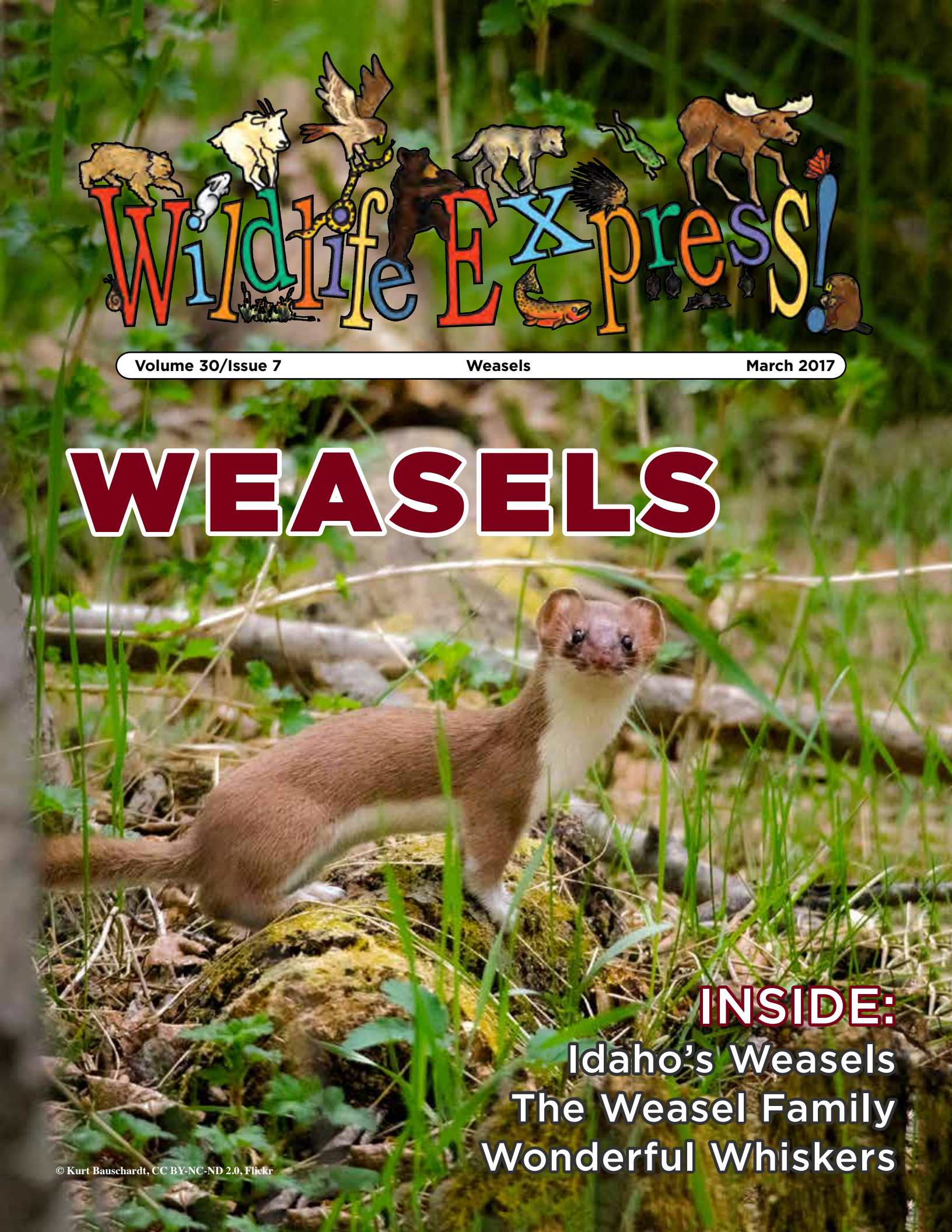

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WEASELS

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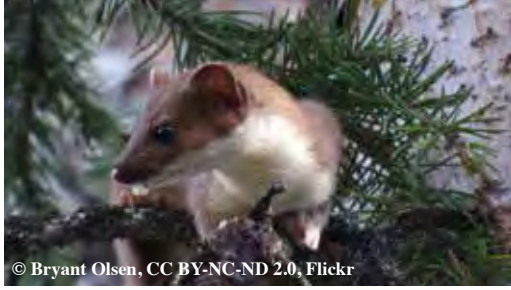

IDAHO'S WEASELS

Could you jump four times your body length from a standing start? Weasels can! Idaho has two species or kinds of weasels, the ermine and the long-tailed weasel. Ermine are also called short-tailed weasels. Ermine is a French word that means "white winter coat." As you might guess, ermine have white coats in the winter. Every part of their coat is white except for a black tip on their tails. In the summer, they have light brown backs and white bellies. Long-tailed weasels also turn white in the winter. They have light brown backs and yellowish-buff colored bellies in the summer.

