

Orkney

Naturetrek Tour Report

19 - 26 June 2011



Ring of Brodgar



Marwick Head cliffs



Guillemot, Razorbill and Kittiwakes nesting at Marwick Head



Scottish Primrose (Primula scotica) at Yesnaby

Report and images compiled by David McAllister



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Day 1

Sunday 19th June

Itinerary: Kirkwall walk

Weather: Cloudy. Occasional light rain

We gathered in the St.Magnus Lounge of the Orkney Hotel. After introductions and a brief preliminary talk from David we had a walk around central Kirkwall to get out bearings and look for town and harbour birds. Going down the main street we passed the “Big Tree” – the 200 year old, 6m tall Sycamore was one of the tallest trees on Orkney at one time. We looked through the gulls in the harbour and then returned by the “Peerie Sea” to the hotel for dinner.

Day 2

Monday 20th June

Itinerary: Westray

Weather: Cloudy, mild.

After a hearty breakfast we set off just before 9:00 a.m. for the ferry terminal to catch the Westray ferry at 9:40 a.m. On the ferry we quickly learned to identify Guillemot, Razorbill and Black Guillemot (Tystie) on the water and the gulls and terns accompanying the boat. Rather to our surprise Ken spotted Peacocks wandering around freely on the island of Egilsay! We also had good views of several Grey Seal colonies.

On arriving at Westray we drove up through the island to Pierowall, the only town where we shopped for lunch. The proprietor of the local café prepared our sandwiches. Passing the medieval stronghold of Noltland Castle we set out on the long, winding and fairly rough road to the Light House at Noup Head. We left the bus at the car park and climbed up onto the headland where we could see the bird cliffs. The ledges were crowded with nesting Gannets, Guillemots and Kittiwakes. With the telescope we could also pick out Razorbills and Puffins which were present in smaller numbers. Walking a little way along the cliffs we found a sheltered spot where we could have a picnic lunch and watch the passing seabirds being harried by Great Skuas (Bonxies) and Arctic Skuas. These birds live by kleptoparasitism (stealing food from other birds, usually as they return to their nests) but are consummate flyers; twisting and turning in their piratical attacks on Gannets, Arctic Terns and Puffins.

After lunch we made our way back south through the island. At Loch of Burness we stopped to see the Little Grebes in their most northerly nesting site in the British Isles. We stopped at the Heritage Centre to see the tiny Neolithic “Venus” figurine, known locally as the “Westray Wife”, which was found recently on the Notland Links excavation. Then south through the surprisingly lush farmland of the island to the south-east coast where we had a look at the deserted crofting village of Nether House and bird watched on the sands and reed beds at Ayre of Fribo before boarding the ferry back to Kirkwall. Regrettably both on the north and south journey we had no cetaceans, petrels or shearwaters despite spending time on deck looking for them.

During our evening meal we were entertained by a Song Thrush gathering food for its young in the hotel garden.

Day 3

Tuesday 21st June

Itinerary: AM Stones of Stenness, Barnhouse settlement, Barnhouse hide.

Ring of Brodgar, Skara Brae, Bay of Skail

PM Yesnaby, Burgar Hill, Birsay Moors

Weather: Cloudy, mild

Mid Summers Day. In the morning we had an introduction to the wonderful series of Neolithic monuments which run across the centre of Orkney mainland. Arriving at the Stones of Stenness we found two Common (Harbour) Seals drying themselves on stones in the Loch of Stenness. The three stark stones are remnants of a larger ring which is probably the oldest stone circle in the British Isles.

Beside it is the Barnhouse settlement, a Neolithic village discovered and excavated in the 1980s. While there, the song of the sedge warbler drew us back to our natural history pursuits, and we moved on to the Barnhouse hide on the edge of the loch where we watched the local water birds while serenaded by the scratchy songs of Sedge Warbler and Reed Bunting.

We then went to the majestic Ring of Brodgar which dominates the thin strip of land between the Loch of Harray and the Loch of Stenness. As well as studying the 36 stones of the ring we were able to look at the RSPB “Bee and Bird” plantings and look at the wildlife of the nearby marshes.

