

Canberra bird notes

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EDITORIAL

This issue of Canberra Bird Notes constitutes something of a record, as it deals with two species new to the A.C.T. and the surrounding district. Jim McNaughton was in the happy position of observing the two on the same day. His notes about the Pectoral Sandpiper were submitted for consideration, and accepted. The Gullbilled Tern was seen by several observers, and their combined notes left no doubt about the species.

These occurrences highlight once more the importance of recording adequate field-notes on any rare birds seen, including a sketch. Witnesses should also be sought, if possible.

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CHANGES IN AVIFAUNA AT MINNAMURRA FALLS RESERVE

Peter Fielding

Minnamurra Falls Reserve, 1000 acres in area, is situated 30 miles south of Wollongong and about 160 miles from Canberra. The habitats found therein are subtropical rainforest, wet sclerophyll forest and grassland. Rainforest covers the greater part. The upper reaches of the Minnamurra River flow through the reserve.

In the table below, the first birdlist was compiled by the Ranger, Mr Howard Judd, between 1946 and 1970. Mr Judd made no attempt at keeping a detailed list of birds observed, and possibly some species were overlooked. During these 25 years he has noticed a marked decline in the numbers of birds inhabiting the area.

The second list contains my observations during 1971 when I was employed as an assistant ranger at Minnamurra Falls. In this year I recorded four additional species. Sixteen species that appear on the first list were not observed by me in 1971. The checklist total is 92.

The third column shows the status given to the species for 1971. The key is as follows: OS = only one sighting; UC = uncommon; FC = fairly common; C = common; x = recorded - = not recorded.

The sequence and vernacular names follow those in "A Pocket List of Australian Birds" by P.J. Fullagar.

The Checklist

	1946- 1970	1971	Status 1971
Little black cormorant	X	X	OS
Little pied cormorant	X	X	UC
Whitefaced Heron	X	X	C
Grey Goshawk (inc. wh. phase)	X	X	FC
Brown Goshawk	X	X	UC
Sparrowhawk	X	X	UC
Little Eagle	X	_	
Wedgetailed Eagle	X	X	FC
White-breasted Sea Eagle	X	_	
Peregrine Falcon	X	X	FC
Little Falcon	X	_	
Brown Quail	X	X	FC
Spurwinged Plover	X	X	OS
Topknot Pigeon	X	X	FC
Brown Pigeon	X	X	C
Peaceful Dove	X	X	UC
Diamond Dove	X	X	FC
Greenwinged Pigeon	X	X	FC
Wonga Pigeon	X	X	C

cont/-

	1946- 1970	1971	Status 1971
Swift Parrot	X	_	
Y/T Black Cockatoo	X	X	C
Red-tailed Black Cockatoo	X	_	
Gang-gang Cockatoo	X	X	OS
Sulphur-crested Cockatoo	X	X	OS
Galah	_	X	OS
King Parrot	X	X	FC
Crimson Rosella	X	X	С
Eastern Rosella	X	X	OS
Pallid Cuckoo	X	_	
Brush Cuckoo	X	X	FC
Fantailed Cuckoo	X	X	FC
Golden Bronze-Cuckoo	X	X	С
Boobook Owl	X	_	
Barn Owl	X	_	
Tawny Frogmouth	X	X	C
Forktailed Swift	X	X	OS
Laughing Kookaburra	X	X	FC
Sacred Kingfisher	X	_	
Dollarbird	X	X	OS

	1946- 1970	1971	Status 1971
Superb Lyrebird	X	X	C
Welcome Swallow	X	X	C
Tree Martin	X	_	
Australian Pipit	X	X	FC
Blackfaced Cuckoo-Shrike	X	X	FC
Ground Thrush	X	X	C
Southern Logrunner	X	X	OS
Spotted Quail-Thrush	X	X	OS
Superb Blue Wren	X	X	C
Variegated Wren	X	X	OS
Southern Emu-Wren	_	X	OS
Brown Warbler	X	X	C
Striated Thornbill	X	X	C
Brown Thornbill	X	X	C
Whitebrowed Scrub-Wren	X	X	C
Yellow-throated Scrub-Wren	X	X	C
Largebilled Scrub-Wren	X	X	FC
Rock Warbler	X	X	OS
Pilot Bird	X	X	OS

