

Yellowhead Flyway Birding Trail Association Inc.

# What's flying around....



## YFBTA to Host Fall Meet of Nature Sask

- Walter Farquharson

An energetic committee is already hard at work planning for the Fall Meet of Nature Sask to be held at Saltcoats September 25-27, 2009. The newly renovated Saltcoats Community Hall will be the place for members and guests to register upon arrival and the place where all events, except the field trips, will take place.

The YFBTA was a fledgling organization when it hosted Nature Sask in the autumn of 2004. It is particularly appropriate, in this sixtieth anniversary year of Nature Sask, that the meet be held in this area. Some very formative work, including the first publication of *The Blue Jay*, was done in this area. Isabel Priestly of Yorkton was one of the pioneers concerned with the celebration of the natural world and the need for solid educational work in areas of conservation and habitat preservation. She was an inspiration to many, including Dr. Stuart Houston whose work with birds



**Saltcoats and District Community Hall**

*Murals by Joan Wilson and volunteers*

*Photo by Joan Wilson*

and in nature conservation is legendary.

The planning committee will also assure that there are events or exploratory opportunities at local points of interest (subject to pre-registration) on both the Friday afternoon before the official opening of the Fall Meet and again on Sunday afternoon as people head off after the conclusion of the Annual General Meeting. There will be opportunity for people to sign up for bag lunches to take with them Sunday.

Two full day bus tours and two half day tours will occupy Saturday prior to the banquet and program in the evening. One of the full day tours will involve travelling to the Whitesand River and enjoying a river boat tour. The other full day option will follow a route through Churchbridge to Esterhazy and will include a stop at the Potash Interpretive Centre in Esterhazy and a visit to the Kaposvar Trail and other nearby areas that are usually rich in opportunities for birding and other

### Inside this issue:

YFBTA to host fall meet Walter Farquharson	1
Habitat loss and the .. Nicole Koper	2
A Place Worth Visiting Don and Marleen Brock	4
Clark's Nutcracker Sighting Edith Mann	5
An Improvement in the Odds - Rob Wilson	7

<http://www.yfbta.com>

explorations of flora and fauna. The morning half-day tour will involve time at the Barvas Marsh, and at Cherrydale Golf Course and Nature Trails. The afternoon half-day tour will involve time at Sloughview Park and on the Leflay Trail. Many of these trails are described in detail on the YFBTA website.

Combine such adventures with lots of good food, opportunity to visit with old acquaintances and make new friends, several displays, a kiosk and a silent auction, and all are assured a great experience as Nature Sask celebrates its 60th anniversary. A photography workshop with photographer Larry Easton will be available as an adjunct to the meet and will occur on Friday, September 25. The cost for this workshop is \$20.00 for adults and \$10.00 for students. While it is hoped that most people attending will be able to participate in the full package of activities and opportunities, additional tickets will be available for the tours only, for the Friday evening reception and program and for the Saturday banquet. Early registration is encouraged as it means a commitment and a date saving for each of us and provides a great help to local planners.

### **Isabel M. Priestly** **Mary I. Houston**

Isabel M. (*née* Adnams) Priestly was born on July 25, 1893, near Newbury, Berkshire, England. An avid botanist, she gave up advanced studies, married a Canadian soldier, Robert J. Priestly, and came with him to Canada. Active in natural history groups in Calgary and Victoria, she developed an interest in [BIRDS](#) in Winnipeg. On moving to Yorkton, she led nature walks, reported sightings in a weekly nature column in the *Yorkton Enterprise*, and made botanical collections. She and her group of enthusiasts compiled a list of birds of the Yorkton area, which created interest province wide. This led to formation of the Yorkton Natural History Society (of which she was president) and to the publication of the quarterly *Blue Jay* (of which she was editor). She encouraged reports from amateurs and professionals alike, with a steady rise in membership and recognition across the continent. She died unexpectedly in Yorkton on April 23, 1946. Cliff Shaw edited the *Blue Jay* until 1948, when a province wide society, the Saskatchewan Natural History Society, was formed to carry on the work she had begun.



