

TEXAS PARKS AND WILDLIFE

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# ON THE WATERFOWL OF TEXAS

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*What would the world be once bereft  
Of wet and wildness? Let them be left,  
O let them be left, wildness and wet;  
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.*

Gerard Manley Hopkins  
Inversnaid

# ON THE WATERFOWL OF TEXAS: DUCKS, GEESE AND SWANS

by Tony Tucci

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## INTRODUCTION

This booklet on the waterfowl of Texas provides information on the 43 native species of ducks, geese and swans that have been documented in Texas. Ten of these are considered vagrants or accidentals with few documented records of each. Most of the remainder are winter visitors that travel from harsher northern climates to spend the winter months in Texas, mainly in the vast wetlands along the Gulf Coast. It has been estimated that the coastal marshes of Texas and the nearby rice fields and coastal waters of the Gulf of Mexico provide winter homes for up to 45% of the ducks and 90% of the geese in the Central Flyway.<sup>1</sup>

Elsewhere in Texas, migrating waterfowl traveling to and from the northern states and Canada use playa lakes in certain areas of the Pecos and Staked Plains<sup>2</sup> of Texas as stopover sites as well as for the winter months. These shallow lakes, which dot the area and cover approximately 250,000 acres, occur when runoff fills these depressions. The lakes often are dry in mid-summer, so few waterfowl use them for breeding purposes.

Only 10 of the 43 species of waterfowl are year-round residents of Texas: Black-bellied and Fulvous whistling-ducks, Muscovy Duck, Wood Duck, Mallard, Mottled Duck, Blue-winged Teal, Northern Pintail, Redhead, and Ruddy Duck. There are many other interesting facts on the waterfowl of Texas in this booklet. This information should be used with any standard field guide or reference book that includes pictures of the waterfowl.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/nature/birding/migrant/index.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.blm.gov/wildlife/pifplans.htm>

# THE DUCKS, GEESE AND SWANS OF TEXAS

This list is in phylogenetic order, meaning the species are listed according to their believed evolutionary relationships.

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck

Fulvous Whistling-Duck

Greater White-fronted Goose

Snow Goose

Ross's Goose

Canada Goose

Brant

*Mute Swan (Introduced)*

Trumpeter Swan

Tundra Swan

Muscovy Duck

Wood Duck

Gadwall

Eurasian Wigeon

American Wigeon

American Black Duck

Mallard (including "Mexican Duck")

Mottled Duck

Blue-winged Teal

Cinnamon Teal

Northern Shoveler

White-cheeked Pintail

Northern Pintail

Garganey

Green-winged Teal

Canvasback

Redhead

Ring-necked Duck

Greater Scaup

Lesser Scaup

King Eider

Harlequin Duck

Surf Scoter

White-winged Scoter

Black Scoter

Oldsquaw (now called "Long-tailed Duck")

Bufflehead

Common Goldeneye

Barrow's Goldeneye

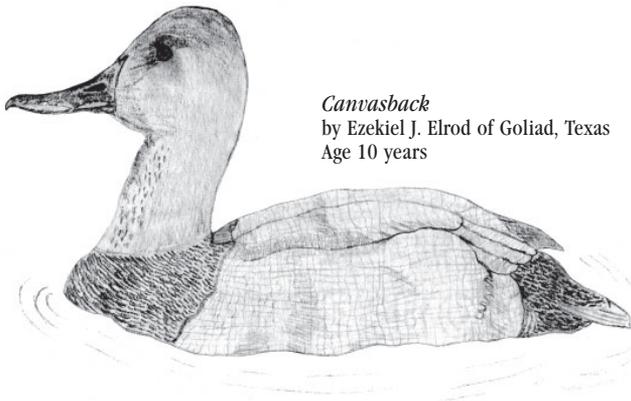
Hooded Merganser

Red-breasted Merganser

Common Merganser

Masked Duck

Ruddy Duck



*Canvasback*

by Ezekiel J. Elrod of Goliad, Texas

Age 10 years

# SOME BASIC FACTS

## Regular Wintering Species (virtually statewide)

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Canada Goose	Ring-necked Duck
Gadwall	Lesser Scaup
American Wigeon	Common Goldeneye
Northern Shoveler	Bufflehead
Green-winged Teal	Hooded Merganser
Canvasback	

