



Weir Wood News

The Newsletter of the Friends of Weir Wood Society no 107

Winter 2024



Chairman's Notes

Welcome to our Winter newsletter and on behalf of the Friends' Committee, I wish you all a happy new year.

This edition includes high-level summaries of our survey work carried out during 2024. We hope that you find this information of interest.

The past three months have generally been all quiet on the reserve which is good news as far as we are concerned. We have had to contend with the now usual autumn / winter storms which have brought down a fair few trees on the reserve, notably Silver Birch. The bird sightings report below makes for encouraging reading, with some rare birds recorded for the reserve in recent months. Weir Wood continues to be a great spot for bird watching.

Work Parties

It has been quite a busy time for the Tuesday work parties. Most of our efforts in the past three months have been devoted to autumnal “housekeeping” around the reserve. Typically this has included, clearing fallen trees, hedge cutting, ditch clearance, path restoration, removing excess plant life and leaves from water courses and ponds and dealing with willow cuttings from our summer activities.

Regular visitors to the reserve will know that after heavy rainfall, the road by the T junction where Legsheath Lane meets Grinstead Lane, floods quite badly which in turn has resulted in a very poor road surface. We have tried to alleviate the flooding by creating roadside ditches to take the water off the road and into Whillets Pool, but we were hampered by the fact that the road drains were completely silted up so the water had nowhere to go. The good news is that the local authority highways team have repaired the road (in particular dealing with the deep crater on the junction itself) and have de-silted the road drains. At the same time the Work Party was able to locate and clear an old drainage pipe which runs from the land next to the lay-by on Legsheath Lane to the reservoir. The result of all this is no more flooding and no more soakings for work party members when a car comes down Grinstead Lane at speed!

Bird Tables

You may have noticed that we have recently renewed the all the bird feeding tables in the feeding station areas near the hide. These have been made using wood from recently fallen trees and were installed by our East Sussex Rangers. The existing tables have lasted well, but were in a poor condition and needed replacing.

New Signs

One of our projects for 2024 has been successfully completed. You may have noticed the smart new wooden signs in the car park and in Legsheath Lane. These have replaced the existing signs which were in a very sorry state. One of our members kindly offered to make the new signs for us and we think that he has done a splendid job. The Rangers completed the installation and our thanks go to all involved in this project.

We are also looking to update the old interpretation board in the car park which is now looking a little tired. Plans are afoot so watch this space



Photo: John Edwards

Website

Work continues in the background to restore the website to full functionality. Hopefully it is now at the stage where both Friends and members of the public can use it and find it a helpful resource.

Membership Renewal 2025

A reminder that membership fees for 2025 are now due. The cost of membership has again been held to just £3 per person. Donations in addition to the fee will be gratefully received and put to good use in maintaining the reserve. The e-mail from the Membership Secretary which accompanied this newsletter sets out the ways to pay if you have **not** already renewed for this year. Many thanks in advance for your continued support, it is much appreciated.

Dates for your Diary:

7 March 2025 – Annual General Meeting and Talk

Our **AGM** will be held on **7th March 2025**. We will be in the Forest Row Community Centre, RH18 5DZ as usual. Doors will open at 7.00pm and the AGM will start at **7.15pm**.

The AGM will conduct the standard formal business, however there is a proposed change to the Committee which will be put to the meeting for approval. After many years of dedicated service, Peter Johnson has decided to step down from the Committee at the AGM. Long-standing members will be aware of Peter's input into all things "technical" to do with Weir Wood such as the website etc. Peter has indicated that he will still be willing to help out with IT issues if needed. We are pleased to report that Linsey Gooding has agreed to join the Committee at the AGM and we will seek the meeting's approval for the appointment. Linsey is a keen birder with a background in IT and he will bring invaluable knowledge to the Committee.

After the AGM there will be a short break for refreshments and we will then receive a presentation from Suzanne Kynaston from the Wildwood Trust. Suzanne is Project Manager for the Pine Marten reintroduction project in Kent and Sussex and she will tell us all about the project and progress so far. One of the proposed re-introduction areas is the Ashdown Forest so this will be of interest to us at Weir Wood.

Members Spring Walk 2025

This is currently being planned and further details will follow.

