

Wise Birding Holidays

Bird and mammal watching tours



WESTERN SAHARA: Mostly Mammals Tour

Thursday 7th - Thursday 14th April 2022

4 Wise Birding Clients

Leaders: John Wright & Nico Calcagno

HIGHLIGHTS OF TRIP

Sand Cat: A single seen well, albeit briefly, close to the Aousserd Road.

African Golden Wolf: Four animals recorded over two days including two Wolves seen together in the spotlight.

Fennec Fox: Superb views from our desert camp west of Bir Anzarane, plus two along the Aousserd Road.

Ruppell's Fox: Although a relatively common species, only two animals were seen during our many spotlighting sessions.

African Wildcat: A single showed well to all, although it didn't hang around.

Horned Viper: One on the road at night gave us close views.



**This wonderful Fennec Fox was just one of the highlights
By tour participant Stuart Chapman**

Tour Summary

The Western Sahara is easily accessible with daily flights, good accommodation, good food and some impressive desert scenery and coastal lagoons. This seven night tour targeted the key mammals of the desert environment with a particular focus on finding Sand Cat as well as seeing a reasonable selection of specialty birds of this region. We enjoyed one night on the coast, two nights in a desert camp and four nights in Aousserd in a simple but very comfortable and clean house with hot water.

Most of our time was spent spotlighting during the hours of darkness for the numerous impressive mammals that can be found in this fabulous region of NW Africa. We used two 4x4 vehicles and kept in touch with each other with walkie-talkies. During the day we did some relaxed birding and enjoyed a boat trip on our first morning in Dakhla.

Western Sahara is often windy, particularly the coast which is why Dakhla is a major centre for kitesurfing. Unfortunately, our week was particularly windy which made things difficult for us at times and affected both our mammal watching and birding.

We saw a total of 12 mammal species plus 2 unidentified species - a gerbil and a bat. Surprisingly we only saw the relatively common Ruppell's Fox on one night and didn't come across any Desert Hedgehogs. In addition to the mammals, we also saw 55 species of bird including some specialties of the region like Cricket Warbler, Desert Sparrow and West African Crested Tern. We also saw several impressive reptiles.

A big thank you of course to Nico and his team for all their hard work, thereby helping to ensure the tour was a success.

We saw a total of 14 mammals and 55 species of bird on this tour.

DAY	DATE	ITINERARY
1	Thur 7th April	Arrival Dakhla. Overnight Dakhla
2	Fri 8th April	Morning boat trip Dakhla Bay and birding around bay. Head north to desert camp nearer Anzarane and spotlighting. Overnight Desert Camp
3	Sat 9th April	Explore desert for birding and more spotlighting during night for mammals. Overnight Desert Camp
4	Sun 10th April	Final morning birding around camp before heading towards Bougouffa and Aousserd. Spotlighting for mammals Overnight Aousserd
5/6	Mon / Tue 11th/12th April	Two days exploring the desert during the day and night. Overnight Aousserd
7	Wed 13th April	Travel to Aousserd with random birding spots en route and a final evening at Dakhla Bay. Overnight Dakhla
8	Thur 14th April	Morning transfer to airport.

Thursday 7th April: ARRIVE DAKHLA

We had an afternoon flight from London Gatwick to Casablanca where we boarded our onward flight a few hours later to Dakhla, arriving around midnight. We then transferred to our hotel just a ten-minute drive away. There were a few European Rabbits around a small pool on the edge of the runway at Casablanca Airport as we taxied towards the terminal. **Overnight Dakhla**

Friday 8th April: BOAT TRIP DAKHLA BAY - ARBT SBETA CAMP

This morning before breakfast from our hotel roof terrace we enjoyed our first views out across Dakhla Bay. Nick spotted three Bottlenose Dolphins, but they disappeared all too quickly and unfortunately no one else saw them. The bird highlight from the terrace was a singing House Bunting. After breakfast we travelled a short distance along the bay where we boarded our private yacht. We spent the morning expertly navigated by Neil and his crew in the hope that we would encounter the Atlantic Humpback Dolphin. Dakhla Bay has long been known for its small population of this critically endangered species, endemic to the west coast of Africa.

