



Breeding-range expansion of the Caspian Gull in Europe: 2021–22 update

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Abstract

Litwiniak *et al.* (2021) detailed the breeding-range expansion of the Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans* in Europe. The paper concluded by saying that: 'The Caspian Gull is an easy-to-study bird, and we can continue to follow its expansion in Europe in real time.' Since that paper was written, the species

has continued to increase and extend its range in Europe. In this paper, we present an update on the increase in both numbers and range across Europe since the publication of Litwiniak *et al.* (2021).

Introduction

The Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans* has undergone a considerable range expansion in Europe in the last 100 years. Litwiniak *et al.* (2021) detailed this expansion up to 2020. Given its large size, conspicuousness and the often-straightforward method of monitoring its nesting areas, the Caspian Gull is an easy species to study, and it is possible to follow its expansion in Europe in real time. For this paper, data has been collected from every country in Europe where the species breeds, except for Russia. Since the publication of Litwiniak *et al.* (2021), the species has continued to increase in number and expand its range. The main aim of this paper is to summarise these changes, updating and adding to the data published in Litwiniak *et al.* (2021). Given the extensive input of recent data from across the species' breeding range, this paper can be considered the definitive source of information for the species breeding in Europe up to and including the 2022 breeding season.

National population estimates

The following reports are ordered by population size of each country, from largest to smallest (see table 1).

Ukraine

Data were not reported in Litwiniak *et al.* (2021) for Ukraine, where the species has bred since the start of the twentieth century. Historically, Caspian

Gulls bred exclusively on islands and coastal areas around the Azov and Black Seas. Numbers began to rise in the 1930s through to the mid 1980s, increasing from 3,000–5,000 to 17,000–23,000 nesting pairs during this period (Klymenko 1950; Siokhin *et al.* 1988). The number of breeding pairs at colonies located on coastal lagoons, such as at the Chernomorsky Nature Reserve, on the shores of the Black Sea, decreased significantly during 1970–1985. However, other colonies, situated at the northeastern coast of the Azov Sea, increased during the same period. The total number of breeding pairs on the Azov and Black Sea coasts and nearby lagoons fluctuated between 28,000 and 35,000 pairs during 1995–98 (Siokhin *et al.* 2000).

The increase in the population on the Azov and Black Sea coasts was one factor in the range expansion of Caspian Gulls into inland areas of Ukraine. Birds were first recorded nesting away from the coast as early as the late 1980s, at three large reservoirs along the River Dnieper and in the Seversky Donets river basin, both in eastern-central Ukraine, and in the Southern Bug River and the Pripjat River basins, both in western Ukraine. Some of these colonies were short-lived, but the colonies at the reservoirs along the River Dnieper have continued to increase in both number of colonies and number of nesting pairs since the late 1980s; by the beginning of the 2000s, there were 13 stable colonies in the area holding 1,100–1,200 pairs. By 2010–15, 17 colonies held 2,500–2,700 pairs (Gavrilyuk *et al.* 2015). The total number of Caspian Gulls in the River Dnieper reservoirs was conservatively estimated to be 2,500–3,000 pairs in 2015.

According to the survey data for 2016–20, the number of Caspian Gulls breeding on the Azov and Black Sea coasts ranged from 9,000 to 11,000 pairs (Chernichko 2020). This data is incomplete as counting in this region is difficult. However, the number of Caspian Gulls breeding in the Ukrainian regions of the Azov and Black Seas has decreased slightly. At the same time, the population at the reservoirs along the River Dnieper has increased since 2015, with 1,300–1,450 pairs at Kaniv reservoir (south of Kyiv) in 2020 and 900–1,050 pairs there in 2021. At Kremenchuk reservoir, there were 2,700–3,000 pairs in 2020 and 2,500–2,800 in 2021 (M. N. Gavrilyuk pers. comm.).

Although the Caspian Gull uses a range of nesting habitats in Ukraine, such as reedbeds and hydrotechnical structures, urban nesting on rooftops is still

quite rare in the country, with only occasional cases in some cities along the Black Sea coasts, such as Odessa, Partenit and Alushta, in the 1990s and 2000s (Beskaravayny 2008; Rusev *et al.* 2011).