After that we went to the west coast for lunch at Skara Brae. Approaching the site we noticed a Whooper Swan bathing in the Loch of Skail, an unusual sight for this time of year. After lunch we explored Skara Brae and bird watched in the Bay of Skail then headed on to Yesnaby. Here a wartime gunnery post sits on the edge of a splendid cliff of Old Red Sandstone. The full force of unrestrained Atlantic gales has sculptured the finely bedded sandstone into geos and promontories. On top of these, a meagre coastal grassland clings to the cliffs. Here after some searching Ken found our first Scottish Primrose (*Primula scotica*). Once we had a good search image we started to find them in some numbers, growing in the sward of Thrift (Sea Pink), Wild Thyme, Birds-foot Trefoil, Spring Squill and Kidney Vetch.

We returned to the hotel for an early dinner and then set out for Burger Hill. Below Wideford Hill we had excellent views of a hunting male Hen Harrier. As we arrived at the Burger Hill hide, nestling below tall wind turbines, we were greeted by Red-throated Divers flying into the little loch (Lowrie's Water) giving their characteristic clacking call. The loch had many Greylag Geese with young, lots of Mallard and the ever present Curlews and Oystercatchers on the surrounding moor. We were a little surprised to see a Black-throated Diver on the water as well. On the opposite side of the loch we saw a Brown Hare and we were to get much closer views as we returned south over the Birsay Moors road.

Day 4

Wednesday 22nd June

Itinerary: AM St.Magnus Cathedral, free time in Kirkwall.

PM Maeshowe, Churchill barriers, Tomb of the Eagles, Italian Chapel

Weather: Cloudy, bright, windy

This morning we had some time off in Kirkwall. David took those who wanted to St.Magnus Cathedral and then we separated for visits to the other historic buildings or shopping. At 12:00 we set out from the hotel to Maeshowe, the finest chambered tomb in Europe. We were treated to an excellent, if rather crowded, tour of the tomb with its wonderful corbelled roof and Viking runic graffiti. Outside the visitor centre Jenny and Fay found Magellan Ragwort, a naturalised native of Tierra del Fuego, probably dating back to the days when Orkney was a centre for whaling fleets.

Then south across the Churchill Barriers to the southern isles, passing down the east past Scapa Flow with its many historic sites associated with the naval history of the two World Wars. On the barriers as well as the block ships we saw Little and Arctic Terns and the usual mixture of coastal and farmland birds. We went straight to the south of South Ronaldsay where we visited the Tomb of the Eagles. After a rather prolonged introduction to the tomb and the remains found there, some of the group walked out to the tomb two kilometres away on the edge of the cliff. We crawled or trundled through the low passage into the grave where we met more of the ancestors who were buried in the tomb. As we walked back along the cliffs, past pebble beach bays with Grey Seals, Sylvia and Freda saw a Great Yellow Bumblebee on the coastal Thrift.

Our last stop of the day was at Lamb Holm on the first Churchill Barrier. Here the Italian prisoners of war who built the barrier also built Orkney's most poignant wartime relic, the Italian Chapel. It was crowded with a busload of passing tourists when we arrived but after a five minute wait we had this remarkable converted Nissan Hut to ourselves. In the bay the block-ships were accompanied by Eiders, Arctic Terns and a Red-throated Diver.

Day 5

Thursday 23rd June

Itinerary: AM Waulkmill Bay, Tuskerbister, Stromness, Mar Wick.
 PM Marwick Head. The Loons. Brough of Birsay, Broch of Gurness
 Harray road, Tuskerbister road

On our final day we decided to visit as many sites on the west and north Mainland as feasible in the time. We started out along the south coast, visiting the sheltered Waulkmill Bay, there was a fine selection of shoreline birds and plants but we were probably too late for otters! We then turned inland at Kirkbister and slowly made our way up the strath of Tuskerbister. Here, at last, we had good views of a Short-eared Owl hunting along the edge of the moor. We moved on through central Mainland to Stromness where we had a short stop to explore the winding streets and closes, buy sandwiches and have a coffee.