cont/-

	1946- 1970	1971	Status 1971
Scarlet Robin	X	X	С
Flame Robin	X	X	UC
Rose Robin	X	X	OS
Southern Yellow Robin	X	X	С
Grey Fantail	X	X	C
Rufous Fantail	X	X	С
Willie Wagtail	X	X	С
Blackfaced Flycatcher	X	X	С
Golden Whistler	X	X	С
Rufous Whistler	X	_	
Grey Shrike-Thrush	X	X	С
Eastern Shriketit	X	X	OS
Eastern Whipbird	X	X	С
Whitethroated Treecreeper	X	X	С
Mistletoe-Bird	_	X	OS
Spotted Pardalote	X	X	UC
Greybreasted Silvereye	X	X	С
Lewin Honeyeater	X	X	С

cont/-

	1946- 1970	1971	Status 1971
Yellow-faced Honeyeater	X	X	FC
Eastern Spinebill	X	X	С
Crescent Honeyeater	X	X	OS
Noisy Miner	X	-	
Little Wattlebird	X	-	
Red Wattlebird	X	-	
Noisy Friarbird	X	_	
Redbrowed Finch	X	X	C
House Sparrow	_	X	OS
Magpie lark	X	X	FC
Pied Currawong	X	X	C
Grey Butcherbird	X	X	OS
Blackbacked Magpie	X	X	C
Green Catbird	X	X	FC
Satin Bowerbird	X	X	С
Raven	X	X	С

Total species

76

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FIELD IDENTIFICATION OF SOME LOCAL HONEYEATERS

S.J. Wilson

The four local green/brown honeyeaters described below are superficially similar, and could cause some confusion in the field. The following notes on plumage, habitat and occurrence should help in distinguishing between the species.

YELLOWFACED HONEYEATER Meliphaga chrysops

<u>Distinctive features of plumage:</u> Yellow line below eye from bill to ear outlined in black. The black is not conspicuous.

<u>Preferred habitat in A.C.T.:</u> Found in all habitats where trees remain, but much more numerous in the ranges. Huge migrations are seen in autumn along the Murrumbidgee, at Lake George, about Canberra and at many other points. A breeding species.

Seasonal fluctuation in numbers: Very common in spring and summer. After the autumn migration a few remain near winter food but it is then not common. Commences its return in early September.

FUSCOUS HONEYEATER Meliphaga fusca

<u>Distinctive features of plumage:</u> Ear coverts dark brown and behind this there is a tiny bright yellow plume. Looks dark about the head in the field.

<u>Preferred habitat in A.C.T.:</u> Not a breeding species here. Found with flocks of Yellowfaced and Whitenaped Honeyeaters in April and May. Occurs about Canberra and near winter-flowering trees and shrubs. Prefers the same habitat as the Whiteplumed Honeyeater.

<u>Seasonal fluctuation in numbers:</u> Remains in the A.C.T. from April to November. Most numerous during spring and autumn migrations.

SINGING HONEYEATER Meliphaga virescens

<u>Distinctive features of plumage:</u> A strong, heavy bill. A black line from the bill through the eye to the neck with patches of yellow and white below. The black is conspicuous. Faintly streaked breast.

<u>Preferred habitat in A.C.T.:</u> A common bird to the west of the A.C.T. Two records only for the Territory (Aug. & Sept.) both in Canberra. A dry-forest bird.

Seasonal fluctuation in numbers: Accidental.

WHITEPLUMED HONEYEATER Meliphaga penicillata

<u>Distinctive features of plumage:</u> Conspicuous line of white behind the ear coverts. Olive-yellow head.

<u>Preferred habitat in A.C.T.:</u> Prefers open savannah woodland on the tablelands. Not generally found in the ranges, though there are old banding records. A breeding species.

Seasonal fluctuation in numbers: Common throughout the year.

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THE GULLBILLED TERN - A NEW SPECIES

A new species was added to the birdlist for Canberra and district with the occurrence of a Gullbilled Tern Sterna nilotica at Fyshwick. The tern was first noted by Shane and Kevin Kennedy of O'Connor on September 17. They watched it hovering and standing on a mudflat at Kelly's lagoon; on the same date it was identified independently by Jim McNaughton.