**Sprague's Pipit**  
*Photo by Jennifer Lusk*

## **Habitat loss and the conservation of prairie songbirds**

**Nicola Koper**  
**Assistant Professor**  
**University of Manitoba**

The first impression of southern Canadians in the "prairie" provinces is that we are surrounded by endless extents of prairies. Of course, as naturalists, we recognize that this is not the case. Prairies have undergone more habitat destruction, and yet have the least protection, of any biome world-wide. Canada has experienced extensive loss of its native prairies, and the moister the prairie, the more likely it is that it has been converted to other habitat types. In Manitoba, our tall-grass prairies are almost completely extirpated. Conservationists are left to manage tiny remnant fragments of this native prairie, which now represent much less than 1% of its historical range in our province.

Saskatchewan is a little better off, as its arid southern regions have not been kind to homesteaders and agriculturalists. Nonetheless, almost 80% of Saskatchewan's prairies have been converted to other habitat types, usually cropland or hayland, but sometimes also through succession to aspen parkland. The conversion rate is probably higher in the regions around the Yellowhead flyway trails, as it is moister than in the south-west. This both enhances succession towards forested systems, and provides more bountiful opportunities for agriculturalists.

A great deal of my work has been on effects of habitat amount and fragmentation on prairie songbirds. Some of my study species include Baird's sparrows, Sprague's pipits, Savannah sparrows, and chestnut-collared and McCown's longspurs. Many of these species have shown extraordinary declines over the last 4 or 5 decades. For example, Sprague's pipit

populations have declined by 70% since the late 1960s. Much of this probably results from habitat loss and fragmentation, as well as degradation of prairie habitats. Many species show area sensitivity, meaning that they are more likely to occur, and will have higher densities, in larger prairies. Many species also avoid habitats near the edges of prairies... our research has demonstrated, for example, that Sprague's pipits, a grassland specialist, have reduced densities more than a kilometer away from cropland and forage habitats, indicating that they are avoiding anthropogenic habitat types across vast distances. You can imagine what a significant effect this has on the availability of grassland habitat suitable for Sprague's pipits.

The existing grassland habitats have also been significantly altered from their historically natural state, but perhaps not for the reasons that you expect. The massive and strongly influential bison herds are more or less gone. Natural wildfire has been severely suppressed, both actively, through human intervention, and because the fragmentation of native prairies would influence fire behaviour even if it were allowed to burn. The absence of these sources of natural disturbance has significantly altered native prairies that exist in southern Canada.

Ironically, it has been our careful management of native prairies that has compromised the survival of some prairie songbirds. Most pastures in southern Canada are moderately grazed. This provides the highest economic benefit in the long run, as well as sustaining prairies for the long term. Many of our prairie songbirds, including Sprague's pipits, are quite tolerant of cattle grazing. However, some prairie birds depend on either heavily grazed, or lightly / ungrazed prairies, and there are very few of these more extreme habitat types left on the landscape. Some species even depend on both of these... burrowing owl juveniles tend to hunt grasshoppers and other species that are more easily found in heavily grazed pastures, while adults prefer hunting small mammals, which are more abundant in dense and tall grassland vegetation. While it is probable that the ideal *average* stocking rate for conserving the most songbird species is a moderate one, a more optimal solution would be to promote a patchy habitat of ungrazed, moderately grazed, and heavily grazed pastures across vast regions of the remaining prairies.

Protected areas play an important role in protecting these less common, and less economically viable, prairie habitats. The Grasslands National Park management plan, for example, proposes that small areas within its boundaries should be heavily grazed, while many areas remain ungrazed. This is the best way that it can complement the relatively moderately

grazed habitats available in its surrounding landscape.

Crown lands have clearly made an essential contribution to the conservation of prairie songbirds. Most Crown lands have continued to be under active use, but most songbird species are quite tolerant of moderate grazing on native prairies, and indeed probably benefit from it. While non-native grasslands sometimes have lower densities of prairie songbirds, given the virtual extirpation of some native prairie types, non-native grasslands have probably played a significant role in reducing the rates of decline of prairie songbirds.

Many private lands have also made a critical contribution towards the conservation of prairies and their wildlife. Indeed, I have met many landowners who demonstrate a clear respect for the prairie landscape, and a strong desire to conserve it while generating a healthy livelihood at the same time. Nonetheless, the risk of transferring crown lands to private hands is that grasslands are more likely to be converted to cropland or hayland ... and few prairie songbirds are tolerant of habitat conversion. The Government of Saskatchewan has announced that it will be selling 1.6 million acres of Crown lands over the next 5 years, most of which consist of grasslands. If landowners preserve these lands and continue to ranch them, they will continue to make a major contribution to the conservation of prairie birds. However, if they are converted for other agricultural purposes, this will affect not just the habitat suitability of the converted grassland, but, because many songbirds are sensitive to distance to habitat edge, the suitability of adjacent grasslands as well.