Members Autumn Walk 2024 – Report

The annual autumn walk went ahead as planned on Saturday 2nd November 2024. Those who attended judged it to be an interesting and informative afternoon. Although we were down on both bird and fungi sightings from previous years, there was still much to enjoy. The report of the afternoon has been circulated to members and it is available on our website if you missed it.

Large Nest Boxes Survey Report – 2024

For many years now, the Friends have maintained and monitored around 35 (this year: 39) large nest boxes dotted around the reserve. The boxes are positioned at least 3m off the ground and on a variety of trees or posts. There are three types of box: large triangular (for Barn Owls), large oblong (typically used by Stock Doves, Tawny Owls, Jackdaws and Mandarin Ducks) and this year for the first time, two boxes specially designed to attract Kestrels. Boxes not used by the birds are often used by Grey Squirrels and Hornets.

The experienced nest box team checks the boxes regularly from early spring through to the autumn, though the frequency decreases as the year progresses. Stock Doves will breed quite late into the season and may have up to four broods a year. By contrast Tawny Owls will breed early in the season and only once. All nesting records are submitted to the British Trust for Ornithology.

What follows is a very brief summary of the results for 2024:

	Stock Dove	Mandarin	Jackdaw	Tawny Owl	Barn Owl
Failed attempts	25	3	1	0	0
Successful attempts *	21	4	0	1	1
Eggs recorded	#	92	4	3	4
Young left nest *	27	42 appx	0	2	2

* Mandarin young leave as newly hatched ducklings so that is defined as success. The very small number of juvenile mandarins ever seen later in the year suggests that about 90% of these ducklings die before fledging. For other species the young have flown.

Quite a few nests were not visited at egg stage and also there were several boxes in which single eggs appeared with no sign of incubation and another in which four eggs under leaves were not incubated.

For Stock Doves the generally miserable weather this year meant it was a poor year for nest success. For Mandarin Ducks it was an average year. Jackdaws first bred in our boxes in 2015 and this is the first year of total failure though they never seem to do very well.

As well as having one successful nest, Barn Owl pellets were found in other boxes and Barn Owls were seen roosting in other boxes, but no eggs were laid.

Five boxes produced no nest records this year but have all had a nest at some time in the past and this year had signs of being visited. However four are in a poor state of repair and will be replaced (see below).

We were not successful with our two Kestrel boxes, but it is still early days. There were signs that one has been visited although not by Kestrels! A Barn Owl was seen flying out of one earlier in the year. Kestrels have been observed in the vicinity of one of the boxes, so who knows for next year?

Finally, the nest box team uses the winter months to get the boxes ready for spring. This will include repairs and in some cases replacing boxes which are showing signs of dilapidation. We are fortunate to have a work party member with very good carpentry skills and he kindly makes our nest boxes for us. The picture below shows an owl nest box he recently made for us and installed in Whillets. The previous box has had Tawny Owls breeding, and Barn Owls roosting in it. Let's hope the new box is as successful!



New Owl Nest Box
Photo: John Edwards

Butterfly Survey - 2024

Members of the team carry out an annual butterfly survey from 1st March to 31st October following a transect through Whillets meadows established in 2011. 32 butterfly species have been recorded here since 2011. Any moths seen during the survey are also recorded. Visitors to Whillets will know that we maintain a variety of flora in order to encourage a range of butterflies and day flying moths.

Here are the brief highlights for 2024:

The first butterfly recorded was on 20th March (Comma and Small Tortoiseshell) and the last on 27th October (Red Admiral). 24 butterfly species were recorded this year, two fewer than 2023, but overall numbers for 2024 were disappointing as they were across all of Sussex. The most recorded species were: Meadow Brown (62), Gatekeeper (49) and Ringlet (31). This is not surprising given the meadow habitat. Small Skippers (25) were seen in reasonable numbers too, as were Orange Tips (18) earlier in the year which were attracted to the plentiful Cuckoo Flower. Other species were recorded in singles or very low numbers which included Silver-washed Fritillary (2), Marbled White (4), Painted Lady (1) and Brown Hairstreak (2). Notable absentees this year were Brown Argus and Common Blue.

Day flying moths recorded were Burnet Companion, Mother Shipton, Silver Y, Cinnabar and Six Spot Burnet. The latter two species enjoy the Marsh Ragwort which is prevalent in the meadows.