Weasels are the smallest carnivores, or meat-eating animals, in Idaho. They have long slender bodies, short legs and pointed faces. The size of a weasel depends upon whether it is an ermine or long-tailed weasel, and whether it is a male or a female. Males can be twice as big as females. Ermine are between eight to 14 inches long and weigh only two to seven ounces. Long-tailed weasels are 13 to 21 inches long and weigh four to 11 ounces. To get an idea of the size and weight of a weasel, bundle together 12 unsharpened pencils. This is about the size and weight of a weasel.

Weasels are very active, and their bodies are not good at storing fat. They need to eat a lot, and they need to eat often. If a weasel is not sleeping, then it is most likely looking for food or eating. Weasels are known for being amazing hunters. Their small, slender bodies are perfect for slipping down mouse holes, and their small, cupped ears help them to capture and hear sounds very well. Weasels also have a good sense of smell and great eyesight. All around their faces they have whiskers that help them feel where they are going. They even have whiskers in a strange place -- on the backs of their front legs! These whiskers help weasels to feel animals when they reach out to catch them. The leg whiskers also help weasels feel their way down mouse burrows.

Weasels eat mostly mice and small mammals, but they may also eat insects, birds, frogs or snakes. Weasels can kill animals that are much larger than themselves, like jackrabbits and snowshoe hares. A weasel killing a jackrabbit would be like someone's pet poodle killing a yearling cow! Now that's amazing. Weasels are incredibly strong for their size.

Remember weasels' white winter coats and black tipped tails? Weasels use their tails as a lure to catch dinner. Weasels hide in the snow and flip the end of their tails. Small animals see the black tip flipping and think it could be food. When the animals come closer to get a better look, the weasels spring up and kill their prey with a quick bite to the neck.

Weasel babies are called kits. Six to nine kits are born in a nest of grass, feathers and mouse fur between April and May. They only weigh about as much as a stick of gum, but they grow fast. By the time they are three to five weeks old, they are starting to eat meat. Long-tailed weasels leave their parents when they are 10 to 12 weeks old. Ermine are usually independent when they are about 16 weeks old.

Next time you are outside and see a streak of brown or white out of the corner of your eye, think of weasels. These curious, active predators are entertaining to watch!

THE WEASEL FAMILY

Members of the weasel family are called mustelids (mus-TELL-ids). In Latin, "mustela" means weasel. This group of animals includes wolverine, badger, fisher, weasels, marten, mink, and otters. In Idaho, we have eight species of mustelids.

Mustelids are found on every continent except Antarctica and Australia. They range in size from the sea otter that can weigh as much as a third grader to the least weasel which weighs about as much as two pinkie erasers. Wolverines are the largest mustelid in Idaho; they usually weigh between 20 to 40 pounds. Ermine are the smallest.

Most mustelids have long, slender bodies and short legs. They can fit easily into tight spaces or move freely through the water. Even the bulky-looking badger and wolverine are amazingly flexible and quick. Several species, including the marten and fisher, are excellent climbers. The otters and mink are wonderful swimmers and spend a lot of time in the water.

The long, thin shape of mustelids makes it difficult to stay warm and store fat, so they eat a lot. As a family, mustelids are mainly carnivores. They eat other animals, but they may also eat fruits, berries or plants. When a mustelid kills more than it can eat at one sitting, it saves the rest for another meal. The leftovers are hidden in a place called a "cache" (cash). When the animal is hungry, it will return to the cache and finish eating its prey.

All members of the weasel family have something in common. They stink! Mustelids have glands located at the base of the tail that make musk. Musk is a strongly scented liquid. Musk may be used to attract a mate. It is also used to mark their homes or territories. The smell tells other members of the same species to stay out! Some mustelids mark their caches with musk. By doing this, they are warning others to stay away from their food. The smell also helps them locate the cache later.

Keep an eye out for mustelids while enjoying time in Idaho's wild lands.

How can animals hide in plain sight? They use camouflage (KAM-e-flazh). Camouflage means to blend in with your surroundings and hide. It is a type of disguise. Camouflage may be a certain color, pattern of colors, or a special shape that fools the eye. It makes animals hard to see. Camouflage may help an animal to hide, or it may help a hunter to sneak up on its prey.

