**Your Shortcut to… Australia's Humpback Highway**

"They travel thousands of kilometres every single year… they communicate with songs that can travel through the ocean for miles… and every winter, they turn Australia's coastline into one giant underwater highway.

This is your Squiz Kids Shortcut to the Humpback Highway— the podcast where we explore the who, what, when, where, why, and how of the wonderful world around us. I'm Christie Kijurina."

(SPEAKING LOUDLY) And I'm Bryce Corbett.....[boat engine hum… waves splashing].....Christie… how are you feeling?

Wet. Cold. Slightly seasick. And, it was pitch black when you picked me up this morning.

All part of the adventure.

You still haven't told me where we're going.

Christie… today… we're going whale watching.

…WHAT? No, what?

Humpback whales.

Well that changes EVERYTHING.

Thought it might.

Hang on… what's that splash out there?

Where?

BRYCE THAT'S A WHALE.

Yes, that… is definitely a whale.

Bryce, that's brilliant! All is forgiven!

I thought it might be. Today, we're unwrapping where humpback whales travel on Australia's giant whale highways… why they make one of the longest migrations on Earth… and how humans nearly wiped them out before helping them make one of nature's greatest comeback stories. So grab your binoculars…

…and your sea legs…

...and let's get started.

And listen carefully. There's a S'Quiz at the end... and let's duck inside

WHERE

As summer fades and the weather cools, something extraordinary begins happening off Australia's coastline. Giant humpback whales start appearing beside beaches, cliffs and headlands… travelling along what scientists sometimes call a "humpback highway".

"Humpback highway" that sounds enormous. How many lanes are we talking here? How many lanes does a whale highway even need?

Well unlike human highways, there aren't painted lines or exits. But year after year, humpback whales follow remarkably similar migration routes along both sides of Australia.

And we're not talking about a handful of whales either. During peak migration season, tens of thousands of humpbacks can be travelling north at the same time.

Yep. Australia actually has two giant whale highways. One runs up the east coast past places like Sydney, Gold Coast and Hervey Bay. The other travels up the west coast past Perth, Exmouth and the Kimberley region.

And some of these whales are travelling up to 8,000 kilometres in just one direction. That's one of the longest migrations of any mammal on Earth.

The journey usually begins far to the south near Antarctica, where humpbacks spend summer feeding on enormous swarms of tiny shrimp-like creatures called krill.

Basically turning the Southern Ocean into an all-you-can-eat buffet before the big road trip.

Pretty much. The whales build up huge fat reserves, then begin swimming north toward warmer tropical waters as winter approaches. And every now and then, these whale highways produce a celebrity. A rare white humpback whale named Migaloo became so famous in Australia that special protection zones were created just for him.

Which is wild when you think about it. Imagine being so famous the government creates special rules just because you might swim past. Honestly it's fair enough. He is magnificent. But Christie... why do whales make this enormous journey every year instead of just staying in Antarctica where all the food is?

WHY

So, why do the whales leave all that delicious krill behind? Well, that's becuase Antarctica is brilliant for feeding… but terrible for raising babies.The water is freezing cold, storms can be brutal, and predators like orcas patrol the ocean. Adult humpbacks can handle that environment. Newborn calves really can't.

Especially because baby humpbacks don't have the thick layers of blubber adults do. So a calf born in Antarctic waters would lose body heat much faster.

Exactly. That’s why humpbacks travel north to warmer tropical waters around places like the Great Barrier Reef and the Kimberley coast. It becomes a giant whale nursery.

And mum whales make this journey again and again throughout their lives. They’ll migrate north to mate… then return to Antarctica to feed… and later make the whole trip again while pregnant to give birth to their calf.

Which is an extraordinary effort when you think about the distances involved.

And the babies they’re carrying aren’t exactly tiny either. Baby humpbacks can weigh close to a tonne when they’re born. That's about the weight of a small car!

And then they start growing almost immediately by drinking incredibly rich milk from their mothers. Some calves can put on around 40 kilos every single day. That's about the weight of your average 12-year-old....Because before long, they’ll need enough strength and blubber to swim thousands of kilometres back south beside their mothers.

And during all of this… the ocean is full of whale songs. Male humpbacks sing these long, complicated underwater songs during breeding season, and scientists think they may help attract mates.

What’s really fascinating is those songs can actually change over time....kinda like music trends. Scientists have recorded entirely new whale songs spreading through populations across the Pacific over the years.

Which means these migrations aren’t just giant journeys. They’re also part nursery… part meeting place… and part underwater concert hall. But for a time, this ancient migration became much more dangerous than icy water or hungry orcas. Christie, if these migrations have been happening for millions of years… how did humans manage to nearly wipe humpback whales out?

HOW

For thousands of years, whales were hunted by some coastal communities for food, oil and materials. But those hunts were usually small-scale. In the 1800s and 1900s with the rise of industrial whaling. everything changed.

This was when humans started using giant factory ships, mechanical winches and explosive harpoons… turning whale hunting into a massive global industry.

Whales were hunted for all sorts of products. Their oil was used in lamps, soaps and machinery. Baleen from some whales was even used in things like corsets and umbrellas. Baleen is a comb-like material made from keratin, the same substance as human hair and fingernails, that some whales have in their mouths to filter tiny food like krill from seawater.

Yeah, it works a bit like a giant underwater strainer… letting the water out while keeping the food in. and because humpbacks migrate along predictable routes close to coastlines, they became easier targets for whalers waiting along the whale highways.

The impact was devastating. Some humpback populations crashed by more than 90 percent. Along Australia's east coast, scientists think the humpback population may have fallen to only a few hundred whales.

Which is incredible when you think about how many we see today. There was a point where these giant migrations could simply have vanished forever.

During the second part of the 20th century people around the world began pushing back against commercial whaling.

Groups like Greenpeace became famous for dramatic protests, with activists steering tiny inflatable boats between whales and enormous whaling ships.

"Countries including Australia also introduced stronger protections, and international agreements helped limit commercial whaling.

One of the biggest turning points came in 1986, when countries around the world agreed to largely stop commercial whaling."

And slowly, something remarkable started happening. Humpback whale numbers began recovering. Today, there are tens of thousands of humpbacks migrating along Australia's east and west coasts again.

One of the great conservation comeback stories on Earth. But scientists are still watching the whale highways carefully. In the last few years researchers have noticed some humpbacks are now starting parts of their migration earlier than they used to, possibly linked to changing ocean conditions and the krill they feed on near Antarctica.

Which means even though these migrations are ancient… they're still changing. And every winter, as whales journey along Australia's coastline once again, they remind us that nature can be both incredibly fragile, incredibly resilient, and incredibly beautiful!

THE S'QUIZ

"This is the part of the podcast where you get to test how well you've been listening…

1. What is the name given to the migration routes humpback whales follow along Australia's coastline? [The Humpback Highway]"

2 True or False. Baby humpback whales are born with thick layers of blubber that keep them warm in Antarctica. [False]

3 What made the whale Migaloo famous? [He's a rare white humpback whale]

That's all we have time for today. Thanks for joining us as we explored the who, what, how, where, when, and why of the Humpback Highway

Now get out there... be propaganda aware...., and have a most excellent day!

Over and out.