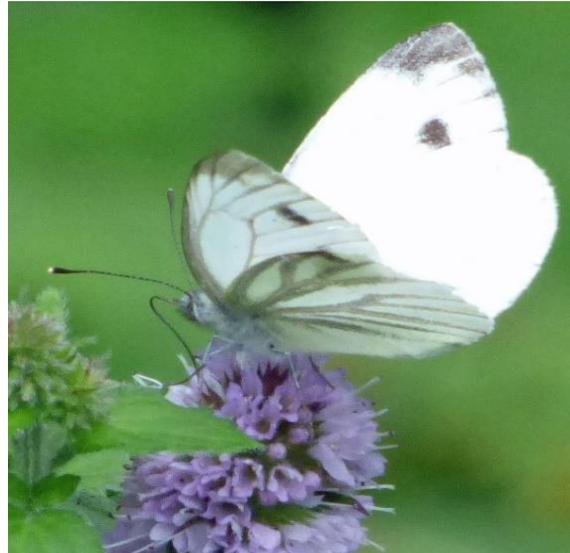
Some non day flying moths were recorded and these included Blood Vein, Straw Dot and Vapourer. Micro moths were generally not recorded but Brown China Mark was seen regularly on the vegetation around Meadow Pond. This is not surprising as it is this moth's ideal habitat.

Selection of survey photos (all courtesy of Bob Johnson and Alastair Gray)

Butterflies:



Marbled White



Green-veined White



Comma



Small Skipper

Moths:



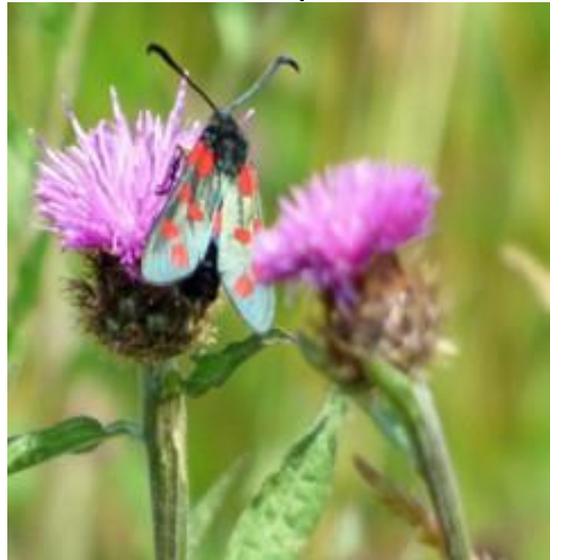
Mother Shipton



Burnet Companion



Cinnabar



Six-spot Burnet

Dragonfly and Damselfly Survey - 2024

Regular surveying of dragonflies and damselflies started in 2004 and to date 24 species have been recorded. Recording centres on Whilleys, in particular Meadow Pond and also the reed bed. It was a slow start for odonata this year as a consequence of the cold wet spring.

This year we recorded a new species – a female Scarce Chaser seen at Meadow Pond. Azure Damselfly was as usual by far our most abundant species. Beautiful Demoiselle and Large Red Damselfly both had good years with long flight periods and peak counts. By contrast both Common Darter and Willow Emerald Damselfly had poorer years with lower peak numbers. Other notable recordings included: Downy Emerald and Migrant Hawker Dragonfly, Broad-bodied and Four-spotted Chaser, Black-tailed Skimmer and White-legged, Blue-tailed and Emerald Damselfly. We did not record a Golden-ringed Dragonfly this year.

The first recorded sighting was on 13th April – Large Red Damselfly and the last on 29th October – Brown Hawker, Southern Hawker and Willow Emerald. Although outside the survey period, a female Common Darter was recorded at Meadow Pond on 15th December. We have been advised that it was the latest ever recording on the wing in Sussex and subsequently advised that it was the latest official record in the UK!

A few photos from 2024 courtesy of Richard Allan:



Azure Damselfly



Beautiful Demoiselle



Black-tailed Skimmer



Southern Hawker

Reptile Survey - 2024

As visitors to the reserve may recall, we have a number of “refugia tins” dotted around the reserve. These are pieces of corrugated metal or felt (typically 2m x 1m) placed on the grass. Grass snakes hide underneath and as the sun warms the tin, so the snakes warm up before they emerge and start to hunt. It is not only the snakes that use the tins, we also find they are used by lizards, slowworms, toads, frogs, newts and a variety of small rodents (voles, shrews and mice). As far as we are aware, there are no adders on the reserve. We do not have the habitat for them.