During our time in the bay, sea conditions weren't particularly good for cetaceans, and it must be said not good for birding either being very windy. Despite trying very hard we sadly did not find any cetaceans on this occasion. The bay is rich in birdlife and is an internationally important site for birds. Despite the difficult conditions, we did see some great birds which included Caspian Tern, Eurasian Spoonbill, Greater Flamingo, Cormorant, Grey Plovers, Bar-tailed Godwits and Whimbrel.

After our morning at sea, we had lunch bay side before we headed north into the desert to the region west of Bir Anzarane and our tented camp at Arbt Sbeta. We arrived at our camp late afternoon, settled in and then enjoyed a tasty dinner before heading out for some spotlighting, searching for mammals. The main purpose for our two nights in the desert was to be based close to a Fennec Fox hotspot!

Our first spotlighting session went well, we began around 20:20hrs and finished around 00:20hrs. The highlight was seeing two Fennec Foxes. It seems the Fennec Foxes strategy is usually to run on seeing a vehicle, and our first views were of a fox running away although stopping occasionally to look back at us. However, the second of the two encounters gave us exceptional views as the Fennec relaxed and curled up adjacent to a huge sand dune. We also had five Lesser Egyptian Jerboas two of which remained stationary in the spotlight affording great views. **Overnight Desert Camp**



Desert Camp by John Wright

Sat 9th April: ARBT SBETA CAMP

After a very comfortable sleep we spent time enjoying the amazing desert landscape around our camp and were entertained by a pair of Brown-necked Ravens, Greater Short-toed and Hoopoe Larks. Then after "brunch" we drove in our two 4x4 vehicles to a nearby dry water course for some birding. A check of the various tree clusters revealed Great Grey Shrikes a couple of distant in-flight Cream-coloured Coursers and Hoopoe Larks but little else.

After our early evening meal, we set off spotlighting at 20:25hrs.

It was windy causing a sandstorm like effect through the spot-light beam, but we persevered till just after midnight. Due to the conditions we only managed a single Fennec Fox and two Lesser Egyptian Jerboas. **Overnight Desert Camp**

Sun 10th April: ARBT SBETA - BOUGOUFFA - AOUSERD ROAD - AOUSERD

After brunch, our camp was dismantled, and we left the area in the early afternoon. We drove along some of the old Paris-Dakar rally tracks until we reached the Aousserd Road and then on to the Bougouffa Trail north of the Aousserd Road arriving around 17:00hrs. Before our "in the field" evening meal, we birded the surrounding scrub and bushes finding Bar-tailed Lark, Greater Short-toed Lark, around eight Desert Sparrows and a single Western Subalpine Warbler. Once again it was very windy with some particularly strong gusts. We had to hold on to our hats and occasionally turn our backs to the wind whilst being sand blasted!

We began spotlighting the Bougouffa trails as it got dark at around 19:40hrs.

We found eight Lesser Egyptian Jerboas and four Savannah Hares which were the first of the trip. A recent scientific study suggests that these hares are in fact a separate and new species – Maghreb Hare. After a couple of hours, we joined the Aousserd Road, and spot lit our way to our house in Aousserd. Along the road we had three more 'Savannah' Hares and a single Fennec Fox. We arrived at our accommodation at 02:45hrs. **Overnight Aousserd**

Mon 11th April: AOUSERD - OUED BOLARYAH – AOUSERD ROAD

After a late start and brunch, we had a walk around the almost deserted desert town of Aousserd. A town that apparently had great plans for growth and wealth creation which have all come to nothing as it now looks and feels abandoned. Ironically, despite its appearance, it does have a charm of its own. The best birds on our walk were White-crowned Black Wheatears, Spectacled Warbler, Western Subalpine Warbler, Rock Martins and an immature Lanner Falcon sitting on a radio mast.

After resting in our house during the hottest part of the day we went to Oued Bolaryah, a few miles south of Aousserd, from 18:00hrs to 19:00hrs. We saw a few of the impressive Spiny-tailed Lizards on route. It was a bit more "birdy" than sites we had visited thus far with three Orphean Warblers, three Western Bonelli's Warblers a single Western Subalpine Warbler, 3+ Desert Sparrows a Common Redstart and a couple of Bar-tailed Larks. A non-bird highlight was a beautiful Moroccan Orange-tip Butterfly. On our return to Aousserd six Brown-necked Ravens came into roost.