My research has recently demonstrated that over the last 2 decades, Manitoba has lost a further 37% of its remaining tall-grass prairie remnants. Clearly, despite our society's increasing interest in conserving our environment, there is an insidious trend towards further degradation of an already crippled ecosystem. Prairies, and prairie songbirds, need pretty much all the help they can get, from governments, NGOs, and individuals.

### Receive This Newsletter

You may receive this newsletter by becoming a member of the Yellowhead Flyway Birding Trail Association. See Page 8 for details. Membership fees: Single - \$15:00 : Family - \$25:00 : Corporate - \$50.00. Newsletter is published 3 or 4 times per year.



### Saw-whet Owl

*Photo Courtesy Don and Marleen Brock*

## A Place Worth Visiting

After sampling life in several areas of our fair province, Don's teaching career led us to Kamsack. At the time, we considered it nothing more than a "pit-stop" in our life's journey. Little did we know that it was to become a long term love affair with the surrounding country-side. While out Sunday driving, we discovered the most amazing little valley and I remember remarking that, "I would just love to live here". Well, a piece of land came up for sale and our dream became a reality.

Just a piece of hilly and rocky land eventually became Border Mountain Country Bed and Breakfast. Nestled in the Little Boggy Creek Valley, it is part of the larger Assiniboine River Valley System and is bordered by the beautiful Duck Mountains, not far from the Saskatchewan / Manitoba Border; hence, the name. It is an ideal area for observing wildlife of all kinds, so it goes without saying, it's an ideal area for bird-watching. I would not profess to be an avid bird watcher, but I do spend a lot of time in the great outdoors and enjoy happening upon any of nature's creatures from time to time. Our backyard feeder attracts an amazing variety of species, which we would otherwise rarely see. In winter we have daily visits from chickadees, Redpolls (Hoary and Common), Pine and Evening Grosbeaks, nuthatches, Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers and Blue Jays. Not to mention the occasional

visits from the local magpie clan. We are always excited to catch a glimpse of a Pileated Woodpecker. In summer we watch goldfinch, purple finches, Rose Breasted Grosbeaks, hummingbirds and sometimes orioles. White Throated Sparrows, phoebes, House and Barn Swallows make our yard their home. The area is abundant with hawks, ravens, owls and Turkey Vultures. Nearby Little Boggy Creek attracts ducks, geese, Blue Herons and White Swans, as well as smaller water fowl. Spring and fall brings our stop-over migrating friends. We never know who we might encounter. (A hike-in wilderness cabin affords an ideal opportunity for wildlife viewing and photography.)

One summer we were excited to discover an adorable little Saw-whet Owl trapped in our wild turkey pen. Before rescuing him, I donned leather gloves, but soon discovered they were unnecessary, as it was a very gentle creature. The turkeys were not impressed to have it settle on the roost beside them. When we set it free, it perched on a tree above the pen and appeared to want to stay with the turkeys. We suspect that it must have fallen from a nearby nest, or got lost on a practice flight. "Hope it was reunited with its mom."

The surrounding hillsides are forever changing. It is common to see deer or elk grazing or basking in the sun. This winter we were thrilled by the sight of a herd of 40 elk, which we could easily observe from our dining room window. We had not seen them in that great number for some years. On another occasion a moose sauntered by. The coyotes keep our dog occupied with their nightly chorus and are often a bit too brazen for my liking. Then there is the howl of the Timber-wolf! It is like no other sound on earth. It demands immediate respect as all other night time sounds cease.

The surrounding woods and meadows offer an abundance of varieties of flora and fauna. Prairie Lilies and Lady Slippers can still be found in large numbers. I have been told that there are rare species of plants to be found in this area. While on a trek through the woods in our back yard, I was excited to come upon a plant I had never seen before. As soon as I arrived back home I looked it up in my *Wildflowers, Across the Prairies* book. It turned out to be a large clump of Indian-pipe! I don't know if that is so rare. I have not seen any since then or in any other place.