During the spring, summer and autumn months, members of the Work Party carry out a weekly check under the tins and record their findings. Here is a high-level report of the findings for 2024:

This year’s survey started on 26th March and finished on 15th October. The weather had a significant impact on this year’s results with some survey days being a complete wash out due to heavy rain and many of the tins being under water / waterlogged (especially in Whilleys) until June.

The first **Grass Snake** was not recorded until 30th April and the last recording was on the 15th October. It was mid-May before two grass snakes were recorded. Things picked up in June as the weather improved (a bit) with seven snakes were recorded on the 18th – the highest count for the year. Numbers of snakes recorded fluctuated between four and six in July, August and September before numbers fell away to single sightings in late September to mid-October.

In respect of the **Common Lizard**, the first was recorded on 11th June. Thereafter there were individual sightings on most weeks until the end of the survey period. A notable exception was 18th June when three lizards were recorded.

It was a very poor year for **Slowworms** on the reserve, which was probably a reflection of the wet summer and resultant conditions underfoot. The only record for the year was one slowworm on the 6th August.



Grass Snake under refugia tin at Whillets Summer 2024
Photo: Richard Allan

The Flowers of Weir Wood – Skullcap

This edition's featured flower is the Common or Marsh Skullcap (*Scutellaria galericulata*). This flower is a member of the *Lamiaceae* family which includes nettles and mints. It is a lover of wet land, so it is surprising that it is found (as far as we know) in only one location in the reserve, on the north bank of the reservoir. Its delicate violet-blue flowers bloom from June to September. Hopefully it will spread further as its flowers are attractive to long-tongued bees.

This plant is so called because its calyx is said to resemble a miniature medieval helmet. Its Latin name is derived from the word *scutella* meaning a small dish which its calyx is also said to resemble.

As might be expected from a member of the *Lamiaceae* family, Skullcap has long been valued for its medicinal properties and it is a plant used by herbalists.

Apparently the soothing effects of Skullcap make it popular in preparing herbal teas. It is also valued for its potential anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties, thus contributing to its overall appeal in natural remedies.



Skullcap at Weir Wood. Photos: Richard Allan

Bird Sightings Report

October

The weather for the month could generally be described as “quiet”. High pressure dominated, with not much rainfall, mild temperatures, light winds and varying amounts of cloud cover which became increasingly persistent towards the end of the month. This is typically the month when our summer visitors leave and our winter visitors arrive.

The last **Wheatear** on the reserve in 2024 was recorded at the Dam End on the 1st. 23 **Swallows** were recorded at the Dam End on the 6th, 10 on the 11th with the last sighting of just one on the 21st. 11 **House Martins** were recorded on the 6th, 3 on the 7th and 11th respectively, but nothing more thereafter.

Our resident thrushes became more evident with both **Song** and **Mistle Thrush** regularly recorded. Their winter visiting cousins, **Redwings**, started to arrive, with five seen at the West End on 5th, 25 at the Dam End on the 7th and 600+ seen flying over on the 17th. By contrast, **Fieldfare** numbers were low with one seen on the 5th with only sporadic sightings of ones and twos thereafter.

October also saw the start of roosting activity at Whillets reed bed. 16 **Reed Buntings** were recorded in a roost count on the 13th and 19 counted on the 30th. **Starlings** started to congregate, 19 were seen in Whillets during the WeBS on the 21st. A **Water Rail** was heard squealing from the reed bed on the 11th and again on the 13th.

In other seasonal sightings, a **Hawfinch** was recorded on the 7th, 3 **Siskins** on the 5th, a **Redpoll** on the 5th and 7 **Linnets** on the 17th. **Bullfinches** were recorded regularly throughout the month.

It was a reasonable month for raptors. **Buzzards** and increasingly **Red Kites** were seen throughout the month. **Kestrels** continued to be seen both at the West End and hunting over Whillets meadows. **Sparrowhawks** were frequent visitors to Whillets with sightings on the 1st, 11th, 17th (2) and 18th.

Given the number of Woodpigeons and Jackdaws in the area it is perhaps not surprising that we are starting to see **Goshawks** more frequently. A juvenile was seen on the 11th and two adults were seen over Whillets on the 18th.