It is important to note that data for Ukraine is incomplete owing to two major factors. Firstly, the majority of nesting territories in southern Ukraine are in areas that have been occupied by Russia since 2014, which makes counting and reporting of data impossible. Secondly, resources do not allow for a full count of each colony along the large river-basin reservoirs each year. Thus, the Ukrainian breeding population of Caspian Gulls is conservatively estimated at 13,000–16,000 pairs during 2021 and 2022.

Belarus

Four species of large gull currently breed in Belarus – Caspian Gull, Herring Gull *L. argentatus*, Lesser Black-backed Gull *L. fuscus* and Yellow-legged Gull *L. michahellis* – with the first two species the most numerous. Owing to the large number of gulls breeding in the country, the small number of birders interested in studying gulls, and the problems with separation of the four species – and hybrids – it is difficult to collate reliable data on numbers of large gulls breeding in Belarus. However, an estimate has been made of 8,000–9,500 breeding pairs of large gulls at 96 separate nesting sites (Samusenko & Pyshko 2023). This should be considered a minimum estimate, since there are likely to be other, currently unrecorded breeding sites, especially in large cities where gulls nest on the roofs of buildings.

There are currently 63 known rooftop-nesting sites of large gulls across Belarus. Most of these sites hold a single pair or a small colony, although they include at least 15 larger colonies, ranging in size from 15 to 5,000 pairs. The largest is at Gatovo near Minsk, where Caspian Gull is the predominant species (Samusenko *et al.* 2019). These rooftop breeding sites are thus an important habitat for Caspian Gulls in Belarus.

To determine the number of Caspian Gulls breeding in Belarus, an estimate

was made of the approximate species composition of birds nesting at sites that were surveyed in person, as well as the verification of the species from photos of breeding birds for a number of large colonies that were not visited in person.

It was estimated that Caspian Gulls made up around 60–90% of the number of large gulls breeding in Belarus: equal to approximately 4,800–8,500 pairs. This includes both apparently pure birds, and possible hybrids that show a typical Caspian Gull-like phenotype and cannot be confidently separated on current knowledge. To provide more accurate estimates, structured surveys are needed to identify currently unrecorded and new breeding sites of large gulls, and to clarify the ratio of species and hybrids.

This new information puts the estimated total of breeding Caspian Gulls in Belarus considerably higher than the minimum of 2,000 pairs reported in Litwiniak *et al.* 2021.

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Poland

Litwiniak *et al.* (2021) reported the number of breeding pairs in Poland to be 3,000–3,500. In 2021, the Caspian Gull Research Group organised a census of the whole country, which confirmed that there were 5,554 pairs at 44 locations (Przymencki *et al.* 2022). The average annual population growth rate between 1989 and 2021 was estimated at 14.8% per year, which is the highest of any breeding bird in Poland (Wardecki *et al.* 2021). Population growth is widespread, both at older, more established colonies and at new ones. For example, at Zastyw Karczmiski, the largest colony in Poland, there were more than 1,970 pairs in 2022, up from 1,983 in 2021 (? Bednarz pers. comm.); in K?pa Nadbrzeska, Poland's second-largest Caspian Gull colony, the number increased from 579 in 2021 to 729 in 2022 (M. Sidelnik pers. comm.); at Zio?o Lake, a relatively new colony, the number of pairs increased from 36 in 2021 to 87 in 2022 (A. Lor?cki and M. Gierszewski pers. comm.); and in Rad?yw, 25 pairs bred in 2021 and around 120 pairs in 2022 (M. Baran pers. comm.).

However, there have been declines at some colonies. At Mokrzec, the number decreased from 304 to 50 between 2021 and 2022 owing to mammalian predation (K. Pary? and R. Szczerbik pers. comm.). In 2022, Mietkyw Reservoir held 439 pairs, but the colony was largely destroyed by Wild Boars *Sus scrofa* and only a few young Caspian Gulls fledged.

A number of colonies have remained stable for several years, such as at Jankowice and Kozielno, where the nesting islands have reached capacity.

