

Middle-western Prairie Region

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Winter precipitation was above normal and, following a hard freeze in late December, January was unusually cold. Moderate December temperatures across the Region resulted in a multitude of lingering migrants. Subsequent, frigid mid-winter conditions, however, pushed enormous gull flocks southward into Missouri and Kentucky, allowing birders in southern reaches of the Region to hone their gull identification skills (which they exercised with adeptness). Also forced southward, perhaps due to the deep snow that blanketed the northern Great Plains, were abnormally high numbers of ground-feeding Lapland Longspurs and Snow Buntings.

Highlights of the winter season included a reinforcement of the autumn Snowy Owl invasion, an incursion of western corvids, a superb rarities list, and excellent northern owls. Speaking of owls, Robert

Cecil invoked a frostbelt version of the "Patagonia Picnic Table Effect," to explain the detection of Ferruginous Hawk, Northern Goshawk, and Prairie Falcon, following the discovery of two Great Gray Owls in northern Iowa.

Abbreviations: H.B.S.P (*Headlands Beach S.P., OH*); Jax.P. (*Jackson Park on the Chicago lakefront*); L. Cal. (*L. Calumet, Chicago*); R.E.D.A (*Riverlands Environmental Demonstration Area, MO*); Spfld. (*Springfield, IL*).

Loons to Swans

Following last fall's heavy flight, five Red-throated Loons lingered on s. L. Michigan into early December; the largest count consisted of two at Illinois Beach S.P., Dec. 7 (PS) and the latest was at Miller Beach, IN Dec. 14 (Jcd, JMc, JWh). Pacific Loons were even more impressive, with one at Illinois Beach S.P., Dec. 7 (ASt), two immatures at Crooked L., *Steuben, IN* Dec. 7-10 (†Haw, †JCd *et al.*), and three at Crab Orchard N.W.R., IL Dec. 25 (RD). In contrast, Com. Loons were scarce. The only concentration of wintering Horned Grebe occurred in *Gibson, IN*, where numbers peaked at 139 Feb. 2 (JCb, ML, AT). Small numbers of Am. White Pelicans were reported from s. portions of the Region; the most noteworthy count consisted of 35 at L. Barkley, KY Feb. 28 (DR). One of the winter's most surprising discoveries was a Neotropic Cormorant at Horseshoe Lake W.M.A., IL Jan. 3 (KMc, MD). A very tardy Green Heron was seen in Mitchell Forest, OH

Dec. 7-15 (NC *vide* NK). Winter period Black-crowned Night-Herons included eight near Roxanna Pond, IN Dec. 28 (JB), one on the Little Calumet R., *Cook, IL* Dec. 28 (M. Baker, *vide* WM), and 21 in Cleveland Feb. 25 (NB).

Waterfowl

An impressive 283 Tundra Swans were counted at Ottawa N.W.R., OH Jan. 5 (EP *et al.*). The peak Mute Swan count was 90 at Wolf L., IL Feb. 8 (WM). Recent expansion of the Greater White-fronted Goose population was verified by reports from every state; noteworthy reports included >600 at Clinton L., IL Feb. 22 (RCh), five at McElroy L., KY Jan. 2-5 (DR), eight at Columbus, OH Jan. 10-Feb. 26 (JWa), and one at Berlin Res., OH Feb. 9 (BL). Perhaps even more remarkable were Ross' Geese, which were reported in all 4 states e. of the Mississippi River. The southernmost Ross' were at McElroy L., KY, where four were seen Feb. 7-19 (DR, BPB, J&PB); singletons wandered eastward to *Lorain, OH* Jan. 12 (†CH) and Columbus, OH Feb. 25 (JWa, ph.). The only Brants consisted of Ohio singletons (or perhaps a single bird) at Middleton Jan. 1 (†JDu, ST), West Carrollton Jan. 28 (JDu, GB, ST), Lakewood Feb. 1 & 3 (TL, †PMu), and Avon L., Feb. 2 (TF).