Insects are animals that use camouflage a lot. It is difficult to see a green insect on a plant, but it is even harder to see a green insect shaped like a leaf on a plant. Many insects look like leaves or twigs. No matter how hungry a bird is it might miss the green, leaf-shaped insect.

Great horned owls also use camouflage. All the shades of brown and white on their feathers help them to blend in with tree bark. If an owl holds completely still against a tree trunk, animals might not notice it.

Many animals change their colors with the seasons. Animals that change color to match their background are using cryptic (KRIP-tik) coloration. This is what weasels and snowshoe hares do. When snow starts to fall, their coats gradually turn white to match.

Animals may even change colors and patterns throughout their lives. Deer fawns are born with tan coats that have white spots. The spots match the sun and shade that dapple the tall grasses where the fawns hide. As long as the fawns do not move, predators, like mountain lions, will have a difficult time seeing them. As deer fawns grow older and can run faster to escape danger, the spots fade away.

Do you think zebras are camouflaged? They are not camouflaged for our eyes. Their black and white stripes stick out against the grasses of Africa, but that is not true for lions' eyes. Lions are color blind to red and green. Grasses and trees look like shades of gray. The zebra's stripes help it to blend into the tall grasses. A herd of zebra standing together can also be confusing. All the stripes make it hard for a predator to focus on one zebra. This helps the zebra avoid becoming a lion's meal.

When animals are perfectly camouflaged, sticks seem to crawl, leaves can fly and trees may have eyes and beaks. Whether hunter or hunted, camouflage helps animals to survive.

THE BETTER TO SEE YOU WITH...

To have vision means to be able to turn light into images of the world around us. Animals do this with their eyes and brains. Eyes come in all shapes, sizes and colors. An animal's eyes are designed to help it survive in its habitat. This can lead to some pretty interesting eyes.

It takes two eyes looking forward at the same scene for an animal to judge distance well. Try closing one eye and reaching for something. Now use both eyes. Isn't it easier to grab using two eyes? Being able to judge distance is important for predators like weasels. They need to know how far away an animal may be from them before they spend a lot of energy trying to catch it.

Prey animals usually have their eyes on the side of their heads. A rabbit can see in nearly every direction, but they can't see everywhere. Their eyes are so far to the side rabbits have a blind spot right in front of their noses.

Frogs eyes stick out from the top of their heads. They can see above, behind, to the side and to the front, all at the same time! This lets frogs look for food while also keeping an eye out for predators. Frogs eyes also help them to swallow food. When frogs put food into their mouths, they blink and pull their eyes down into the roof of their mouths. The eyes help to push food down the frog's throat.

Have you ever heard a person say a dog is colorblind? Well, that is half true. Dogs can see some colors, but seem to have a difficult time seeing red and green. Tests have shown that many mammals can see at least some colors.

Bees and other insects see colors too, but they may see colors differently than people. Insects might see blue grass and green skies. Scientists aren't really sure yet. Animals' eyes may look similar to your eyes from the outside, but they sure can work differently on the inside.

Wonderful WHISKERS

Weasels have whiskers on their faces and legs that help them while hunting. Other animals depend on whiskers as well.

Imagine you are a bobcat hunting during a dark, moonless night. Your eyes, although designed to work in low light, are having a difficult time seeing. It is so dark even a bobcat's eyes can't make their way through the darkness. You are hungry, and you know a mouse must be nearby. How are you going to find the mouse if you can't see it? Use your whiskers. Bobcat whiskers can feel vibrations caused by a mouse moving.

Whiskers are great tools for animals that hunt at night or in dark places like underground or underwater. Whiskers are special hairs that are very sensitive to touch and movement.

All mammals, except humans, have whiskers. Although men's beards are called whiskers, they are just body hairs. Men's beards cannot help them find their way around.

Whiskers are called vibrissae (vy-BRISS-ee). They are thicker and rooted deeper in the skin than regular hairs. Each whisker sits in a sack of fluid filled with nerves. The whiskers can turn in the fluid like a straw in a bottle. When something touches a whisker, the information goes down the hair to the nerves. The nerves tell the brain what the whiskers have felt.

Whiskers not only grow on animals' faces. Cats, foxes and squirrels have whiskers on their ankles. Some bats have them on their rumps, and underground burrowers, like moles, have whiskers behind their ears and on their tails and front feet. Flying squirrels use whiskers on their heads, feet and legs to help them find their way through trees at night.