## Regular Wintering Species (mainly along the Gulf Coast)

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Greater White-fronted Goose	Ross's Goose (same as
Snow Goose (also in small numbers	Snow Goose above)
on the Pecos and Staked Plains	Red-breasted Merganser
and in the Trans-Pecos)	

## Regular Wintering Species (mainly in West Texas)

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Common Merganser

## Year-round Inhabitants of Texas (includes breeding)

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Black-bellied Whistling-Duck	Blue-winged Teal
Fulvous Whistling-Duck	Northern Pintail
Muscovy Duck	(rare but regular breeder)
Wood Duck	Redhead
Mallard	Ruddy Duck
Mottled Duck	

## Rare and Irregular Breeding Species in Texas

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Gadwall	Northern Shoveler
American Wigeon	Lesser Scaup
Cinnamon Teal	

## Vagrant/Accidental Species (with total number of accepted records in Texas according to the Texas Bird Records Committee as of November 2000)

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Brant (17)	Garganey (2)
Trumpeter Swan (2)	King Eider (1)
Eurasian Wigeon (28)	Harlequin Duck (2)
American Black Duck (7)	Barrow's Goldeneye (5)
White-cheeked Pintail (1)	Masked Duck (56)

## Introduced Species

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Mute Swan

## Wild (uncaged and not an escapee) North American (Continental U.S. and Canada) Waterfowl never documented in Texas

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Bean Goose  
Pink-footed Goose  
Lesser White-fronted Goose  
Emperor Goose  
Barnacle Goose  
Whooper Swan  
Falcated Duck  
Spot-billed Duck

Baikal Teal  
Common Pochard  
Tufted Duck  
Steller's Eider  
Spectacled Eider  
Common Eider  
Smew



*Blue-winged Teal*  
by Ezekiel J. Elrod of Goliad, Texas  
Age 10 years

# WHAT TEXAS HABITAT DO THEY NEED?

**Key to Distribution Codes:**

E = eastern portion of Texas  
 W = western portion of Texas  
 C = central portion of Texas

S = southern portion of Texas  
 Throughout = basically statewide

**Fulvous Whistling-Duck**

(S) Builds a nest of reeds, grass and weeds on the ground in dense vegetation. It prefers wet agricultural land, near ponds or in marshes. In winter, most retreat from Texas to the east coast of Mexico, but a few occasionally stay year-round in the lower Gulf Coast.

**Black-bellied Whistling-Duck**

(S, C) Makes a nest of rotted wood chips in a tree cavity or nest box 8 to 30 feet above the ground, although it sometimes may nest on the ground. It is a year-round resident in wooded resacas, ponds, marshes and smaller lakes and is expanding its range in many parts of Texas.

**Greater White-fronted Goose**

(E) Also known as “Speckle Belly,” this goose spends the winter months in the wetlands and agricultural fields along the Texas Gulf Coast. It travels to Texas each year from the tundra of northern Canada.

**Snow Goose**

(E) Both color morphs occur in Texas. After spending its summers on the tundra of northern Canada, this species travels to the Texas Gulf Coast for the winter, gathering on agricultural fields and wetlands in large flocks that can number in the tens of thousands. Winter numbers are increasing in other parts of the state (i.e., Pecos and Staked Plains, and Trans-Pecos). It feeds on the roots and tubers of aquatic plants, and on waste grain and tender grass shoots. Since the mid-1990s, this species has been experiencing a tremendous population explosion in North America, especially on the Texas wintering grounds.

**Ross’s Goose**

(E) This species can be found on the Gulf Coast, where it often winters with the Snow Goose on agricultural fields and wetlands (as well in other parts of the state mentioned under Snow Goose above). It feeds on grasses and waste grains. Its summer home is in northern Canada, where it seeks protection from predators by nesting on islands in lakes.