We started the night's spotlighting session at 20:50hrs on a less windy night than previous evenings so we all felt a bit more upbeat. We were right to feel that way as we hadn't gone far when we stopped to look at a superb Horned Viper on the road. Testament to calmer and warmer weather conditions. Not too long into the session some eyeshine revealed two Golden Wolves moving along together. A great start indeed but the downside to it was only the front vehicle saw them, they were a bit distant and not in view for long, but a good start, nevertheless. Talk about swings and

roundabouts as later it was the second car that scored what must be the sighting of the trip. They stopped to check out eyeshine and had superb views of a Sand Cat close to the road crouching down looking at them! Unfortunately, it slinked off before the 2nd vehicle could get to the spot. On searching the immediate area for the cat some eyeshine was seen. We got out of the vehicles and walked towards it keeping a light on it as we quietly moved forward until we reached it. This time, not a Sand Cat but an African Wildcat which looked at us for a short while before turning away and running off into the darkness. We also saw three Savannah Hares and two Lesser Egyptian Jerboas, and a small bat sp. was seen flitting through the spotlight beam. The session ended at 02:30hrs and without doubt was the best evening spotlighting of the trip so far. We had put in as much effort as always, so did the slackening in wind strength and a warmer night help? Yes, I would say it did. **Overnight Aousserd**

Tues 12th April: AOUSSERD - OUED JENNA - AOUSSERD ROAD

Late morning, we drove the short distance to what would have been a fine building but is now a derelict shell used for storage, the Aousserd Regional Council building. We had permission to enter, the door was unlocked for us, and we entered the building and began searching the small rooms scattering feral pigeons as we went. We soon found our target species, Lesser Mouse-tailed Bats. We found at least 20 bats spread through several small dark rooms. Job done and a great start to the day. Later that morning we had another short walk around Aousserd but the few migrants we saw yesterday had cleared out. We did see White-crowned Black Wheatears of course, and the juvenile Lanner Falcon was again showing well and had been joined by its parents on the radio mast.

In the late afternoon till 19:00hrs we birded Oued Jenna but it was quiet for migrants. However, we did find a pair of Cricket Warblers a few Thekla Larks and Greater Short-toed Larks along with Great Grey Shrikes, Orphean, Western Subalpine and Sardinian Warblers. We then went back to our house in Aousserd and got ourselves sorted out for our final spotlighting session of the trip. Fortunately, the wind wasn't too strong and like the previous evening it was a little warmer. We set off at 20:20hrs.

It turned out to be a very good spotlighting session with everybody seeing every species. With a Golden Wolf showing well as it trotted across an open area and a second wolf seen briefly just on the edge of the spotlight range. A Fennec Fox did the expected and ran off soon as we spotted it. Two separate sightings of single Ruppell's Foxes (amazingly the first of the trip) were a big relief to everyone that we finally nailed this species. Five Savannah Hares were par for the course as were three Lesser Egyptian Jerboas. Proceeding with caution on the identification of the gerbils/jirds seen; of the two species photographed one was quite small and was thought at first to be a Pygmy Gerbil but is probably a Lesser Egyptian Gerbil, and the other is probably a Libyan Jird. More than happy to be corrected on their identification. A couple of other gerbils seen couldn't be positively identified. We finished the session tired but happy at 03:15hrs. **Overnight Aousserd**

Wed 13th April: AOUSSERD - DAKHLA

We packed our bags and departed Aousserd just after midday. The White-crowned Black Wheatears were hopping about the house roof as we drove off. The drive was interesting in being the first time we had seen the desert landscape along the Aousserd Road in daylight! As we drove along, we saw Brown-necked Ravens, Marsh Harrier, Bar-tailed and Greater Short-toed Larks. We stopped for an hour at the Water tower at Gleb Jdiane and found Marsh Harrier, Yellow Wagtail, Turtle and Collared Doves, Great Grey Shrikes and three Trumpeter Finch.

There was some amphibian and reptile interest with Moroccan Green Toads, presumed Green Toad tadpoles in the pond and a Bibron's Agama in an old disused building. The only Odonata species seen was a Red-veined Darter (female).