Moving on to the north-west of the island we stopped for a picnic lunch at Mar Wick where we watched families of Shelduck in the sheltered lagoon. We then moved on to Marwick Head with the Kitchener Memorial and exceptional bird cliffs. On the long grass on the cliff top there were many vole holes and runs, and Sylvia and Freda were lucky to see an Orkney Vole running between two holes. The parallel-bedded cliff ledges were lined with nesting Guillemots, Kittiwakes and Fulmars. Razorbills were more scattered and we also found Puffins on the precarious grassy slopes in the cliff gullies. Off shore Gannets glided in the breeze but were constantly harassed by Bonxies (Great Skuas) while Arctic Skuas concentrated on the terns and auks returning to their nests with fish.

Next we moved from salt to fresh water visiting The Loons, a large area of loch, marsh and reed bed in the centre of the island. Here our attention shifted to ducks, waders, warblers and waterside plants. And so on to the north-west corner of the mainland where, after excellent tea and cakes at the local tearoom, we headed out to the point where we could view the crossing to the Brough of Birsay, a Neolithic, Pictish and Viking settlement on a tidal island. As the tide was not suitable we couldn't cross to the island.

From there we moved on around the north and east coast and late in the afternoon called in to visit the Broch of Gurness. The base of the great defensive tower is surrounded by a settlement which, like so many others in Orkney, had been occupied by Bronze Age peoples, Picts and Norse settlers. We returned to Kirkwall via the moorland roads again seeing Hen Harriers and Short-eared Owls.

Day 6

Friday 24th June

Goodbyes and departures...

"The essence of Orkney's magic is silence, loneliness and the deep marvellous rhythms of sea and land, darkness and light." George Mackay Brown

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Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted)

| | Common name | Scientific name | June | | | | | |
|----|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|------|----|----|----|----|----|
| | | | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 |
| 1 | Mute Swan | <i>Cygnus olor</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 2 | Whooper Swan | <i>Cygnus cygnus</i> | | | ✓ | | | |
| 3 | Greylag Goose | <i>Anser anser</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 4 | Common Shelduck | <i>Tadorna tadorna</i> | | | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| 5 | Eurasian Wigeon | <i>Anas penelope</i> | | | | ✓ | | |
| 6 | Mallard | <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 7 | Eurasian Teal | <i>Anas crecca</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 8 | Tufted Duck | <i>Aythya fuligula</i> | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 9 | Common Eider | <i>Somateria mollissima</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 10 | Red-breasted Merganser | <i>Mergus serrator</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| 11 | Common Pheasant | <i>Phasianus colchicus</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 12 | Peacock | <i>Pavo cristatus</i> | | ✓ | | | | |
| 13 | Red-throated Diver | <i>Gavia stellata</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 14 | Black-throated Diver | <i>Gavia arctica</i> | | | ✓ | | | |
| 15 | Northern Fulmar | <i>Fulmarus glacialis</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 16 | Little Grebe | <i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i> | | ✓ | | | ✓ | |
| 17 | Northern Gannet | <i>Morus bassanus</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 18 | European Shag | <i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 19 | Great Cormorant | <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 20 | Northern Hen Harrier | <i>Circus cyaneus</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 21 | Common Kestrel | <i>Falco tinnunculus</i> | | | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| 22 | Eurasian Coot | <i>Fulica atra</i> | | ✓ | | | ✓ | |
| 23 | Eurasian Oystercatcher | <i>Haematopus ostralegus</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 24 | Northern Lapwing | <i>Vanellus vanellus</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 25 | Common Ringed Plover | <i>Charadrius hiaticula</i> | | | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 26 | Common Snipe | <i>Gallinago gallinago</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 27 | Bar-tailed Godwit | <i>Limosa limosa</i> | | ✓ | | | | |
| 28 | Whimbrel | <i>Numenius phaeopus</i> | | | | | ✓ | |
| 29 | Eurasian Curlew | <i>Numenius arquata</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 30 | Common Redshank | <i>Tringa totanus</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 31 | Black-legged Kittiwake | <i>Rissa tridactyla</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 32 | Black-headed Gull | <i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 33 | Common Gull | <i>Larus canus</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 34 | Great Black-backed Gull | <i>Larus marinus</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 35 | European Herring Gull | <i>Larus argentatus</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 36 | Lesser Black-backed Gull | <i>Larus fuscus</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 37 | Sandwich Tern | <i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| 38 | Little Tern | <i>Sternula albifrons</i> | | | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 39 | Common Tern | <i>Sterna hirundo</i> | | ✓ | | | | |
| 40 | Arctic Tern | <i>Sterna paradisaea</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 41 | Great Skua | <i>Stercorarius skua</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 42 | Arctic Skua | <i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 43 | Common Guillemot | <i>Uria aalge</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 44 | Razorbill | <i>Alca torda</i> | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 45 | Black Guillemot | <i>Cephus grylle</i> | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 46 | Atlantic Puffin | <i>Fratercula arctica</i> | | ✓ | | | ✓ | |
| 47 | Common Pigeon/Rock Dove | <i>Columba livia</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |