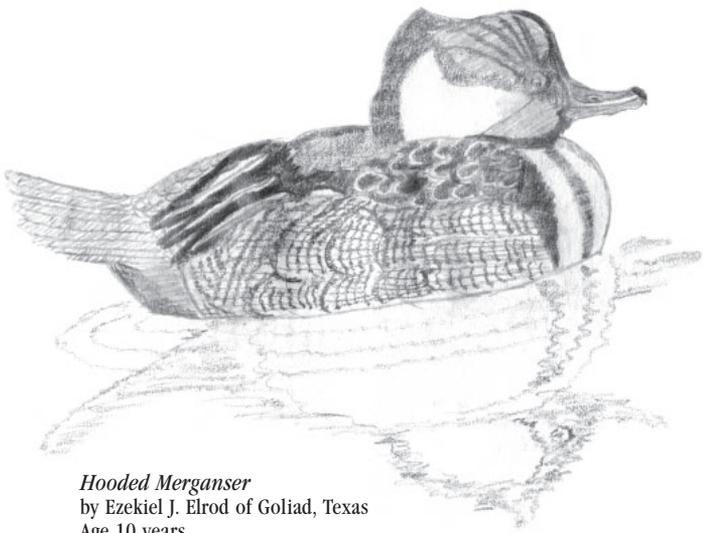
<b>Canada Goose</b>	(Throughout) Inhabits lakes, bays, fields, and parks from the Panhandle to the Gulf Coast wherever it can find submerged vegetation, grasses, winter wheat, clover and waste grain. There are several races found in Texas with size varying greatly.
<b>Wood Duck</b>	(E) Makes its nest of wood chips and feather down in a tree cavity or manmade nest box 5 to 50 feet above the ground or water. It inhabits the wooded swamps and river basins of East Texas west through the Edwards Plateau.
<b>Green-winged Teal<sup>1</sup></b>	(Throughout) Prefers freshwater ponds and lakes, rivers, and coastal marshes. Frequently visits grain fields where it feeds on seeds, wheat, oats, and buckwheat.
<b>Mottled Duck<sup>1</sup></b>	(S) Inhabits freshwater and saltwater marshes, mostly along the Gulf Coast. It eats mollusks, insects, crayfish, snails, small fish, aquatic vegetation, grass, and seeds.
<b>Mallard<sup>1</sup></b>	(Throughout) A ubiquitous duck that is also popular as a domesticated variety. Natural populations prefer any open water, but the largest numbers winter in the northeast corner of the state in wooded sloughs, beaver ponds, and other wetlands associated with bottomland hardwood forests. Makes its nest of reeds and grasses lined with down, placed on the ground near water.
<b>Northern Pintail<sup>1</sup></b>	(Throughout) Winters in small to large flocks that are often seen flying to fields to feed. Besides agricultural fields, its winter habitat includes coastal bays and lakes. It eats seeds, roots and shoots of aquatic plants, small crustaceans, corn, and various grasses.
<b>Blue-winged Teal<sup>1</sup></b>	(S) Inhabits marshes and protected coastal areas. It often can be seen skimming the water surface with its bill when afloat, or reaching just below the surface for aquatic plants. Most individuals winter in Mexico and further south in Latin America. This is a low density breeder in the Panhandle (High Plains and Rolling Plains). Typically the first species of duck to peak in fall.

