelling more than 4,000 kilometres west of the British Columbia coast. Once they're mature, they head back to the coast to begin their final migration to their spawning grounds.

Quick facts

- Arctic terns often fly at altitudes of more than 1,500 metres, where high winds help carry them on their way.
- Because they travel between the Arctic and Antarctic summers, Arctic terns see more daylight than any other animal on Earth.



ARCTIC TERN

The Arctic tern is the world champion of migration. This bird travels farther than any other animal, from the Arctic to Antarctica and back every year. That's a round-trip journey of 40,000 kilometres — roughly the circumference of the Earth.

The Arctic tern spends most of its time over the ocean. It rarely stops flying, even to feed. It weighs only about 100 grams but has a wingspan of 65 to 75 centimetres, giving it one of the widest wingspans of all birds compared to its weight. This makes the Arctic tern well equipped for long-distance flight.

The Arctic tern breeds across Canada's Arctic during the summer. When the chicks are about three weeks old, the terns head across the Atlantic to Europe, where they follow the coast south to their wintering grounds on the edge of the Antarctic pack-ice. Because the north and south poles have opposite seasons, terns can leave the Arctic before winter and arrive in the Antarctic region in time for the southern summer.