The 18th was clearly a good day for raptors with a **Peregrine** seen, together with 3 **Tawny Owls** and a **Barn Owl** hunting in Whillets.

Winter wild fowl started to arrive with **Shoveler** recorded on the 1st and later in the month on the 22nd. **Gadwall** were recorded on the 13th, **Wigeon** (2) on the 27th, **Teal** (3) also on the 27th and **Pochard** (2) on the 22nd rising to seven on the 27th.

Large numbers of **Canada** and **Greylag Geese** landed in the reservoir from time to time joined occasionally by a pair of **Egyptian Geese**.

Black-headed and **Herring Gulls** were seen regularly during the month. With high water levels and the changing season, wader activity was minimal with just one sighting of a **Common Sandpiper** on the 7th. A **Common Snipe** was recorded at the Dam End during the WeBS on the 21st. The WeBS also recorded 36 **Great Crested Grebes**. A **Little Grebe** was seen on the 1st and then at both the Dam End and West End on the 7th and again at the West End on the 24th.

In addition to the usual **Grey Heron** sightings, a scarce **Great White Egret** was seen at the West End on the 2nd and the 19th. Great White Egret is a scarce bird nationally but is being seen with increasing regularity at Weir Wood.

Ravens are now a regular Weir Wood feature with sightings of ones and twos during the month. Their distinctive "cronking" and aerobatics marking them out from their smaller corvid cousins – Crow, Jackdaw and Rook – which are all present in large numbers in the reserve.



Reed Bunting at Whillets
Archive photo (2023): Ian Hodgson

November

Quite the month for weather with November starting where October finished, with day after day of low cloud. The cloud finally lifted mid-month and we were suddenly plunged into a short icy blast from the Arctic. This was followed by tropical temperatures as Storm Bert battered the UK, before the month closed out quietly with cooler and more normal weather for the time of year.

This month the ducks took centre stage with the bird of the month being a drake **Goosander** which was spotted on the 28th, raising hopes that it would be joined by others as was the case last year. It was also pleasing to note a regular posse of **Pochards** on the water, with six seen on the 2nd and numbers fluctuating thereafter between 10 and 16 for the rest of the month. As well as the usual **Mallard**, other ducks recorded during the month were: **Wigeon** - two on the 3rd and five on the 24th, **Teal** – one seen during the WeBS on the 17th and two on the 25th, **Mandarin** – seen most days with 15 seen on the 2nd and **Shoveler**, **Gadwall** and **Tufted Duck** seen in ones and twos during the month. Finally a **Pintail** was seen on the 4th. All were good to see.

Black-headed Gulls were seen regularly at both the West and Dam ends and in good numbers at the Dam End. Unusually a juvenile **Kittiwake** was seen flying over the West End on the 19th.

Greylag Geese were frequent visitors (less so **Canada Geese**) and they were joined by **Egyptian Geese** in twos and threes from time to time. 12 **Dark-bellied Brent Geese** were seen flying over the Dam End on the 3rd and a little later on the same day 22 were seen flying over the West End.

Cormorant numbers remained steady with 61 seen on the 3rd and typically similar numbers coming into roost at the West End most afternoons. The scarce **Great**

White Egret was recorded on the 10th and 12th and a **Little Egret** recorded on the 28th.

It was relatively quiet on the raptor front with **Buzzards, Kestrels** and **Sparrowhawks** seen regularly but fewer sightings of **Red Kite** with just one seen on the 25th. A **Goshawk** was seen flying low on the 12th creating a mass panic amongst the Woodpigeons. A **Barn Owl** was seen on the 26th.

Great Crested Grebe numbers hovered in the upper teens for most of the month although 20 were seen on the 10th and 22 during the WeBS on the 17th. Singles of **Little Grebe** were seen throughout the month. **Coots** and **Moorhens** were seen regularly too. During the WeBS on the 17th, three **Water Rail** were heard in Whillets reed bed, up from just one in October. Unusually one was also heard near the hide at the West End.

Winter thrushes started to be seen more regularly and in good numbers. For example 136 **Redwing** were counted on the 3rd and 64 the next day. 16 **Fieldfare** were recorded on the 3rd and 59 the following day.