<b>Cinnamon Teal<sup>1</sup></b>	(W, S) Makes its nest of grasses lined with down, placing them on the ground in covered areas, sometimes on islands. It inhabits the open shallow lakes and marshes mostly in South Texas in winter.
<b>Northern Shoveler<sup>1</sup></b>	(Throughout) Winters where it can find the aquatic organisms, insects, and other invertebrates on which it feeds. It also eats duckweed and submerged aquatic plants.
<b>Gadwall<sup>1</sup></b>	(Throughout) Winters throughout Texas on open lakes and marshes. It tips its tail up and dips under water for its food, foraging for seeds, and aquatic plants.
<b>American Wigeon<sup>1</sup></b>	(Throughout) Winters on wet pastures, lakes, ponds, and coastal waters. It feeds on the stems, weeds, and buds of aquatic plants such as pondweeds, wigeon grass, wild celery, and eelgrass.
<b>Canvasback<sup>2</sup></b>	(Throughout) Seeks open freshwater and sheltered coastal waters where it can find a ready food supply. This duck can dive up to 30 feet under water to reach roots, buds and tubers of aquatic plants. Pondweed and wild celery are among its favorite foods, but it also will eat insects, small fish, and crustaceans.
<b>Redhead<sup>2</sup></b>	(Throughout) Winters from the Panhandle to the coast, finding shelter in ponds, lakes, and bays. It eats aquatic vegetation, insects, larvae, mollusks, and small crustaceans. The greatest percentage of the entire world's population winters along the Laguna Madre of Texas.
<b>Ring-necked Duck<sup>2</sup></b>	(Throughout) Found most frequently on large lakes and in coastal areas. It dives for its food, which includes tubers, leaves, and seeds of submerged vegetation as well as mollusks and insects.
<b>Lesser Scaup<sup>2</sup></b>	(Throughout) Its habitat includes lakes, sheltered coastal areas, and freshwater ponds where it often gathers in flocks numbering in the thousands. This species dives for its food which includes plant seeds, snails, insects, and crustaceans.
<b>Common Goldeneye</b>	(E, N) Winters on interior and coastal waters. It eats aquatic insects, and also dives underwater to feed on crustaceans and mollusks.

<b>Bufflehead</b>	(Throughout) Winters on lakes and coastal waters throughout Texas, diving underwater for small mollusks, fish, snails, and crustaceans. It also eats aquatic insects.
<b>Hooded Merganser</b>	(E) Winters on wooded rivers and lakes from the Panhandle to the lower Gulf Coast. It dives underwater for most of its food, which includes small fish, frogs, crustaceans, mollusks, and aquatic insects. A cavity nester that requires large cavities or manmade nest boxes.
<b>Common Merganser</b>	(W) Winters on large freshwater lakes. It eats mostly fish and has a serrated bill to hold this slippery prey. It also dives underwater for crustaceans and mollusks.
<b>Red-breasted Merganser</b>	(E) Tolerates both fresh and saltwater. It dives for fish, mollusks, and crustaceans.
<b>Ruddy Duck</b>	(Throughout) Except for a small area in the northern Panhandle, this species spends the winter months throughout Texas, especially the coastal areas. It dives for its food, which includes aquatic plants, crustaceans, and aquatic insects.