We arrived back in Dakhla late afternoon and after dropping our bags in our hotel rooms we took a short walk to Dakhla Bay for a spot of birding. The best sighting was a West African Crested Tern, but we also saw a few Gannets, Caspian and Sandwich Terns, Lesser Black-backed Gulls and Nick picked-up a Cory's Shearwater that sadly no-one else could get on to. We then returned to our hotel where we enjoyed a leisurely evening meal. **Overnight Dakhla**

Thurs 14th April: EARLY DEPARTURE

At 06:00hrs we took the ten-minute transfer to the airport to get our flight to Casablanca and connections back to the UK where the tour concluded. The only birds seen at Casablanca airport were a few Cattle Egrets.



Lesser Mouse-tailed Bat (above)

Lesser Egyptian Gerbil (below)

Both photos by tour participant Stuart Chapman





**Horned Viper by Stuart Chapman (above)
Immature Brongersma's or Moroccan Green Toad by Nick Rutter**





Savannah/Maghreb Hare by Stuart Chapman
Desert landscape by John Wright





**Lesser Egyptian Gerbil (above)
Libyan Jird (below)
Both by Stuart Chapman**





**Immature Lanner Falcon (above)
Brown-necked Raven (below)
Both photos by Nick Rutter**





Desert sunset by John Wright
Female Red-veined Darter by Keith Millar



The following **mammal checklist** mostly follows [the IUCN framework](#) (Red List) but also the Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF) www.gbif.org & Handbook of The Mammals of the World.

The **bird checklist** follows the nomenclature and classification from Gill F, D Donsker & P Rasmussen (Eds). 2022. **IOC World Bird List** (v12.1).

The IOC World Bird List complements three other primary world bird lists that differ slightly in their primary goals and taxonomic philosophy, i.e. [The Clements Checklist of the Birds of the World](#), [The Howard & Moore Complete Checklist of the Birds of the World](#), 4th Edition, and [HBW Alive/Bird Life International](#).

Total number of mammals recorded: 14 species

African Golden Wolf

Canis anthus

Perseverance and patience paid off after two wolves seen trotting along together rather distantly on the 11th weren't seen by all the group. The following day two singles were seen. One seen well by all the group moving across open ground and a second wolf giving brief views at the furthest edge of the spotlight range.

Ruppell's Fox

Vulpes rueppelli

Although one of the more common animals of the area we started thinking we might actually miss the species. Of course we didn't when we scored two animals on the 12th.

Fennec Fox

Vulpes zerda

This species is the main reason for our desert camp at Arbt Sbeta, on our first spotlighting session on the night of the 8th we encountered two Fennecs. We encountered our third Fennec the following night. Our fourth and fifth Fennec sightings were from the Aousserd road on the 10th and 12th.

Sand Cat

Felis margarita

One encounter on the 11th from the Aousserd Road. It crouched down close to the road and looked towards the spotlight before slinking off. Unfortunately, it did not hang around long enough for everyone to see it! Nevertheless a pretty special sighting!

African Wildcat

Felis lybica

We picked up eye-shine when following-up on the Sand Cat sighting. Keeping the eye-shine in view, we walked off road towards it. After getting closer, it soon became clear that it wasn't a Sand Cat but an African Wildcat. Great views and how fantastic to record two cat species within 10 minutes of each other!

Bottlenose Dolphin

Tursiops turncatus

Three seen in Dakhla Bay from our hotel roof terrace by Nick.

Lesser Mouse-tailed Bat

Rhinopoma hardwickii

At least 20 of these interesting looking bats hanging from the walls and ceiling in a large abandoned building in Aousserd. The building was to be the administrative centre for the province but now is empty with the many rooms now mostly used by pigeons and bats.

African Savannah (Maghreb) Hare***Lepus microtis/ mediterraneus***

Recent research suggests hares in the Western Sahara region are a new species - Maghreb Hare. Relatively common and recorded on three evenings totalling 15+ animals.

European Rabbit***Oryctolagus cuniculus***

About eight around a wet area at Casablanca Airport.

Lesser Egyptian Jerboa***Jaculus jaculus***

Recorded on five evenings with a max count of eight on the 10th. Some of which gave very close views.

Lesser Egyptian Gerbil***Gerbillus gerbillus***

One seen and photographed along the Aousserd Road on the 12th.

Libyan Jird***Meriones libycus***

One seen and photographed along the Aousserd Road on the 12th.