| | Common name | Scientific name | June | | | | | |
|----|------------------------|---------------------------------|------|----|----|----|----|----|
| | | | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 |
| 48 | Feral Pigeon | <i>Columba livia domest.</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 49 | Common Wood Pigeon | <i>Columba palumbus</i> | | | | ✓ | | ✓ |
| 50 | Eurasian Collared Dove | <i>Streptopelia decaocto</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 51 | Short-eared Owl | <i>Asio flammeus</i> | | | | | ✓ | |
| 52 | Western Jackdaw | <i>Coloeus monedula</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 53 | Rook | <i>Corvus frugilegus</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 54 | Hooded Crow | <i>Corvus cornix</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 55 | Northern Raven | <i>Corvus corax</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 56 | Eurasian Skylark | <i>Alauda arvensis</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 57 | Sand Martin | <i>Riparia riparia</i> | | | ✓ | | | |
| 58 | Barn Swallow | <i>Hirundo rustica</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 59 | Common House Martin | <i>Delichon urbicum</i> | ✓ | | | | ✓ | |
| 60 | Willow Warbler | <i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i> | | | ✓ | | | |
| 61 | Sedge Warbler | <i>Acrocephalus paludicola</i> | | | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| 62 | Common Starling | <i>Sturnus vulgaris</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 63 | Common Blackbird | <i>Turdus merula</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 64 | Song Thrush | <i>Turdus philomelos</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| 65 | European Robin | <i>Erithacus rubecula</i> | | | | | | ✓ |
| 66 | Northern Wheatear | <i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 67 | House Sparrow | <i>Passer domesticus</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 68 | Pied Wagtail | <i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 69 | Rock Pipit | <i>Anthus petrosus</i> | | | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| 70 | Meadow Pipit | <i>Anthus pratensis</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 71 | Common Chaffinch | <i>Fringilla coelebs</i> | | | ✓ | | | ✓ |
| 72 | European Greenfinch | <i>Carduelis chloris</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| 73 | Common Linnet | <i>Carduelis cannabina</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 74 | Yellowhammer | <i>Emberiza citrinella</i> | | | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| 75 | Common Reed Bunting | <i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i> | | | | | | |

Mammals

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|--------------------------|------------------------------|--|---|---|---|---|--|
| 1 | Orkney and Guernsey Vole | <i>Microtus arvalis</i> | | | | | ✓ | |
| 2 | Common Rat | <i>Rattus norvegicus</i> | | | | | ✓ | |
| 3 | Rabbit | <i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 4 | Brown Hare | <i>Lepus capensis</i> | | | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| 5 | Common Seal | <i>Phoca vitulina</i> | | | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| 6 | Grey Seal | <i>Halichoerus grypus</i> | | ✓ | | ✓ | | |