<sup>1</sup> Dabbling or puddle duck

<sup>2</sup> Diving duck

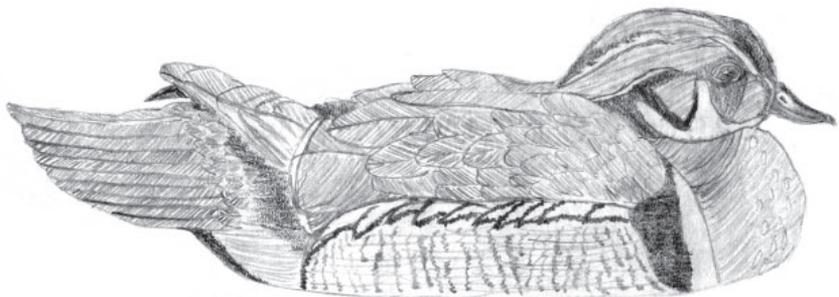


*Hooded Merganser*  
 by Ezekiel J. Elrod of Goliad, Texas  
 Age 10 years

# WHAT DO THEY SOUND LIKE?

<b>Black-bellied Whistling-Duck</b>	A series of 3 to 4 whistles, often voiced in flight.
<b>Fulvous Whistling-Duck</b>	Whistling, loud “kaweee.”
<b>Greater White-fronted Goose</b>	A high-pitched “leek-leek.”
<b>Snow Goose</b>	A high-pitched honk.
<b>Ross’s Goose</b>	A high-pitched honk, slightly higher than the Snow Goose.
<b>Canada Goose</b>	The males and females do a duet, with the males calling “ahonk” and the females responding with a higher “hink.”
<b>Wood Duck</b>	The female calls “oo-eek” during flight; the male sounds a high whistle during courtship.
<b>Gadwall</b>	Male whistles and calls “raeb-raeb;” female quacks in a higher pitch than the Mallard.
<b>American Wigeon</b>	Male makes a soft, descending, three-syllable whistle; female has a soft, growling “quegegege” and also quacks.
<b>Mallard</b>	The male calls “rhaeb-rhaeb” during times of aggression, and a short whistle during courtship. The female quacks when alarmed or separated from the male, and calls “quegegege” when excited.
<b>Mottled Duck</b>	Similar to Mallard’s call (see above).
<b>Blue-winged Teal</b>	Male peeps “tsee;” female makes a high-pitched quack.
<b>Cinnamon Teal</b>	Male makes “chuk” notes in a series; female makes a high-pitched quack that sounds like the Blue-winged Teal.
<b>Northern Shoveler</b>	Male sounds a low “took-a” during courtship; female quacks in a series of five notes, with the first note the loudest.
<b>Northern Pintail</b>	The male gives a fluty whistle; the female quacks.
<b>Green-winged Teal</b>	Male sounds a piping whistle; the female makes a quacking sound of about four notes.

<b>Canvasback</b>	Male “coos” during courtship; female gives a soft “krr-krr.”
<b>Redhead</b>	Male has a cat-like call during courtship; female makes a soft growling note.
<b>Ring-necked Duck</b>	Male whistles loudly during displays; female makes soft “rrr” sound.
<b>Lesser Scaup</b>	Male makes a faint “whee-ooo” sound, a single-note whistle, and a quacking sound; female makes a purring “kwuh” sound.
<b>Bufflehead</b>	Generally silent, but female makes a guttural noise during courtship.
<b>Common Goldeneye</b>	Relatively silent, but male makes a nasal “eeent” sound during courtship.
<b>Hooded Merganser</b>	Male makes a froglike noise; female makes a hoarse “gak” sound.
<b>Common Merganser</b>	Male has a guitar-like call during courtship; female makes a harsh sound.
<b>Red-breasted Merganser</b>	Male has a catlike “yeow-yeow” call; female sounds a harsh double note.
<b>Ruddy Duck</b>	Mostly silent, but male makes a drumming sound by beating its lower mandible on its breast.



*Wood Duck*  
 by Ezekiel J. Elrod of Goliad, Texas  
 Age 10 years

# INTERESTING BEHAVIOR

(plus some colloquial and hunter names in parenthesis)

<p><b>Black-bellied Whistling-Duck</b> (Black-bellied Tree Duck or Pe-che-che-ne Duck)</p>	<p>Usually found in large flocks. Adults prefer nests in trees over vegetation, so the ducklings will have a soft landing as they jump from the nest 24 hours after hatching.</p>
<p><b>Fulvous Whistling-Duck</b> (Fulvous Tree Duck or Mexican Squealer)</p>	<p>This bird is highly social and usually is found in groups. The female may lay its eggs in another female's nest. Such nests are often deserted.</p>
<p><b>Greater White-fronted Goose</b> (Specklebelly or Tiger Breast)</p>	<p>This goose often mixes with Canada Geese during migration and on winter feeding grounds.</p>
<p><b>Snow Goose</b> (White Goose)</p>	<p>Large flocks, for example, on the Katy Prairie on the Upper Texas Coast can number in the tens of thousands.</p>
<p><b>Ross's Goose</b></p>	<p>Formerly thought to occur only in small numbers amongst large flocks of Snow Geese on winter feeding grounds, the Ross's Goose is more common and widespread.</p>
<p><b>Canada Goose</b> (Honker or Black-headed Goose)</p>	<p>Instead of migrating, some Canada Geese may stay year-round at local ponds if food is plentiful. A very rare breeder with only a couple of dozen nesting records in Texas.</p>
<p><b>Wood Duck</b> (Squealer or Woody)</p>	<p>Courtship takes place in fall and winter, with female flicking its bill over her shoulder. The male responds by raising its wings and tail, turning the back of its head to her, and swimming away, enticing the female to follow.</p>
<p><b>Gadwall</b> (Gray Duck or Blarting Duck)</p>	<p>A complex courtship display similar to Mallard. This also involves the males doing a grunt-whistle, in which he points his bill down, raises the back of his neck, and gives a short high-pitched whistle.</p>
<p><b>American Wigeon</b> (Baldpate or Bald-head)</p>	<p>They arrive in the southern wintering grounds early, and immediately begin courtship. During courtship, competing males whistle repeatedly and raise folded wings almost vertically above their backs.</p>
<p><b>Mallard</b> (Greenhead or Curly-tail)</p>	<p>Courtship occurs from fall through winter. Female follows male and repeatedly flicks her bill over one side of her body. Male responds by stretching its head, wing tips and tail up.</p>
<p><b>Mottled Duck</b> (Black Mallard or Florida Duck)</p>	<p>This duck is relatively sedentary, although it has a complex courtship ritual that is similar to the Mallard.</p>