The feeders by the hide were re-established at the end of October and during November we started to see the usual tits and finches etc return. One of the more interesting visitors to the feeders are **Marsh Tits** with three recorded on the 2nd and recorded on most days thereafter. The area around the feeders is alive with small birds and it only goes quiet when a Sparrowhawk flies through!

Other sightings include nine Lapwings on the 4th and a **Common Snipe** on the 3rd. **Siskins** and **Redpolls** were seen regularly. The alder trees at the Dam End are a good place to see Redpoll, 13 were spotted there during the WeBS on the 17th and 30 seen there on the 25th.

Two **Ring-necked Parakeets** were spotted in flight at the Dam End on the 10th. This is perhaps unsurprising given that their range continues to expand in Sussex.

Finally, a Whillets reed bed roost count on the 17th (after the WeBS) recorded 540 **Starlings** and 31 **Reed Buntings**, both significant increases from October.



Drake Goosander - Nov 24
Photo: Alastair Gray

December

The month started generally wet and mild then accompanied by very high winds with the arrival of Storm Darragh. We then had a period of chilly, damp, cloudy weather as high pressure dominated before warm air came in from the Atlantic mid-month. The month closed out with generally cloudy mild weather and gloomy light.

The month started with the action again “on the water”. The drake **Goosander** seen at the end of last month was seen on the 3rd. Then as hoped for, more arrived with two drakes seen on the 9th and three on 16th and most days until the 25th when four were seen. On the 30th four were also seen but this time it was three drakes and one red-headed (female).

However the main excitement of the month was when a **Slavonian Grebe** was spotted in amongst the usual Pochard flock on the 9th. This is a rare sighting for Weir Wood; the last one seen here was pre 2016, with a long-stayer recorded in 2007. Sadly this grebe did not hang around and it was gone by the following morning and not seen again.

Duck numbers have been encouraging with a little group of **Pochard** seen on most days. The group was usually made up of around 18 birds reaching a peak of 22 on the 10th. **Wigeon, Gadwall, Tufted** and **Mandarin Duck** and **Mallard** were seen regularly. Wigeon numbers peaked at eight on the 30th. It would be great to see a Goldeneye this winter (we have had them in the past, but not for a while) – so fingers crossed.

Our now regular **Great White Egret** was spotted on the 15th during the WeBS and very obligingly (for the photographers) was often seen quite close to the hide. It was present on most days and was still around at the end of the month. **Little Egret** was also seen with sightings on the 9th and 10th. Six were spotted on the 30th. **Grey Herons** were ever present and **Cormorant** roosting numbers increased during the month with 75 counted on the 30th.

In respect of the raptors, the usual **Buzzards, Kestrels, Red Kites** and **Sparrowhawks** were seen in the month. The latter being attracted to the small birds on the feeders and by the **Starlings** coming in to roost in Whillets reed bed. A **Goshawk** was spotted during the WeBS on the 15th. The Work Party had an excellent view of a **Peregrine** sitting on a pylon in Whillets on the 3rd. A Peregrine was also seen flying over the west end on the 10th. A **Tawny Owl** was recorded on the 30th.

In other sightings, 32 **Redpolls** were recorded in the Alder Trees at the Dam End on the 2nd. A **Siskin** was also seen there on the same day. A **Lapwing** was recorded on the 5th. A **Water Rail** was recorded in Whillets reed bed during the WeBS on the 15th and also on the 18th. **Great Crested** and **Little Grebes** were seen regularly with 21 Great Crested recorded on the 15th and three Little on the 30th. A **Grey Wagtail** was recorded on the 15th as was a **Barn Owl**. A **Common Snipe** was seen on the 3rd.

A reed bed roost count was carried out after the WeBS on the 15th and 42 **Reed Buntings** were recorded.

Black-headed Gulls started to roost in numbers with 279 counted on the 20th and 350 on the 30th.

There was the usual cohort of birds on and around the feeders by the hide. **Kingfishers** were seen regularly from October to December.



Slavonian Grebe and Common Pochard – Dec 24
Photo: Edward Paxton



Great White Egret – Dec 24
Photo: David Williams

The Report above just gives a “flavour” and a detailed list of sightings can be found on our website at: www.weirwood.me.uk – click on the “Recent Sightings” link. Remember to check our Facebook page too for regular sightings and photos.

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