Following the pattern of recent winters, puddle duck numbers were high, especially along the Mississippi River. The 50 Blue-winged Teal at Hickman Bottoms, KY Feb. 28 (CP) were a harbinger of spring. Other significant dabbling reports included a midwinter Gadwall in n. *Dickinson, IA* Jan. 12 (LS) and a ♂ Eur. Wigeon at Moraine View S.P., IL Feb. 18 (†BP). Noteworthy bay duck reports included 7500 Canvasbacks in *Hancock, IL* Feb. 25 (VK), 3000 Greater Scaup along the Indiana lakefront Feb. 15 (KB *et al.*), 12,845 Com. Goldeneye on the upper Mississippi R., IL Jan. 6 (MG), and 7300 Bufflehead in the Nauvoo/Keokuk area of the Mississippi R. (MG). A ♀ Harlequin Duck lingered at Willmette, IL, until Dec. 27 (EW, RHu), two were reported at Ottawa N.W.R., Jan. 5 (EP, RHu, SW), and a first-winter male was at Eastlake, OH Feb. 2 (†PMu). Small numbers of sea ducks were scattered across the Region, with Oldsquaw, Black Scoters, and White-winged Scoters reported in every state except Missouri. Black Scoters were unusually widespread; one immature/female pressed southward to Kentucky, where it was seen above Barkley Dam, KY Dec. 11 (BPB). One-two White-winged Scoters were also at Mel-



dahl Dam, KY Feb. 15–23 (FR). Reports from Iowa suggest that Hooded Merganser numbers were down (RCe).

Vultures to Shorebirds

The 19 Black Vultures seen in *Holmes*, OH Dec. 21 (LY) were unexpected. A Turkey Vulture, "feeding on a road kill," near Irvington, IA Dec. 10 (J.W. Gardner, *vide* MK), was well n. of this species normal wintering range. Most surprising was an Osprey seen hunting along the Ohio R. near the mouth of the Miami R. in s.w. Ohio Jan. 25 (PW). Topping the winter Bald Eagle surveys was a record 2459 birds (63% adult and 28% immature) in Illinois (*vide* RD). Other eagle survey results included 1188 in Iowa (PP, K. McKay) and 138 in Indiana (JCs). In c. Illinois, Danley deemed N. Harrier numbers very poor; however, McKenzie counted >50 in s.w. Missouri in mid-February. Only nine N. Goshawks were reported in the Region: five in Illinois and four in Iowa. An unusual event occurred at a Marshalltown, IA; an ad. Red-shouldered Hawk regularly visited a feeder where "a lady fed it chicken necks" (MP). "Harlen's" Red-tailed Hawks wintered at Carlyle L. (DK) and Union County W.M.A., IL (RD), and another was seen in *Nelson*, KY Dec. 28 (BPB). An extremely well-described imm. **Ferruginous Hawk** was seen in *Cerro Gordo*, IA Feb. 12 & 16 (†CFs, †JF, †TK, †JD, †SD *et al.*). Rough-legged Hawk numbers were low in Illinois, Indiana, and Kentucky. It was a good winter for Golden Eagles, with reports from every state except Ohio. Two Golden Eagles moved S to Kentucky, where an adult and immature were seen in Bernheim Forest Dec. 28 (BPB). According to Larry Rosche, Am. Kestrels are doing poorly in n.e. Ohio. The Region's Merlin winter count remained high, with 20 reports scattered across every state except Kentucky. Above-normal Prairie Falcon numbers were logged in the w. states, with four in Missouri and three in Iowa. The only Prairie Falcon e. of the Mississippi R. was seen in *Champaign*, IL Dec. 2 (RCh).

Very poor Gray Partridge numbers were reported in *Winnebago*, IL (DW), but counts were up in Iowa (*vide* RCe). Wild Turkeys are flourishing, with flocks of 215 in e. *Muhlenberg*, KY Dec. 30 (BPB) and 62 in *Rock Island* and *Whiteside*, IL Jan. 19 (CFI). The only Virginia Rails were reported in Ohio, where one wintered s. of Holmesville (BG) and another was seen at Burton Jan. 1 (P&LK). An ad. Sandhill Crane at Phillips L., *Boone*, MO Feb. 1 & 8 (†PMc *et al.*) provided one of few February records for that state. Cranes are

becoming quite regular in Ohio, with 20 reported at Western Hills Feb. 18 (*vide* NK) and 15 at Funk Feb. 28 (BG). Lingering shorebird reports included a Dunlin at Waukegan, IL Dec. 7 (ASt), two Least Sandpipers in *Muhlenberg*, KY Dec. 2 (BPB), plus Com. Snipe in *Will*, IL Dec. 21 (CA) and *Holmes*, OH Jan. 19 (BG). The Region's only reported Purple Sandpiper was at H.B.S.P., Dec. 24 (RHn). American Woodcocks surfaced Jan. 4 in Cedar Rapids (K. McKay), to furnish Iowa's 2nd January record, and Dec. 10 in Cincinnati, OH, where one provided a meal for a Peregrine (*vide* NK).