Neil Hermes, Simon Bennett and Terry Gourlay observed it over the next three days and their field-notes put the identification beyond doubt. This is the first record of this species for the A.C.T. and surrounding district.

WADERS IN PLENTY

The Gullbilled Tern was in good company, as a rich variety of waders was recorded over the same period at the same place. The commonest were Sharp-tailed Sandpipers Calidris acuminata, with about 40 present on September 21. Feeding with them along the margins of Kelly's lagoon were eight Curlew Sandpipers Calidris ferruginea, a rare species here, and three Greenshanks Tringa nebularia. An Eastern Golden Plover Pluvialis dominica was seen on the 23rd by the Kennedys and on the 24th by Jim McNaughton who also recorded a Painted Snipe Rostratula bengalensis

Other interesting waders seen in the latter half of September included 16 Japanese Snipe <u>Gallinago</u> <u>hardwicki</u>, one Marsh Tern <u>Chlidonias hybrida</u> and one Pectoral Sandpiper <u>Calidris melanotos</u>. The latter is also a new record for this area (see page 19).

THE STATUS OF BIRDS IN CANBERRA AND DISTRICT

Part 3

ANSERIFORMES

GRASS WHISTLE DUCK Dendrocygna eytoni

Occasional visitor; all records in late summerautumn (February-May). Essentially tropical in distribution, but isolated breeding colonies as far south as the Riverina (Murray River) where they forage on pastures and crop stubbles. Flocks characteristically camp at the edge of farm dams, lagoons and lakes during the day and fly out to forage on surrounding grassland in the late afternoon. Recent records in the A.C.T. district are of small flocks at Lake George (17/5/65) and Lake Burley Griffin (12/2/66) and a small group attracted to the captive flock at Gungahlin (14/4/66). No breeding record in the region.

BLACK SWAN Cygnus atratus

Common breeding resident. Single birds, pairs and small family parties are found on almost any water habitat at all seasons of the year. Large flocks may be seen on the larger bodies of water (i.e. Lakes George Bathurst, Burley Griffin) during late autumn and winter. Commonly nests in colonies in shallow marshy habitat on Lakes George and Bathurst. Usually nests in spring or early summer, but in favourable seasons may breed through the year. There is a presumed breeding record for Lake Burley Griffin (a pair with two cygnets in the Fyshwick marsh area on 27/9/69).

FRECKLED DUCK Stictonetta naevosa

Regular visitor. The breeding distribution is localised to a few favoured swamps in the winter-rainfall dominant areas of south-east and south-west Australia. However, nomads are not uncommon anywhere on the continent. This species is a filter-feeder and forages in shallow water on the margins of swamps and lakes. They normally roost on stumps or posts or in dense vegetation during the day and move out to feed at dusk. In this region, pairs and small groups have been observed in every season, with flocks of up to 50 birds commoner in late summer, autumn and winter on the Lakes. No breeding record in the region.

MOUNTAIN DUCK Tadorna tadornoides

Common breeding resident. The breeding distribution is confined to the higher-rainfall areas of temperate Australia, including Tasmania. Canberra is near the northern limit of its range in southeast Australia. This species grazes aquatic and dryland herbage and favours large open bodies of water such as lakes and estuaries. In our area birds occupy territories and breed in winter. Following breeding, they congregate in large flocks (up to 2000 at Lake George) over the summer period. At this time flocks of up to 20 birds have been seen on Lake Burley Griffin. Winter records are few and are usually of paired birds.

BLACK DUCK Anas superciliosa

Common breeding resident. Extensive distribution in Oceania. In Australia it is most common in the Riverina and east coast. It prefers well-vegetated margins of dams, swamps, rivers and lakes. Pairs and small groups can be found in almost any water habitat in any season. large flocks are most common in summer and autumn when nomads from drying inland swamps seek refuge. However, flocks of up to 100 birds have been recorded in all seasons on Lake Burley Griffin. In this region breeding normally takes place in spring and summer, but may extend into autumn.

MALLARD Anas platyrhynchos

Introduced resident in small numbers on Lake Burley Griffin. The first record was of a single bird on the Molonglo River Flats on 13/8/67. Although naturalised in many city parks and water features in southern Australia it does not appear to have expanded its range as it has done in New Zealand. As there are reports of mallards being released on Lake Burley Griffin, all sightings should be reported.