And of course, my most favorite way of enjoying nature is on the back of a horse. It is very easy to come upon and surprise wild creatures, when riding, as they do not sense danger from a horse. I have seen coyotes, fox, pine martins, beaver, porcupine, a family of baby skunks, bear, deer, elk, moose, and many species of birds; all at very close range. A good deal of

my riding is done in the fall when the mosquito activity has subsided and the hills are changing to their magnificent fall colors. In my life, a day spent out in nature on the back of a horse could never be wasted.

Border Mountain Country Bed and Breakfast is a great area for hiking, cycling or horseback riding. Note: The Trans-Canada Trail passes near by on its way to Duck Mountain Provincial Park.

**Marleen and Don Brock**  
*Border Mountain Country Bed and Breakfast.*



## Clark's Nutcracker Sighting- December 2008

**Edith Mann**

We live in the village of Togo which is nestled in a "border - pocket" of the Parkland, about halfway between Kamsack and Roblin, Manitoba.

Our area is blessed with abundant wildlife habitat due to the Assiniboine River Valley to the south and west, the Duck Mountains to the north, north-east and the Boggy Creek Valley to the east. There are plenty of trees, particularly large spruce, in the village itself.

Our birdfeeders are tucked in the west, bushy corner of our yard where there's spruce, chokecherries, elderberry and poplar. As our kitchen windows allow a view of the birdbath and feeders, we can watch "Bird TV" during all daylight

hours. Our common winter visitors are Evening and Pine Grosbeaks, chickadees, nuthatches, redpolls, Blue Jays, Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers, along with some pesky magpies.

One December morning, prior to Christmas, I stared as three Blue Jays and an unusual black and white, crow-like bird jostled each other for space at the large feeder. Its striking black and white plumage, long, sharply pointed bill and boldness of a Gray Jay made me think it belonged to the Jay-Crow-Magpie Family. I checked my *National Audubon Field Guide to North American Birds* (Western) and there it was, a Clark's Nutcracker! However, the Range Map said this shouldn't be possible so I felt quite deflated.

Several days later, my guest reappeared by itself and checked out the yard more thoroughly. It very cockily sat on the "hummer feeder" pole right in front of the kitchen window! I only had time for a mental picture before it flew away. This time I consulted my new *Smithsonian Field Guide to Birds of North America* (2008) which has updated Range Maps. This map showed that rare sightings are possible for this area.

Satisfied, I included a Clark's Nutcracker in my Christmas bird count.

**Edith Mann / Togo, Saskatchewan**  
*Photo by Edith Mann*



## Barred Owl Sighting at Good Spirit

*Photo by Terry Popoff*

Joan and I were skiing and saw this cool bird. After we arrived home we searched to see what kind of bird it was and discovered that it was a Barred Owl. We took this picture - not that great, but it still shows what it is. - *Terry and Joan Popoff*



George and Laurie Murray

### **George has been a member of the YFBTA Board of Directors since 2007**

George has been married to Laurie for 31 years. Together they have three children, Jamie, Derek, Lisa and 3 grandchildren Wynter, Dustin, Jorga.

George and Laurie live north east of Saltcoats on the same farm where George himself was raised. Upon completion of his formal education George began farming, a vocation he has stayed with for over 40 years. At present the farm operation includes cattle and grain. In years previous George operated a broiler hatching egg flock, which he terminated about 10 years ago.

When George was asked to describe his favourite spot on the farm, he responded that he loves to be in the yard. In the summer, Laurie plants and tends to various flowers and they have a deck where he sits and enjoys the view. In the winter, this same spot on the deck is where he watches the birds. The two types of birds that he enjoys watching the most are robins and chickadees. George jokingly blames fellow YFBTA member George Maben for getting him involved in the YFBTA. He has a deep appreciation for nature and enjoys the opportunity that living on a farm affords him. However, if he could visit any place George says that it would be nice to go away and escape an entire Saskatchewan winter and the -40C

temperatures.

#### ***Other organizational involvement:***

- Broiler Hatching Egg Board (founding member)
- Chatsworth Curling Club
- Saskatchewan Wheat Pool
- Yorkton Natural History Society

#### ***Personal Goal:***

One personal goal that he has set is to learn more about the computer and to become comfortable working on a computer.