Butterflies

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|--------------------|-------------------------|---|---|---|--|---|--|
| 1 | Small White | <i>Pieris rapae</i> | ✓ | | | | | |
| 2 | Green-veined White | <i>Pieris napi</i> | | ✓ | | | ✓ | |
| 3 | Red Admiral | <i>Vanessa atalanta</i> | | | | | ✓ | |
| 4 | Tortoiseshell | <i>Aglais urticae</i> | | | ✓ | | | |

Bumblebees

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|------------------------|-----------------------------|--|--|--|---|--|--|
| 1 | Great Yellow Bumblebee | <i>Bombus distinguendus</i> | | | | ✓ | | |
|---|------------------------|-----------------------------|--|--|--|---|--|--|

Plants

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|------------------|----------------------------|--|---|---|---|---|--|
| 1 | Meadow Buttercup | <i>Ranunculus acris</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 2 | Ragged-Robin | <i>Lychnis flos-cuculi</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |

| | Common name | Scientific name | June | | | | | |
|----|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|------|----|----|----|----|----|
| | | | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 |
| 3 | Sea Campion | <i>Silene uniflora</i> | | | ✓ | | | |
| 4 | Thrift (Sea Pink) | <i>Armeria maritima</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 5 | Bay Willow | <i>Salix pentandra</i> | | | ✓ | | | |
| 6 | Osier | <i>Salix viminalis</i> | | | ✓ | | | |
| 7 | Eared Willow | <i>Salix aurita</i> | | | ✓ | | | |
| 8 | Cuckooflower | <i>Cardamine pratensis</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| 9 | Common Scurvygrass | <i>Cochlearia officinalis</i> | | | | | ✓ | |
| 10 | Heather | <i>Calluna vulgaris</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 11 | Bell Heather | <i>Erica cinerea</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 12 | Scottish Primrose | <i>Primula scotica</i> | | | ✓ | | | |
| 13 | Meadowsweet | <i>Filipendula ulmaria</i> | | | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| 14 | Tormentil | <i>Potentilla erecta</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| 15 | Water Avens | <i>Geum rivale</i> | | | ✓ | | | |
| 16 | Kidney Vetch | <i>Anthyllis vulneraria</i> | | | ✓ | | | |
| 17 | Bird's-foot Trefoil | <i>Lotus corniculatus</i> | | | ✓ | | | |
| 18 | White Clover | <i>Trifolium repens</i> | | | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| 19 | Red Clover | <i>Trifolium pratense</i> | | | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| 20 | Sycamore | <i>Acer pseudoplatanus</i> | ✓ | | | | | |
| 21 | Bogbean | <i>Menyanthes trifoliata</i> | | | | | ✓ | |
| 22 | Water Forget-me-not | <i>Myosotis scorpioides</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| 23 | Wild Thyme | <i>Thymus polytrichus</i> | | | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| 24 | Buck's-horn Plantain | <i>Plantago coronopus</i> | | | ✓ | | | |
| 25 | Sea Plantain | <i>Plantago maritima</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 26 | Monkeyflower | <i>Mimulus guttatus</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| 27 | Lousewort | <i>Pedicularis sylvatica</i> | | | ✓ | | | |
| 28 | Lady's Bedstraw | <i>Galium verum</i> | | | ✓ | | | |
| 29 | Daisy | <i>Bellis perennis</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 30 | Sea Mayweed | <i>Tripleurospermum maritimum</i> | | | ✓ | | | |
| 31 | Magellan Ragwort | <i>Senecio smithii</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| 32 | Common Cottongrass | <i>Eriophorum angustifolium</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 33 | Common Reed | <i>Phragmites australis</i> | | ✓ | | | ✓ | |
| 34 | Spring Squill | <i>Scilla verna</i> | | | ✓ | | | |
| 35 | Yellow Iris | <i>Iris pseudacorus</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 36 | Fragrant Orchid | <i>Gymnadenia conopsea</i> | | | | | ✓ | |
| 37 | Heath Spotted-orchid | <i>Dactylorhiza maculata</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 38 | Northern Marsh Orchid | <i>Dactylorhiza purpurella</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |

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