Some interesting urban breeding observations were made in Poland's large cities in 2021 and 2022; for example, a Caspian Gull paired with a possible Caspian Gull hybrid at Warsaw Zoo, where they nested on a felled tree in an animal enclosure. The nest failed, but this was nevertheless a new breeding site for the species (M. Niedziy?ka pers. comm.). A total of 15–20 pairs of Caspian Gulls were recorded nesting on rooftops in Warsaw in 2021–22 (Rapczy?ski *et al.* 2021; J. Rapczy?ski pers. comm.), with new records of

rooftop nesting coming from Płock in 2022, where one pair bred (probably also in 2021) (P. Wardecki pers. comm.), and Olsztyn (A. Włodarczyk-Komosińska pers. comm.). Breeding behaviour has been observed around rooftops in Wrocław and Poznań, but no nesting has been confirmed there so far.

The Polish Caspian Gull population was estimated at 5,700–5,730 breeding pairs in 2022, nesting at 46 locations.

Romania

The number of Caspian Gulls in Romania appears to have remained more or less stable over recent years, although there has been some annual fluctuation.

It is assumed that the initial core breeding range of the Caspian Gull includes the northern and western Black Sea coasts south to the Danube Delta. The marked expansion of this species from here towards the north and northwest over the last 30–40 years, and the significant increase in total population, led to the assumption that a similar process could have taken place in Romania. Indeed, from 2000 onwards, some small colonies appeared away from the species' stronghold in Dobrogea, near the Black Sea coast, where 80–90% of the country's population breeds to this day. However, apart from a recently discovered colony with approximately 350 pairs at Sărulești, Calarasi county (C. Fântâniș pers. comm.; SOR database), the number of breeding pairs is low in regions away from Dobrogea, with smaller colonies found in northern regions, such as at Hârșești, Botoșani county (I. Kovacs pers. comm.) and on reservoirs of the lower Olt River near Slatina (J. Szaby pers. comm.), the last being the westernmost breeding site in the country. The only apparent breeding record for Transylvania is the fishponds at Rotbav, Brașov county (L. Szentes pers. comm.), although the identification of the birds has not been verified in this case; possible breeding in Transylvania was recorded in 2017, when one or two pairs were observed apparently holding territory at Ocna Mureș.

During 2016–18, the species bred in smaller numbers at the steppe lakes, Lake Ianca and Lake Amara, on the plains of southeast Romania; however, extreme drought has caused these lakes to dry up every summer between 2019 and 2022 and Caspian Gulls have disappeared from there as breeders. The same problem is facing what is likely to be the largest Caspian Gull colony in the country, at Murighiol, Tulcea county, which held well over 600 pairs in the late 2010s (E. Todorov *et al.* pers. comm.). In 2021 and 2022, low water levels have allowed the breeding islands to be accessed by terrestrial mammals, such as foxes and jackals. In 2022, the number of breeding Caspian Gulls at Murighiol was significantly lower than in the two preceding years.

Another important breeding site around the Danube Delta is Musura Island, a new sand spit that emerged during the early 2000s on the border with Ukraine, and which holds the only site of breeding Great Black-headed Gulls *Ichthyaetus ichthyaetus* in Romania. Here, succession of vegetation minimises the size of the colony and numbers of breeding pairs have dropped from over 700 in 2011 (D. Hulea & M. Cazacu pers. comm.; SOR database).

Despite the negative effects caused by drought and the limitations imposed by vegetational succession, Caspian Gulls have recently begun to extend their breeding range in Romania to include urban rooftops, a trait previously limited in the country to Yellow-legged Gulls. The latter have shown a significant increase in breeding range, colonising four major cities as far inland as the Carpathian Basin, in Transylvania. Rooftop breeding by Caspian Gulls was noted in Tulcea (M. Dima pers. comm.), Braila and Galati (S. Horoiu pers. comm.), Medgidia (D. Pleșu pers. comm.) and Bacău (C. Chirilioaie pers. comm.) in 2021. It seems likely that rooftop breeding by Caspian Gulls in Romania will increase in the future.

There is a lack of systematic counts of the species, but an almost 100% survey coverage of the country during the last two atlas projects allowed the population to be estimated at 2,000–4,000 breeding pairs in Romania, during both 2007–13 and 2014–18.