The legacy that he would like to leave for his grandchildren is that they would enjoy being on the farm.

**Lauretta Ritchie-McInnes**

## ***YFBTA Loon Initiatives 2009***

***Rob Wilson***

***Here is an update on some of the ongoing workings of the Loon Initiatives Committee of The YFBTA:***

1. Completion of a loon video documenting loons nesting on Madge Lake. Raymond Lacusta intends to complete the filming at Madge Lake this summer. YFBTA hopes to have copies of Mr. Lacusta's video for its own educational uses and for use by Duck Mountain Provincial Park before the end of the year.
2. Distribution of a coloured pamphlet educating park users about loons and about behaviours and/or actions that support the concept of Madge Lake as a "loon-friendly" lake. YFBTA through The Loon Initiatives Committee has received funding from a number of sources enabling plans for printing and distribution of a pamphlet throughout Duck Mountain Provincial Park to be realized.
3. YFBTA will pay for loon monitoring on Madge Lake throughout the summer of 2009. This includes recording and then reporting to The Canadian Lakes Loon Survey (CLLS) program (a component of Bird Studies Canada). Results will be shared with the park superintendent at Madge Lake. The cost to YFBTA is \$35.00.
4. YFBTA through the Loon Initiatives Committee has extended an invitation to the Madge Lake Cottage Owners' Association to

join in the loon initiatives partnership. Arrangements have been made to have this invitation included in an annual mailing from the government to park lease-holders. Currently the partnership includes Nature Saskatchewan, The Yellowhead Flyway Birding Trail Association (YFBTA) and Duck Mountain Provincial Park.

5. The Loon Initiatives Committee intends to meet this summer. We are looking for additional members, especially persons who spend a lot of time on Madge Lake. Contact YFBTA if you are willing to participate in surveys and / or if you have an interest in serving on the committee.

## **An Improvement in the Odds: A Sky of Relief over Yorkton - Rob Wilson**

In 2008 during the period of the fall migration, members of the board of directors of YFBTA heard that birds migrating during the night were dying as a result of the “tipi lights” shining into the skies over Yorkton (There are six 4000 watt spotlights. The combined light output amounts to ‘just over 2 billion candlepower’ – that’s approximately equivalent to the output of 13 million 100 watt bulbs).

Working to promote awareness of a possible problem YFBTA informed The Painted Hand Casino. We received a positive response in October from the casino indicating a sharing of the concerns and outlining five actions taken (refer to Issue 1, 2009 of *What’s flying around...*, our newsletter) by SIGA in efforts to reduce the harm.

As I write, another migration period is underway. I have researched and can now report upon the current state of affairs. Be reminded that I am an amateur birder and in no way an expert on any of the following matters. I am however, like some of you, a concerned naturalist who wants to be part of a solution.

What actions are being taken this spring to reduce negative impacts of lights over Yorkton? A phone call to Environment Saskatchewan informed me that officials in that office are very aware of concerns expressed last fall. Environment Saskatchewan intends to be in contact with The Painted Hand Casino (at the time of preparation of this editorial) for discussions regarding the spring migration. These same officials stated that cooperation and communication between Environment Saskatchewan and The Painted Hand Casino had been excellent last fall. Environment Saskatchewan has already recommended

that a monitoring system be established by the Painted Hand Casino. .

Environment Saskatchewan wants to be informed about birds seen fluttering in lights over Yorkton and encourages reporting. People are also invited to express concerns. Officials told me that they are unaware of data pertaining to lighting issues and migrating birds in Saskatchewan but they are aware of data collected in the United States that indicates high bird mortality during migration has been observed around lighted buildings, towers and lights shining into the sky. This certainly suggests that there are reasonable and probable grounds for local concerns.

A phone call to our friend Dr. Stuart Houston and some enquiries on his part led me to some free advice from Stan Shadick who is acknowledged to be a bird expert in Saskatoon. Mr. Shadick suggested that if lights were turned off during peak migration times (approx. May 07 – June 07 in spring migration and Aug. 15 – Sept. 15 in fall migration) nighttime mortality could be reduced significantly. Mr. Shadick reported that most of the smaller birds do migrate at night.