GREY TEAL Anas gibberifrons

Common, breeding resident. Although birds are present at all seasons this may be the net result of fluxes into and out of the region, for it is an extreme nomad noted for long-distance movements. Pairs and small groups can be seen in almost any water habitat in any season, large flocks occurring in summer and autumn. Although breeding can be triggered off at any time by changes in water level, it occurs here in late winter and spring, and may extend into the summer.

October 1972

CHESTNUT TEAL Anas castanea

Resident breeder, far less common than the Grey Teal and in this area largely restricted to the larger lakes. The breeding distribution is limited to the higher-rainfall regions of temperate Australia, but vagrants occur well outside these limits. Breeding in this area is in spring and early summer on small islands in the lakes. During this period (September-November) there have been no records on Lake Burley Griffin. This is a dabbling duck which seldom leaves the water except to roost and nest. Small groups are present in summer, autumn and winter on Lake Burley Griffin with an occasional larger flock being reported in late summer.

SHOVELER Anas rhynchotis

Uncommon resident breeder. Essentially temperate in distribution, across southern Australia and also in New Zealand. It usually occurs as widely dispersed pairs or in small groups. It forages by filtering surface water, often in echelon formation. Breeding records for Lakes George and Bathurst suggest a spring breeding season. Post-breeding flocks in summer have been observed on the larger lakes and one flock of 40+ birds was seen on Lake Burley Griffin. Otherwise, pairs and small parties have been observed on this lake at all seasons.

PINK-EARED DUCK Malacorhynchus membranaceus

Irregular visitor; a few birds present at all times on the larger lakes. There are records for all seasons from Lake Burley Griffin, with an occasional larger flock in summer and autumn. This species is extremely nomadic, favouring as it does the more ephemeral lakes and floodouts of the inland, where it breeds. With the drying of these inland waters birds move in towards the higher rainfall areas for summer and autumn refuge. Occasionally in drought years, very large flocks have been observed on Lake George. It usually occurs in pairs, often in company with Grey Teal. The species is another filter-feeder, with a specially adapted fringed bill. No breeding record for the region.

WHITE-EYED DUCK Aythya australia

Regular visitor in small numbers. There is one breeding record for Lake Bathurst and one unconfirmed record of a female with one duckling at Sullivan's Inlet, Lake Burley Griffin (20/12/66). Extensive distribution throughout the continent, but it favours deep permanent lagoons and waterholes associated with the major rivers draining the Murray-Darling basin. This is a diving duck, rarely seen away from deep water. Although more abundant and commoner in summer, pairs and small flocks have been observed at all seasons on Lake Burley Griffin.

WOOD DUCK Chenonetta jubata

Common breeding resident. Continental in distribution, but nest common in the woodland habitats of eastern and southwestern Australia which have been developed for grazing and mixed-fanning. The species grazes emergent aquatic and dryland herbage and may be found foraging far from water. Large flocks occur on the margins of lakes, swamps and farm dams through summer, autumn and winter. In late winter and spring the birds disperse to breed throughout the region.

MUSK DUCK Biziura lobata

Breeding resident in small numbers. Restricted in distribution to southern Australia and Tasmania, where it favours permanent water fringed with dense reeds or rushes. This species forages by diving for aquatic insects, crustaceans and molluscs. It breeds locally on the swamp at Collector. There is no nesting record as yet from Lake Burley Griffin, where birds appear to be absent during the known breeding season from September to November. At other times it is present in small numbers.

BLUEBILLED DUCK Oxyura australis

Rare vagrant. Distribution restricted to southern Australia and Tasmania where it favours deep, permanent water with dense rushes and reeds. It forages on aquatic plants and insects by diving. The species nests in winter-spring in a few favoured locations in southeast and southwest Australia, but there are no records from our region. It is very secretive in summer, keeping to dense swamps. Larger flocks appear on lakes prior to breeding.