Germany

In 2022, the German Caspian Gull breeding population was estimated at 1,050–1,200 pairs, nesting in 20 sites. These numbers are based on both estimates and actual counts of pairs but viewing difficulties mean that only approximate numbers can be obtained at some sites. It is worth noting that 98% of all pairs of this species in Germany breed in eastern regions, with the largest proportion of the breeding population in Brandenburg (500–550 pairs), Saxony (300–350 pairs) and Saxony-Anhalt (120–170 pairs). After the Caspian Gull, the Herring Gull is the second most common species there and, in all cases, colonies are mixed.



26. Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans* (with Black-headed Gulls *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* and a Herring Gull *L. argentatus*), Heligoland, Germany, October 2023.

The vast majority of Caspian Gulls nest on sparsely vegetated islands in both

natural and artificial lakes, including disused gravel and coal pits. So far, nesting on rooftops is in the minority. However, an increasing colony exists in the centre of Berlin, where 50–60 pairs of Caspian Gulls nest. A similar situation has been observed in Waren, M̄ritz, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, where 2–3 pairs bred on a flat roof in 2021 in a mixed colony with Herring Gulls (Rapczyński *et al.* 2021), increasing to 10–12 pairs of Caspian Gulls in 2022. It is likely that some sites with single pairs have not been recorded yet, especially if Caspian Gulls are breeding amongst other large gull species or in obscure locations, such as on the Baltic coast in the cities of Greifswald and Lubmin, where single pairs have occasionally been found nesting over the past few years (Rapczyński *et al.* 2021). More, currently undetected, records are expected, especially in certain gull colonies on the coasts, both on islands and on rooftops.

Slovakia

In the last five years, at least six breeding sites have been documented (Karaska *et al.* 2014; Demko *et al.* 2019): Orava Reservoir, with 583–808 pairs (D. Karaska pers. comm.); S̄ava Reservoir, with 90–110 pairs (J̄. Benko pers. comm.); Senianske fishponds, with 40–50 pairs (M. Repel pers. comm.); Hruľovsk̄ Reservoir with 30–35 pairs (J̄. Benko pers. comm.); Liptovsk̄ Mara reservoir, with 20–30 pairs; and Veľeovsk̄ Reservoir, with one pair (P. Vr̄nk pers. comm.). Some Yellow-legged Gull colonies are also visited by Caspian Gulls during the breeding season, though no nesting has been confirmed.

In general, all Caspian Gull colonies in Slovakia are increasing and the population was estimated at 764–1,034 pairs in 2021 and 2022, up from the 757–765 pairs in 2019 (Litwiniak *et al.* 2021).

Lithuania

The last official assessment of the Caspian Gull population in Lithuania was 550–650 breeding pairs (European Environment Agency 2020), suggesting that the estimate of 700–800 pairs in Litwiniak *et al.* (2021) was too high. This discrepancy is, in part, due to new data from western Lithuania, particularly the Baltic coast, which show that colonies in this area are in fact occupied by birds that are a phenotypic match for Herring Gull, not Caspian Gull (J. Morkūnas and A. Raudonius pers. comm.).

During 2021–22, the Caspian Gull population in Lithuania (discounting the aforementioned large-gull colonies in the west) has remained stable or has increased slightly. In 2022, the number of breeding pairs at Lake Kretuonas, the largest colony in the country, decreased from 300 to 20 pairs owing to predation by Red Foxes *Vulpes vulpes* (G. Varnas pers. comm.). A colony at Lake Niedus, which held 20–30 pairs in 2014–16, has apparently been extirpated through subsequent destruction of the nests by a pair of Common Cranes *Grus grus* over a period of at least two years (M. Karlonas pers. comm.). There are two Caspian Gull colonies in Lithuania where increases have been observed: at Lake Baluošas, where numbers have risen from 50 to 200 pairs over recent years (T. Masiulis pers. comm.), and at Lake Dysnai, where numbers rose from 5–10 pairs in 2019 to 54 in 2022.

The colony at Lake Alaušas has remained stable at around 20 breeding pairs (D. Norkūnas pers. comm.). The situation on the rooftops of Kaunas city is unclear, but the number of pairs seems to remain more or less stable at about 20–30 (R. Patapavičius pers. comm.). At Lake Apvardai, there is no update on numbers since 2017, when there were 40 pairs (Litwiniak *et al.* 2021). There are believed to be around 15–20 pairs of Caspian Gulls nesting at Novaraistis peat bog (A. Raudonius pers. comm.).