Here is a sentence from an article on migration published in the U.S.: *“Most long-distance passerine migrants, travelling from temperate or arctic breeding areas, depart an hour or two after sunset...., fly chiefly at night and usually land at dawn”* To that, I add: when they would require rest, shelter and food.

I have been in contact with The Saskatchewan Indian Gaming Authority (SIGA). I am pleased to provide a statement received from Stephen Shaheen, the Director of Communications and Media Relations: *“...our company has reduced the number of lights to a standard six and have limited the number of hours of operation of the tipi lights. As a part of our commitment, we will observe a dark out period during the spring and fall migration which will last approximately four weeks at the Painted Hand Casino. Additionally, the company will implement a practice of turning off the lights when birds are observed in the lighting system. As a First Nations organization, we are very sensitive to environmental issues and are committed to doing our part to ensure natural wildlife is protected.”*

I am assured that the staff at the Painted Hand Casino “are very aware of the procedures regarding the lights. If there is any evidence of any birds in the lights, please contact the casino and ask for the Operations Manager or manager on duty. This will ensure that this is dealt with in a quick fashion”. I am not certain

if they wish to receive reports of dead birds. I do not know if they will accept emails and digital photos but it is apparent to me that The Painted Hand Casino is “walking the walk”.

I would like to remind you, valued YFBTA member, that night lighting is merely one of many factors that impact negatively upon the birds migrating across our region. When I am working in the schools I often ask students to raise a hand if a bird has died as a result of flying into one of the windows at home. Usually most of the students raise a hand. The collective deaths must be nothing less than a slaughter. The loss of stopping places, the disappearance of native plants and accompanying insects, the draining of shallow water bodies and the incessant release of pollutants and toxins into our water and air result in migration difficulties. Fragmentation of habitat provides a short term advantage to predators (including household pets). Wires, towers and vehicles exact victims.

The ways in which each of us manage our driving habits, our wastes, our homes and our pets will impact positively or negatively on individual birds in our yards, acreages or farms. Do what you can to protect the birds.

## The Last Word

I would like to welcome new readers of the YFBTA newsletter. This will be the first issue to be printed in excess of 300 copies.

Rob Wilson and I appreciate all the support and information received in the preparation of articles for this newsletter. The articles and personal stories shared in this and past newsletters are those to which we can all relate. The contributions were superb!

I would like to introduce Paula Maier who has become the newest member of the Board of Directors for the YFBTA. Paula has been a member and a great supporter of this group for years.

I would like to thank a number of individuals who have played an important part in producing this newsletter. Walter Farquharson has

been our faithful proof reader since its beginning. While Rob and I receive credit for publishing the newsletter, I must admit that Walter plays an integral part in giving the newsletter a professional look. Joan Wilson has also diligently proofread newsletters and given it the teacher’s constructive suggestions. Joan is an expert on wild flowers and an accomplished artist. Jim and Shirley Jowsey, both experts in identifying flowers, birds and wildlife, also assist by distributing the newsletter to local members. Our organization would never be the same without these individuals.

Members of the YFBTA and I would like to extend our sincere appreciation to Kim Wondrasek GM of Yellowhead REDA for the invaluable assistance she has given to this organization since its organization. Thanks Kim. Best wishes in whatever you do.

In February, we received an outstanding donation from Mary Tatham and Richlu Manufacturing (clothing) in Winnipeg which was auctioned to raise funds for the YFBTA. Richlu Manufacturing is a distributor of quality clothing to major retailers including Sears and Work Warehouse. We would like to express our appreciation to Ms. Tatham and Richlu Manufacturing for their generous gifts to our organization.

There are few people who are so dedicated as members of the YFBTA. When it comes to planning meetings, conferences, working on birding trails, building and distributing bird houses - doing workshops in schools - or whatever - they put their heart and soul into it.

We have distinguished members from various parts of Saskatchewan who receive our newsletter and keep in touch even though they are unable to be physically active in our group. We appreciate their concern, support and suggestions.

To those who have received this newsletter and are not members - we invite you to become a member and receive our eight page - color newsletter. All contributions to our newsletter are welcome.

Please check the <http://www.yfbta.com> website for information regarding future YFBTA meetings and major events to be held in this area.

All members will receive a hard copy of this newsletter along with a pamphlet in this mailing. You may request a PDF form to be sent by email in the future - if you wish . - **John Sawkey / Publisher / Webmaster**

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