Jaegers to Owls

Stragglers from the heavy fall Pomarine Jaeger flight were widespread, with lingering birds reported in every state except Indiana and Kentucky. December records included two in Ohio, one in downstate Illinois, one in Iowa, and one in Missouri. The latest records came from the Ohio lakefront, where Pomarines were reported at H.B.S.P., Jan. 11 (RHn), Lorain Jan. 12 (RHn, SW), and H.B.S.P., Jan. 26 (RHn). Most remarkable were tardy Parasitic Jaegers seen at Eastlake, OH Dec. 22 (CH), Rocky River, OH Jan. 11 (PL), and a molting immature at Eastlake, OH Jan. 12 (LRo).

Following the pattern of recent years, there was another fine winter gull flight, with both large numbers and excellent diversity. Most unusual for midwinter was an alternate-plumed Franklin's Gull at Saylorville Res., IA Jan. 3 (SD). Up to five Little Gulls were reported on L. Erie; the Region's only inland Little Gull was an adult at Clinton L., Dec. 1 (RCh). Enormous Ring-billed Gull counts were logged; the peak tally was 65,000 at Red Rock Res., IA Dec. 7 (SD). In addition, an estimated 20,000–30,000 Ring-billed/Herring gulls were at Mel Price Lock & Dam, IL Jan. 20 (JVb), >50,000 were seen in the tailwaters of Kentucky and Barkley Dams, KY (CP), and 90,000–200,000 were estimated to be concentrated at R.E.D.A. (DE). The only Mew Gulls were in Indiana, where single adults were seen at Michigan City Harbor Dec. 14 (JMc, †JcD, JWh) & 31 (†Jmc, ph.). Adult California Gulls were documented at Michigan City Harbor, IN Dec. 21 (JMc, †JcD, †KB, DH) and Eastlake, OH Feb. 9 (†KMT, LRo). Thayer's Gulls were unusually widespread, with multiple reports from all 6 states; the largest single count consisted of 12 at Michigan City Harbor and nearby LaPorte County Landfill, IN Dec. 21 (KB, JcD, JMc, DH). Iceland Gulls invaded the Region in unprecedented numbers; season totals included 23 in Indiana, >ten in Illinois, eight in Ohio,



Glaucous-winged Gull (in first-winter plumage) at Riverlands Environmental Demonstration Area, Missouri, February 8, 1997. First state record. Photograph/ Kirby Goslee.



A first for Illinois was this Band-tailed Pigeon at Lake Springfield December 30, 1996. Photograph/David B. Johnson.

four in Missouri, and two in Kentucky. The latter report included an adult at Barkley Dam, KY Feb. 1 & 5 (DR) and a first-year at Kentucky Dam Jan. 25–Feb. 15 (BPB, DR). Lesser Black-backed Gulls were reported in every state, with >12 in Illinois, seven in Ohio, four in Missouri, four in Indiana, three in Iowa, and two in Kentucky. The larid of the season was a first-year **Glaucous-winged Gull** that frequented both the Missouri and Illinois side of the Mississippi R. at R.E.D.A. and Mel Price Lock & Dam from Jan. 30+ (JVb). The gull was first identified on the Missouri side of the river Feb. 6 (†JVb; †DE, BR, ph.), where it constituted a first state record. It appeared on the Illinois side the following day (†JVb, †JZ, †DK). Both Glaucous and Great Black-backed gulls were recorded in all 6 states. Late departing Black-legged Kittiwakes were logged at Clinton L., IL Dec. 1 (RCh), Michigan City Harbor, IN Dec. 21 (JcD, JMc *et al.*) & 24 (JMc), and at H.B.S.P., Dec. 26 (D&JB). The >12 lingering Forster's Terns at Kentucky L., KY Dec. 11 (BPB) provided one of few winter records for the Region.