NOTES ON THE SMALL CRAKES

W.J. Vestjens

All three species of small crake - Marsh Crake Porzana pusilla, Spotted Crake Porzana fluminea and Spotless Crake Porzana tabuensis - have been recorded in the A.C.T. These birds are rarely seen due to their secretive habits and their favoured habitat of reeds or high grass near water. Their presence is usually given away by their calls, which, however, do not vary a lot between the species.

In the table below are some notes on plumage differences and size:-

	Marsh	Spotted	Spotless
Size:	Smaller than Starling	Similar to Starling	Similar to Starling
Bill:	Brown/green at base	Green/orange at base	All black
Iris:	Red	Red	Red
Legs:	Green-brown	Green	Red-brown
Back:	Light-brown with black streaks	Brown with green spots	Blue- black
Breast:	Grey-blue, lower half striped	Slate grey, lower half barred	All blue- black
Undertail:	White centre with few black bars, bordered light-brown	All-white centre bordered black	Black centre with few white bars

Further notes

The bills, which differ quite a lot, may become muddy when the birds are feeding; this also applies to the legs. The colours of back and breast may be obscured in the dense habitat because of the differential lighting. The undertail pattern is the important diagnostic feature. As the birds flick their tails constantly it becomes quite conspicuous.

Crakes occur in areas with about 90% water coverage, and follow declining water levels. At Lake Cowal during 1971 the Spotted Crake was a common bird in lignum. Concentrations of 35, 40 and 40 birds were found in three separate sites. Areas are divided up into territories - one 50 x 20 yard stretch covered by ten lignum bushes was occupied by seven pairs and two single birds.

The breeding season of the Spotted Crake ranges from August to December, that of the Marsh and Spotless Crakes from October to January. Nests are built on the ground or just above ground in vegetation and at least the Spotted Crake holds breeding territory

Feeding is done in the open on mud patches, mainly on insect larvae; when disturbed the birds run fast for cover. They can also swim and fly.

Tiger Snakes <u>Rotechis scutatus</u> seem to be the main predators of crakes at Lake Cowal.

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Note: Lake Cowal is a large, semi-permanent lake lying between West Wyalang and Forbes in Central New South Wales (Editor).

FIRST RECORD OF THE PECTORAL SANDPIPER

J. McNaughton

On September 17, 1972 at Kelly's Farm I noted a sandpiper which appeared different from the Sharptailed Sandpipers Calidris acuminata with which it was feeding. Although similar in size it seemed to stand more upright. It was heavily streaked with well-defined dark striations on the breast, reminiscent of a Speckled Warbler Chthonicola sagittata. There was an abrupt line of demarcation between the breast and the creamy-white belly. The legs were muddy and their colour could not be determined. The rest of the plumage was similar to a Sharptailed Sandpiper's.

The bird was watched for about two minutes with 8 x 30 binoculars from a distance of about 18 feet. I identified it as a Pectoral Sandpiper Calidris melanotos and hereby submit the record as a new species for the A.C.T. (The record has been accepted - Editor).

COLOUR-BANDED CURRAWONGS

During the last winter B. Baker and S. Davey have banded 850 Pied Currawongs <u>Strepera graculina</u>, 80 of them with colour bands. Three colour bands were used on one leg and a CSIRO band on the other leg. Information is requested from the public on any birds sighted, particularly the colours and the leg on which they are. B. Baker can be contacted on 819620 during working hours.

RECORD REVIEW

Australian Bird Calls Index - Series I, W. Australia

(Record available from John N. Hutchinson, Gascoyne Research Station, Carnarvon, W.A. \$5 incl. postage)

There are recordings of 50 species on this record ranging from the Emu to the Crow (<u>Corvus orru</u>) via the Bluewinged Kookaburra, White-breasted Whistler and Blackthroated Butcherbird, to name a few. The recordings were made by Mr Hutchinson himself except for three provided by Norman Robinson -the Emu, White-tailed Black Cockatoo and Noisy Scrub Bird.

This is a very useful record for those interested in bird calls and their regional variations as the calls are all from Western Australia, whereas all other records on the market known to this reviewer were made in the eastern States. In this context it is of interest to compare some of the birds of Western Australia (e.g. the Whiteplumed Honeyeater and Whitewinged Sittella) with the same or closely related species in the east. This record also has the calls of three shrike-thrushes - the Western, Brown and Brown-breasted - which can be compared with the local Grey Shrike-thrush, and this allows the listener to pick out the intra-generic similarities and differences.