<b>Blue-winged Teal</b> (White-faced Teal or Summer Teal)	Usually the first fall migrant waterfowl in late summer or early fall. Male aggressively lifts chin towards other males while competing for female.
<b>Cinnamon Teal</b> (Red Teal)	Occasionally hybridizes with the Blue-winged Teal.
<b>Northern Shoveler</b> (Spoonbill or Smilin' Mallard)	Very aggressive during courtship displays and while defending its territory.
<b>Northern Pintail</b> (Sprig)	Pair formation starts in winter and continues through spring. Male and female pump their heads prior to mating.
<b>Green-winged Teal</b> (Red-headed Teal or Winter Teal)	This is one of the earliest birds to migrate in spring. Courtship takes place from winter through spring.
<b>Canvasback</b> (Can or Bullneck)	They concentrate in large numbers on migratory and wintering grounds. Courtship continues during migration and includes aerial chases.
<b>Redhead</b> (Raft Duck)	Hatching success is low because some females dump their eggs in the nests of other ducks and the host female may then abandon such a nest.
<b>Ring-necked Duck</b> (Ringbill or Blackjack)	Courtship peaks during spring migration. Copulation is preceded by bill-dipping.
<b>Lesser Scaup</b> (Broadbill, Bluebill or Doegree)	These birds are highly social, and winter flocks on water, called rafts, may number in the thousands.
<b>Bufflehead</b> (Butterball)	Courtship begins in January, and the male is highly aggressive toward other males.
<b>Common Goldeneye</b> (Brass-eyed Whistler)	This duck has a spectacular and complicated courtship ritual, which includes numerous displays. When nesting sites are scarce, female may lay eggs in another duck's nest.
<b>Hooded Merganser</b> (Hairyhead or Wood Shelduck)	Courtship begins in midwinter. Female bobs and pumps head and male raises crest.
<b>Common Merganser</b> (Gooseander)	Courtship displays involve chasing one another on the water and in the air as well as underwater.
<b>Red-breasted Merganser</b> (Fish Duck or Common Sawbill)	Courtship begins in midwinter. Male postures elaborately and makes a cat-like call.
<b>Ruddy Duck</b> (Stiff-tail or Spiketail)	Courtship starts during spring migration. The most obvious display is male's tail cocking and enlargement of his neck. Female sometimes dumps eggs in other duck nests.

## FURTHER READING

This is certainly not an inclusive list.

- Bellrose, F. C. 1976. *Ducks, Geese, and Swans of North America*. Stackpole Books, Harrisburg, PA. 543 pp.
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Search for Species Accounts by the Birds of North America Project at  
<http://www.birdsofna.org>

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For more information on birds and birding,  
try Texas Parks and Wildlife's nature Web site at:  
<http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/nature/nature.htm>



Texas Partners in Flight is in the  
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