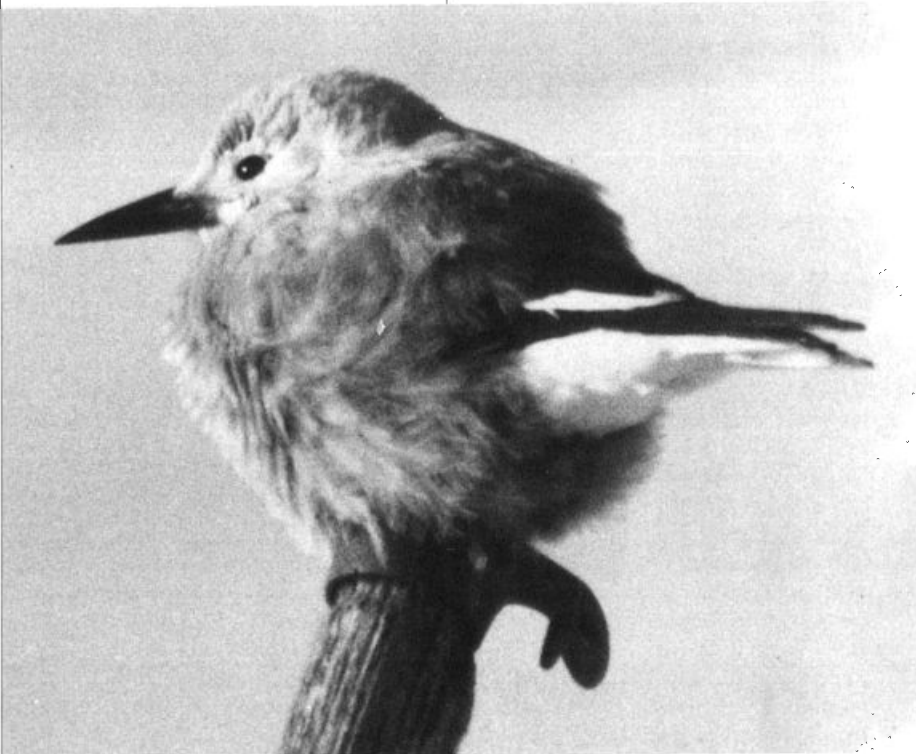
Illinois' first **Band-tailed Pigeon** frequented L. Springfield Dec. 22–Jan. 23 (†DBo, †VK, ph. m.ob.). Based in part on a decrease in road-kills, Bohlen concluded

that E. Screech-Owl numbers have declined in *Sangamon*, IL. Following last fall's massive fall invasion, excellent Snowy Owl counts were logged across the n. states, with >35 in Illinois, 25 in Indiana, 17 in Iowa, and four in Ohio. Snowy Owls pressed S to *Davies*, MO, where one was seen by many between mid-December and early January (R. McNeely, †PMc, m.ob.), and to *Warrick* in extreme s.w. Indiana Dec. 26 (ML). The season's 2nd-best owls consisted of two **Great Gray Owls** that appeared in Clay Banks Forest, *Cerro Gordo*, IA Feb. 9; at least one remained through the end of the period (RA, †PA, †CFs, †JF, m.ob.). Both Long-eared and Short-eared owls were reported in all 6 states; peak counts included six Long-eareds in *Muhlenberg*, KY Dec. 11 (BPP) and 22 Short-eareds at the Ayrshire strip mine in s. Indiana Jan. 29 (JCb, ML, AT).

SA Hands down winner of the "Bird I most wanted to see" award, was the Region's first Boreal Owl since 1914. This elusive owl made a one day appearance Feb. 9 in a Rockford, IL, backyard. Attention was initially drawn to the bird when it hit Marian Doyle's window. The owl then flew to a nearby yew tree, where it remained for the rest of the day. Ms. Doyle thoughtfully contacted local birders who, not surprisingly, responded with alacrity to document this rare occurrence (†BG, †RM, FS, VS, m.ob., ph).



As the first Boreal Owl to visit the Middlewestern Prairie Region in more than 80 years, this bird drew a lot of attention during its one-day stay at Rockford, Illinois, February 9, 1997. Photograph/Fred Stella.