A large new colony of 100–120 pairs was found on rooftops in Alytus city in 2020 (E. Drobėlis and A. Petraška pers. comm.). In addition, at least 1–2 rooftop-nesting pairs are known at the Ignalina Nuclear Power Station – determining actual numbers at the power station is difficult as it is in a strictly restricted area. The main colony of gulls in this area is, however, at nearby Lake Drūkiai, on the Belarussian border.

In eastern Lithuania, a pair bred for the first time at the Antalieptis reservoir in 2022.

Czech Republic

The first nesting by Caspian Gulls in the Czech Republic was recorded in 1990 and the species has been nesting regularly in the country since 1996 (Vavřínek 1998). The population remained low, with just 2–5 breeding pairs estimated between 2001 and 2003 (Ljuboštinová *et al.* 2006). By 2020, numbers had risen to a minimum of 253–259 breeding pairs (Litwiniak *et al.* 2021). In 2022, the number of breeding Caspian Gulls in the Czech Republic was estimated at a minimum of 390–460 breeding pairs.

The vast majority of Caspian Gulls nest on sparsely vegetated islands in a variety of waterbodies (dam reservoirs, flooded sand pits, fishponds). Sites typically hold between one and 40 pairs. There are only two larger colonies: Nový Mlýnský náhon reservoir in South Moravia, with 220–230 pairs; and Vojšovice pond in South Bohemia, with 70–100 pairs.

A formal census of the species was not carried out in the Czech Republic until 2022, data before this relying on casual observation only. It is therefore likely that some nesting pairs were not previously recorded.

Hungary

No further data is available since Litwiniak *et al.* 2021. Thus, the estimated population in Hungary remains at 100–160 pairs, though it's likely there has been an increase in numbers since 2019.

Bulgaria

In 2015, nesting Caspian Gulls were knowingly observed for the first time in Bulgaria when several incubating pairs were ringed on a rooftop in Ruse, northern Bulgaria, in a mixed colony with Yellow-legged Gulls. However, three chicks were ringed at the same location in 2013 and one of these was resighted in Bucharest, Romania, in February 2014, where it was identified as a Caspian Gull. Thus, breeding has been taking place since at least 2013. Since then, more than 300 large-gull chicks have been ringed at the same colony and the recovery data show that 69% of the relocated birds were identified as Caspian Gulls (versus 31% identified as Yellow-legged Gulls). There is currently no proven breeding of Caspian Gull along the Bulgarian Black Sea coast; breeding remains limited to the cities of Ruse (approximately 70–200 pairs) and Silistra (at least ten pairs; D. Mitev pers. comm.), both of which lie on the banks of the River Danube.

The Netherlands

By 2021, the breeding population of Caspian Gull was estimated at 95–100 pairs. A total of 105 breeding pairs were observed throughout the country in 2022 – double the number recorded in 2020. The IJsselmeer area is the stronghold of the species, with two colonies – of 42 and 55 pairs, respectively – in 2022. In these colonies, mixed pairings with Herring Gulls or hybrid birds of the two species occur, but most pairs appear to be pure Caspian Gulls based on phenotypical characters. In the last few years, an increasing number of isolated pairs have been discovered near freshwater bodies throughout the Netherlands, often near or within colonies of other large gull species. Ringed breeding birds originate from Germany, Poland and the Czech Republic. Since 2019, most chicks hatched in the Netherlands have been colour-ringed.

Austria

Before 2020, there were no observations of Caspian Gulls in Austria that indicated breeding. However, on 13th April 2020, a pair of Caspian Gulls was observed carrying nesting material at the Zwischenlager ponds in Hohenau an der March in the northeastern part of the country. What was presumably the same pair was observed carrying nesting material at the same site on 16th March 2021. Despite monitoring being carried out at the location, nesting was not confirmed (R. Katzinger pers. comm.). Then, in spring 2022, three breeding attempts involving Caspian Gulls were recorded at three locations in Austria (Vratny 2023). In the first case, two juveniles fledged from a nest at the Inn Reservoir, Obernberg, Upper Austria; three adult Caspian Gulls were involved in raising the young (C. & T. Pumberger pers. comm.). One of the adults had been ringed as a chick in the nest at Reddern, Brandenburg, Germany, in May 2017.