Sometimes animals use whiskers to greet. When two rats meet, they rub their whiskers over each other. This helps them to identify the other rat.

Mammals would have a difficult time getting around and catching food without their whiskers. Whiskers help animals stay in touch with their environments.

HOW MAMMALS WALK

Believe it or not, the way an animal moves may tell you quite a bit about how it lives its life. Have you ever noticed that mammals walk in different ways?

Some animals walk on their entire foot. These animals are called plantigrades (PLANT-e-grades). Plantigrades walk by putting their heels on the ground, rolling forward on the soles of their feet and then pushing off with their toes. Squirrels, bears, mice and you walk this way. Walking on the whole foot takes a lot of energy and time. Plantigrades are slow walkers compared to other animals.

Some animals are called digitigrades (dij-IT-e-grades). Digitigrades walk on their digits or toes. Their feet have evolved where their heels have risen up higher on their legs. Only their toes touch the ground. Wolves, mountain lions, and weasels are digitigrades. Digitigrades are the fastest walkers and runners.

Walk across the floor as you normally would walk. Now lift your heels in the air and walk across the floor on your toes. Do you notice a difference in the speed of your walking?

Which is easier? If you used the same amount of energy, walking on your toes should seem faster and use less effort.

Usually, animals that are plantigrades eat plants and are considered prey animals. They move slower and are easier to catch. Digitigrades are often predators and eat meat. Walking on their toes, they can move faster than the plantigrades and catch them.

There is one group of animals considered digitigrades that eat plants, the ungulates (UN-gye-lets). Ungulates are mammals with hooves. Deer and elk are ungulates. Ungulates are special digitigrades that only walk on two toes. Many ungulates have evolved with wolves and mountain lions eating them. To help them get away from speedy predators, their feet have evolved to walk on two toes. They can sometimes run faster or just as fast as the digitigrades that eat them.

Look closely at animal tracks if you see some. Are the animals walking on their whole feet or just their toes? Are there two sets of tracks, one a plantigrade and one a digitigrade? Try to read the tracks. They may tell you a story about the animals' lives.

Be Outside & Let them be

Spring is a time for renewal. It's a time to get out of the house and explore all the wonders of nature. Walks, bike rides and fishing trips may take us closer to wildlife. You may see baby animals. It's a true sign that spring has arrived.

When you hear people talking about enjoying animals, remember it is especially important that we leave animals alone. Let them do the things they need to do to survive. Getting too close to wild animals might stress them and cause them to die.

As humans, we have an urge to take care of things we think are helpless, especially "cute" animals. If you see a baby animal, don't assume it has been abandoned by its mother. Most of the time, this isn't the case. Mothers often leave their young hidden while they go away to eat. If the mother stayed close to her baby, she could actually draw the attention of a predator. You may have scared the mother away. She will return once "danger" has passed.

If you know that an animal is orphaned because the mother has died, call your local Fish and Game office. They will take the animal to a wildlife rehabilitator. Chances are if you take an animal home, it will die. Caring for a wild animal is not the same as caring for a pet. They need special foods, cages and treatments. Wildlife rehabilitators are specially trained and licensed to care for wild animals.

Wildlife should not be handled, fed, chased or disturbed. If an animal will let you close enough to pick it up, it may be sick. Do not pick up a wild animal – dead or alive.

Get outside this spring and look for wildlife as you are enjoying the fresh air. Just remember, wild animals survive on their own just fine without any help from people. View them from a distance and leave wildlife in the wild.

Weasel Word Search

D M R K W G H R Z C C N G S F
Q I L O U E E Y A Q A E T X G
E E G A T D A R M Y M R Y A Z
I K B I N A N S Y J O X C E K
L K J E T I D M E N U U V R E
A P L R V I D E G L F B Z M X
G S G O T W G E R V L T D I E
D W R A D S B R T P A K I N Q
K E H C A C A I A J G S L E V
P E I Y D Z K F A D E U E C L
B A P N F M L N W Y E M T J I
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P W D S Y U D A I S G C U D R
J W O D Y O O H D G Z T M Z K
C U R I O U S W H Y C H Y S V

WORDS:

CACHE
CAMOUFLAGE
CARNIVORE
CURIOUS
DIGITIGRADE
ERMINE
FAST
KIT
MUSK
MUSTELID
PREDATOR
SLENDER
STRONG
WEASEL
WHISKERS

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WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU!
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