Hummingbirds to Warblers

A Rufous Hummingbird frequented a Loudenville, OH, feeder until Jan. 4, when a cat chased it into a screen, where by it became Ohio's first specimen (*LY, BG, m.ob.). December E. Phoebes were reported in several states; the latest was seen Dec. 28 at Roxana Pond, IN (JB). The peak Horned Lark counts included 2000 in *Floyd* and *Cerro Gordo*, IA Feb. 14 (TK), and 1385 in *Sangamon*, IL Jan. 9 (DBo). The imm. **Pinyon Jay** that arrived in *Boone*, IA Nov. 30 remained throughout the winter season (†SD, †CE, †JF, m.ob). A major surprise of the season was the appearance of two **Clark's Nutcrackers** in the Region. The first, which constituted Iowa's 6th record, appeared at the Roy and Bobbi Davis feeding station in Mills, IA, in mid-December. The bird, which displayed a penchant for suet, was identified by birders Dec. 20–26 (†JF, †TK, †SD, †PP, m.ob., ph). The second Nutcracker was discovered at the farm home of Britten and Martha Gray, in *Hancock*, IL Dec. 27. This bird was found dead Jan. 13 and the specimen, which is preserved in the Illinois State Museum (* E&E Franks), provided the first confirmed Illinois record. The largest Am. Crow tally consisted of 148,000 in Vermilion, IL Jan. 1 (RCh, SB). Two Fish Crows were discovered in Branson, MO Jan. 6 (A. Floyd).

An extremely tardy Barn Swallow remained in Rittman, OH, from Dec. 1–19 (I. Beck, J. Wert). Red-breasted Nuthatches were uniformly scarce across

A far-flung stray from the mountains of the west, this Clark's Nutcracker reached Mills County, Iowa, in December 1996, providing a sixth state record. Photograph/T. H. Kent.

the Region; this dearth was underscored by Larry Gara's observation, "For the second time in 32 years in our (Wilmington, OH) home we failed to see a single Red-breasted Nuthatch all winter." Late House Wrens were reported at Clinton L., IL (RCh, SB), in *Clermont*, OH Dec. 29 (†DD), and two in the Miami Whitewater wetlands, OH Feb. 2 (PW). The Region's only Sedge Wren was found at L. Panorama, IA Dec. (†SD). Several Marsh Wrens were reported in s. reaches of the Region, but one exceptionally hardy bird was still present in Rockford, IL Dec. 21 (DW). It was another good season for Townsend Solitaires. Four reports came from Iowa, with single birds at Storm L., Dec. 3 (M. Schwitters, *vide* TK), Waterman Creek W.M.A., Jan. 31 (SD), near Des Moines Feb. 16 (BE), and in *Cherokee* Feb. 23 (†RT, PE *et al.*). East of the Mississippi R. solitaires appeared at Klehm Arboretum, Rockford, IL Dec. 28–Mar. 3 (DE, BW, m.ob.) and in Salamonie State Forest, IN Dec. 31–Jan. 5 (JWi, †Haw, m.ob). The later provided Indiana's 2nd Townsend's Solitaire record.

Varied Thrushes were unusually widespread, with 7 reports scattered across 5 states. Records included two in Iowa, two in Indiana, one in Illinois, one in Ohio,

and one in Missouri. A single Am. Pipit was a Parma Heights, OH Jan. 2 (RH), two were in *Gibson*, IN Jan. 21 (ML), and an impressive 100 were seen at McElroy L., KY Feb. 8 (BPP). Several correspondents in Illinois and Ohio commented on low Cedar Waxwing numbers. Northern Shrikes were reported in every state except Kentucky; state totals included 17 in Iowa, seven in Illinois, six in Indiana, three in Ohio, and one in Missouri. The latter bird, which was also seen in Iowa, was found near the state line in n.w. *Harrison*, MO Jan. 9 (SD).

A White-eyed Vireo lingered in Spfld. into early December, with sightings Dec. 9 & 11 (DBo). Among the late departing fall migrants were Orange-crowned Warblers at L. Spfld., Dec. 31–Jan. 1 (DBo) and in *Muhlenberg*, KY Jan. 1 (BPP). Iowa's first winter-period Cape May Warbler, a female, was seen in Indianola Dec. 15 (SD). Palm Warblers remained in the Region until mid-December, with singletons reported at Peabody W.M.A., KY Dec. 7 (BPP), s. of Boone, IA Dec. 9 (†SD), and at Drakes Cr., KY Dec. 12 (DR). A very tardy Ovenbird was still in Cleveland, OH Dec. 12 (†D&JH). The only Com. Yellowthroat was reported in Mitchell Forest, OH Dec. 21 (*vide* NK).