In the second case, a pair of Caspian Gulls was found nesting at the Ottensheim-Wilhering hydroelectric power plant on the Danube, Upper Austria, alongside 11 Yellow-legged Gull nests. However, no young had hatched by the fourth week of incubation (J. & J. Vratny pers. comm.).

27. Caspian Gull, Lake Traunsee, Upper Austria, Austria, March 2021.

28. Pair of Caspian Gulls on nest, Danube power plant, Ottensheim-Wilhering, Upper Austria, Austria, May 2023. The same pair bred at this site in 2022.

The third case concerned a mixed pairing between a male Yellow-legged Gull and a female Caspian Gull at a gravel pit next to the Danube in Puchlarn, Lower Austria. The male also bred with a female Yellow-legged Gull during the same breeding season. The female Caspian Gull abandoned the nest during the second week of incubation, probably due to insufficient support by its partner (W. Schweighofer pers. comm.).

France

The male Caspian Gull ringed at Kozielno Reservoir, Poland, in 2012 that paired with a hybrid gull in Paris city centre in 2018 (see Litwiniak *et al.* 2021) was still present in 2022. There have still not, however, been any other

breeding records in France.

Nonetheless, the species continues to increase in the country during the winter months, with birds arriving earlier and earlier each year (typically in August rather than at the end of October as was the case a decade ago). It is present mainly along the northeast coast, though birds are regularly seen inland as far as Paris and there are now dozens of birds along the southwest French Atlantic coast. The biggest concentrations are in Ardennes department, close to the Belgian border, where up to 350–750 birds have been estimated in January–February in recent years. There are no recent national counts of Caspian Gulls during winter, but there are probably at least 1,000 birds every winter.

Latvia

Breeding remains unproven in Latvia, although there is a lack of detailed information from southeastern regions, which are close to Caspian Gull colonies in northeastern Lithuania. An intriguing observation was made at a landfill site at Getliži, central Latvia, where a juvenile gull was noted that appeared, based on phenotype, to be a Caspian Gull. It had been ringed as chick in a Herring Gull colony in Riga port (Turku sala) in 2020 and had been assumed to be that species. Special attention was paid to the gulls breeding in the colony in 2021, but no Caspian Gulls were seen. One possible Herring x Caspian Gull hybrid was observed in the colony during the 2022 breeding season. The same year, at least one adult Caspian Gull was seen in a rooftop Herring Gull colony in Daugavpils, southeast Latvia. Confirmed breeding is expected in Latvia soon.

Discussion

The ongoing expansion in the breeding range of the Caspian Gull is providing a fascinating view into how bird species may change in distribution and abundance. In all countries where extensive counts were undertaken, the population of Caspian Gulls had increased since the publication of Litwiniak *et al.* (2021) (except for Lithuania, see above). Additionally, nesting was noted in Austria for the first time, where the species is a common wintering bird and where breeding had been anticipated for some time.

We expect that the species' breeding range will continue to expand along the North Sea coast, from the Netherlands into Belgium and northern France and probably across the English Channel into southeast England.

Although this paper gives the most up-to-date information on the population and range of Caspian Gulls in Europe, it is likely to be far from complete in all areas of the species' European range. The complete census undertaken in Poland demonstrated how many pairs might have been missed elsewhere when numbers were based on casual observations. Accurate recording is hindered by the morphological similarity to other large gulls, meaning that Caspian Gulls can be easily overlooked in areas where they are unexpected or when observers do not pay enough attention to identification and detection of the species. Hence, we believe that the numbers presented in this paper (table 1) still represent an underestimate of the number of pairs of breeding Caspian Gulls in Europe.

Additionally, we still do not know how many hybrids or backcrosses exist within the population. The counts presented here are based on morphology and phenotypes, and we are aware that phenotypically Caspian Gull-like

hybrids may be included in the counts.

Despite the presence of a large number of keen 'gullers' in some European countries, the popularity of gulls – and, accordingly, knowledge of identification – remains low in other countries. Consequently, the level of coverage is not consistent across Europe, and this, in our opinion, is one of the most important areas to improve in order to obtain accurate, ongoing counts of Caspian Gulls (and other gull species) across the continent.

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