Some interesting tracks include the Yellow-nosed Albatross, Barking Owl, Blackeared Cuckoo and Northern Fantail. There is also a long and varied recording of a Wedgebill.

To sum up - this is an excellent record well worth buying for two reasons. Firstly, it is a very inexpensive way of visiting Western Australia to hear some of the species there. Secondly, it can be used to brush up on local birdcalls, because at least 20 of these recordings are of species which occur in New South Wales, such as the Whistling Kite, Rainbowbird, White-breasted Woodswallow, etc.

GSC

BOOK REVIEW

Wildflowers of the A.C.T.

Jacaranda Wildflower Guide No. 6 \$1.95

Thelina and George Chippendale

Just over three pages at the beginning of this new Jacaranda pocket guide give a short introduction to the flora communities of the A.C.T. and their distribution. There then follows a full description and photograph of 51 common wildflowers of the Territory. The photographs are excellent but if there can be any criticism of the book it is that they are close-ups of the flowers and do not show the whole plant. This might have been more useful for recognition purposes.

On balance, a well-presented little book which is especially useful for people who wish to learn some of the more common wildflowers in our area.

GSC

COG ACTIVITIES

August 9

Mr David Purchase gave an excellent review of the achievements to date of the Australian Bird-Banding Scheme, of which he is Secretary. Added visual impact to his talk was provided by the CSIRO film "Birdbanding in Australia" which was later shown to the appreciative audience.

The following excerpts are taken from Mr Purchase's) article on the Scheme published in Australian Natural History, Vol.16, No.6.

The Australian Bird-Banding Scheme, as well as providing a technical service of great importance to the bird investigations being carried out by the CSIRO Division of Wildlife Research, is enabling non-professional ornithologists to conduct studies of a high scientific calibre. It has also brought Australia into line with other developed countries in the world, many of which possess officially sponsored schemes. (...)

The type of banding being undertaken varies from the detailed study of the behaviour of a few birds in a suburban garden to the large-scale banding of one species in order to obtain records of migration. Another type of banding is in the regular operation of permanent banding stations, from which data can be obtained about the seasonal fluctuations and movements of bird populations, especially passerines.

Over the years, research programmes of the Division of Wildlife Research have benefited greatly from the wider banding coverage made possible by the participation of amateur banders. Examples include the work being carried out on the Short-tailed Shearwater and on water-fowl, ravens, cormorants, pigeons and doves.

September 13

Owing to the unexpected early departure of Dr van Tets for Christmas Island, his talk had to be cancelled, and two films were borrowed at short notice from the South African Embassy to fill the gap. The longer film was a travelogue which did, however, contain some footage about wildlife. The second film was a fast-moving account of the capture of 100 White Rhinos in the Umfolosi Game Reserve for transfer to other parks and zoos. The huge beasts were brought down with tranquilliser darts fired from a rifle. They appeared none the worse for this experience and soon settled into their new homes.

October 4

The Chatham Islands, a small group about 500 miles east of New Zealand, were the subject of a fascinating talk by Mr Brian Bell, a wildlife officer who has organised several expeditions to study their avifauna. After a general account of the islands' history and development since their occupation first by Polynesians and later by Europeans, Mr Bell detailed the problems of conservation posed by a pastoral economy and the introduction of all kinds of alien animals which have run wild. These latter include pigs, sheep, cats and rats. The pigs and sheep have caused serious erosion in some parts, while cats and rats have wrought havoc on the ground- or burrow-nesting birds. Sheep have now been shot out on the smaller islands, and control measures are being taken against the other aliens. A goodly array of colour slides showed the island habitat and some of the birds found there.

CONTENTS page

Changes in Avifauna at Minnamurra Palls Reserve	
- Peter Fielding	2
Field Identification of Some Local Honeyeaters	
- S.J. Wilson	8
The Gullbilled Tern - a new Species	10
Waders in Plenty	10
The Status of Birds in Canberra and District	11
Notes on the Small Crakes	
- W.J. Vestjens	17
First Record of the Pectoral Sandpiper	
- J. McNaughton	19
Record Review	20
Book Review	21
C.O.G. Activities	22

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