Buntings to Finches

It was a remarkable winter for Indigo Buntings in the sunflower fields of c. Illinois; two females were found at Carlyle L. in mid-December, a male was seen at that location Feb. 1, and a female was identified at Horseshoe Lake W.M.A., Jan. 4 (DK). A Dickcissel visited an O'Fallen, IL, feeder Dec. 3 (KMc). The easternmost Spotted Towhee was found at the Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation, IL Dec. 1 (RM, m.ob.). Good numbers of Am. Tree Sparrows appeared in Missouri, where the peak count consisted of 200 in *Buchanan* Jan. 11 (LL). Remarkably, two Clay-colored Sparrows were present in Chicago Dec. 22–Jan. 18. (DJ, JL, ph., m.ob.), providing that state's 2nd winter record. Illinois' 3rd **Brewer's Sparrow**, which was discovered in Chicago's Lincoln Park Nov. 27, spent the winter (DJ, JL, ph., m.ob.). During a Feb. 22 study of the bird it delighted observers by breaking into full song; this investigation revealed that the bird displayed characters of the nominate *breweri* race (JDu, GB, ST *et al.*). Indiana's first January Grasshopper Sparrow was found dead in a *Tippecanoe* driveway Jan. 20 (†BD). The furtive Le Conte's Sparrow was found in e. *Muhlenberg*, KY Jan. 1 (BPP, m.ob.) and in Prairie S.P., MO, where two were seen Feb. 14–16 (PMc).

A **Lark Bunting**, likely an imm. male, discovered in *Daviess*, MO Jan. 19 (†PMc), provided that state's first winter record and one of very few winter records for the entire Region. Harris' Sparrows were unusually common in Iowa, where birds were recorded at 11 locations. Smith's Longspurs were also more numerous than normal. In w. Missouri five Smith's were heard at Birdsong W.M.A., Feb. 14 (†PMc) and a male was flushed in Prairie S.P., Feb. 15 (†PMc, MW). Far more remarkable, however, was a Smith's Longspur at the Richmond, IN, airport Jan. 12–13 (†DG, †HA, LA, DBr), which constitutes a first January record for Indiana. Lapland Longspurs were reported in every state, with counts of >2500 birds in Illinois and Iowa; the southernmost report consisted of ≤seven birds at McElroy L., KY Feb. 16–22 (DR). Snow Buntings were also extremely abundant in w. reaches of the Region; peak counts included 1500 in *Floyd* and *Cerro Gordo*, IA Feb. 14 (TK), 800 in Kossuth, IA Jan. 23 (MK), 800 at Coralville Res., IA Dec. 31 (TK), and >350 in Lake, IL Feb. 15 (SH).

The only winter period Yellow-headed Blackbird was found in a Brewer's Blackbird flock in *Daviess*, MO Feb. 17 (TMc). Four Rusty Blackbirds at Rock Valley Jan. 1 (JVd) were noteworthy for n.w. Iowa. An unprecedented 134 Great-tailed Grackles were counted at Bartlett, IA, no date given (SD). A Baltimore Oriole remained in Iowa City, IA, until Dec. 17 (*vide* TK). Except for a few Purple Finches and a modest Red Crossbill flight, winter finches were virtually nonexistent. Further depleting the winter finch ranks, several correspondents also reported declines in House Finch numbers. Small- to medium-sized flocks of Red Crossbills (2–23 birds) were scattered across 4 states; maximum counts included 23 in *Andrew*, MO, Feb. 28 (JH) and 19 in *Warren*, IA Dec. 15 (SD). The only Com. Redpolls consisted of three birds at 2 Iowa locations, and single Evening Grosbeaks were reported in Iowa and Illinois. A fine count of 91 Eur. Tree Sparrows was made in *Mercer*, IL Dec. 27 (PP).

Corrigenda

The 8 nests reported in *Hamilton*, OH June 24 (AFN 50:954) belonged to Least Bitterns, not Am. Bitterns.

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