Gerbil sp.***Gerbillus sp***

Two gerbils scuttled off before giving a decent chance of an id but were thought to be North African Gerbils.

Bat sp.***Pipistrellus sp.***

A small bat seen briefly in the spotlight was probably one of the pipistrelle species - with Kuhl's being a likely candidate.

Reptiles, Dragonflies and Butterflies**Brongersma's Toad (Moroccan Green)*****Pseudepidalea brongersmai***

An immature at the water tower pond Gleb Tachktant (Gleb Jdiane) on the 13th. Numerous tadpoles may also have been this species.

White-spotted Gecko***Tarentola annularis***

Great views of one after it was caught by Nico whilst spotlighting along the Aousserd road on the 11th.

Egyptian Sand Gecko***Stenodactylus petrii***

Two caught whilst spotlighting along the Aousserd road on consecutive nights.

Dumeril's Fringe-toed Lizard***Acanthodactylus dumerilii***

At least three seen in a scrubby area a few kilometres from our tented camp at Arbt Sbeta.

Sudan Mastigure / Spiny-tailed Lizard***Uromastix dispar***

Seen south of Aousserd one afternoon when we went out birding.

Horned Viper***Cerastes cerastes***

A cracking individual was seen well along the Aousserd Road on the night of the 11th.

Bibron's Agama***Agama impalearis***

One in a small empty old building at the water tower stop, Gleb Tachktant (Gleb Jdiane)

Moroccan Orange-tip***Anthocharis belia***

A beautiful butterfly south of Aousserd

Red-veined Darter***Sympetrum fonscolombii***

A female at the water tower, Gleb Tachktant (Gleb Jdiane).

Total number of birds recorded: 55 species

Rock Dove

Columba livia

Feral birds recorded on three days around habitation.

European Turtle Dove

Streptopelia turtur

A single at the water tower stop, Gleb Tachktant (Gleb Jdiane).

Eurasian Collared Dove

Streptopelia turtur

Small numbers recorded on three days in Dakhla and Aousserd.

Greater Flamingo

Phoenicopterus roseus

A few seen around Dakhla Bay on our boat trip.

Eurasian Oystercatcher

Haematopus ostralegus

The odd bird seen in Dakhla Bay on our boat trip.

Grey Plover

Pluvialis squatarola

Small numbers in Dakhla Bay seen on our boat trip.

Common Ringed Plover

Charadrius hiaticula

Small numbers in Dakhla Bay on our boat trip.

Little Ringed Plover

Charadrius dubius

Three or four noted around Dakhla bay shore side on the 8th.

Eurasian Whimbrel

Numenius phaeopus

Only one seen in Dakhla Bay on the 8th.

Bar-tailed Godwit

Limosa lapponica

Small numbers in Dakhla Bay seen on our boat trip.

Ruddy Turnstone

Arenaria interpres

A few seen around the oyster pens in Dakhla Bay on our boat trip.

Dunlin

Calidris alpina

Small numbers seen around Dakhla Bay on the 8th.

Common Sandpiper

Actitis hypoleucos

A single bird near the Oyster Farm, Dakhla Bay on the 27th.

Yellow-legged Gull

Larus michahellis

Seen around Dakhla Bay on the 8th and 13th.

Lesser Black-backed Gull

Larus fuscus

Good numbers in Dakhla Bay with numerous birds seen on the 8th and the 13th.

Caspian Tern

Hydroprogne caspia

Great views of this striking tern seen in small numbers in Dakhla Bay on the 8th and 13th.

Sandwich Tern

Thalasseus sandvicensis

Small numbers in Dakhla Bay on the 8th and 13th.

West African Crested Tern

Thalasseus albididorsalis

One flew by as we birded from the bay side promenade in Dakhla on the 13th.

Little Tern

Sternula albifrons

A few seen around Dakhla Bay on our boat trip.

Common Tern

Sterna hirundo

Small numbers around Dakhla Bay on the 8th.

Northern Gannet

At least 6 seen seen distantly in Dakhla Bay from the shore on the 13th.

Great Cormorant

Morus bassanus

Phalacrocorax carbo

The sinensis race seen very well around Dakhla Bay on the 8th.

White-breasted Cormorant

Phalacrocorax lucidus

Seen well around Dakhla Bay on our boat trip.

Eurasian Spoonbill

Platalea leucorodia

A flock was roosting on a mud bank in Dakhla Bay seen on our boat trip.

Grey Heron

Ardea cinerea

A few noted on the 8th around Dakhla Bay.

Cattle Egret

Bubulcus ibis

A few noted as we landed at Casablanca airport on the 14th.

Little Egret

Egretta garzetta

Common enough around Dakhla Bay.

Western Marsh Harrier

Circus aeruginosus

Singles seen on the 8th and 13th.

Pharaoh Eagle Owl

Bubo ascalaphus

One seen briefly along the Aousserd Road on the 12th.

Lanner Falcon

Falco biarmicus

The very pale *erlangeri* form is probably the most impressive and was seen well on two days in Aousserd.

Great (Southern) Grey Shrike

Lanius excubitor

The *elegans* race seen on three days. Typical counts of 2-3 birds but 6 birds on the 9th.

Brown-necked Raven

Corvus ruficollis

Seen daily in the Aousserd region on five days with small groups often present just outside the town and adjacent army camp.

Greater Hoopoe-lark

Alaemon alaudipes

This beautiful bird was seen well around our desert camp over two days.

Bar-tailed Lark

Ammomanes cinctura

Small numbers with counts of 1-3 birds on four days.

Thekla Lark

Galerida theklae

At least two pairs at Oued Jenna on the 12th.

Greater Short-toed Lark

Calandrella brachydactyla

Small numbers seen on four days.

Rock Martin

Ptyonoprogne fuligula

At least six birds in Aousserd on the 11th.

Barn Swallow

Hirundo rustica

Low numbers passing through on six days.

Western Bonelli's Warbler

Phylloscopus bonelli

Three birds seen on the 11th at Oued Bolaryah south of Aousserd.

Willow Warbler

Phylloscopus trochilus

A single seen in Aousserd on the 11th.

Common Chiffchaff***Phylloscopus collybita***

Two seen in the scrub at the Bougouffa track and one at Oued Bolaryah.

Cricket Warbler***Spiloptila clamans***

A pair at Oued Jenna on the 12th.

Western Orphean Warbler***Sylvia hortensis***

Three on the 11th at Oued Bolaryah and one at Oued Jenna on the 12th.

Sardinian Warbler***Currca melanocephala***

One at Oued Jenna on the 12th.

Western Subalpine Warbler***Sylvia cantillans inornata***

Singles at Bougouffa track on the 10th, Aousserd on the 11th and Oued Jenna on the 12th.

Spectacled Warbler***Currca conspicillata***

One in a small low growing bush in Aousserd on the 11th.

Common Redstart***Phoenicurus phoenicurus***

A male at Oued Bolaryah on the 11th.

Desert Wheatear***Oenanthe deserti***

One seen at the side of the road as we drove to our desert camp on the 8th.

Black Wheatear***Oenanthe leucura***

A single bird seen in Dakhla on the 8th was the only sighting.

White-crowned Wheatear***Oenanthe leucopyga***

This stunning bird was recorded on three days around Aousserd, with plenty of opportunities to see it well.

House Sparrow***Passer domesticus***

Recorded at Dakhla and Aousserd.

Desert Sparrow***Passer simplex***

Small groups seen at the Bougouffa Track and Oued Bolaryah.

Western Yellow Wagtail***Motacilla flava***

A single flew off from the pool at the water tower, Gleb Tachktant (Gleb Jdiane).

Trumpeter Finch***Bucanetes githagineus***

A flighty group of three birds around the small pool at the water tower, Gleb Tachktant (Gleb Jdiane).

House Bunting***Emberiza sahari***

A singing male from our hotel roof terrace in Dakhla on the 8th was the only sighting.

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Conservation Donation – Following this tour to Western Sahara £200 was transferred to the Wise Birding Holiday's central conservation fund.

For the last three years Wise Birding Holidays has been supporting a number of small conservation projects. However, we now believe that to try and make a bigger difference to conservation it seems best to pool the donations from most of our tours into one central fund. Once a target amount has been reached this money will be used to support one single project in the hope of achieving more for species conservation. Currently this amounts to over £8,000. Some tours will continue to donate money to help some of the smaller projects that we feel will still benefit from smaller donations. Please visit www.wisebirding.co.uk to find out more about the projects we support.

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