

# Wildlife Matters



## Spring 2018 Newsletter

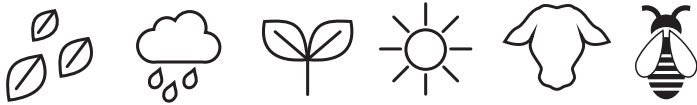


Lower Pertwood Farm strongly believes in the importance of wildlife when monitoring the overall health of the farm as a production unit for arable crops and livestock.

It is interesting that the debate that is currently taking place regarding the future of subsidies in the post-EU era mirrors, to a large extent, what we already do at Lower Pertwood Farm. We work closely with specialists who advise us on issues such as soil health, bird populations, endangered plants, wild bee populations and many other specialised areas of the natural world.

We are delighted that farmers may well in future be subsidised for the work they do in all these areas and at the same time, be encouraged to look more closely at their farms in order to better understand the natural order of things. We are, after all, in possession of only so much land and every time a new housing development takes over open farmland, so the burden of responsibility for the protection of species etc falls on the farms that remain unencumbered by non-agricultural development.

In this newsletter, we explore many different areas of this broadly based subject.



# Organic Farming: what does this actually mean?

by Nick Adams

One of the things we are most proud of at Lower Pertwood is our organic status, as most of the farm has been farmed in this way for 30 years.

We are often asked what being organic actually means. It basically means we do not use any artificially manufactured chemicals on our fields. Those chemicals typically used by what is known as conventional farming. These chemicals will mostly be a mix of fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides.

A better way of thinking about it might be that organic farming tends to be more about farming with Mother Nature, rather than fighting her.

The fertilisers we use are a mix of animal manure, composted straw and digestate from anaerobic digesters. All these sources have to be tested to ensure they are organic before we even allow them on the farm.

Our weed control is done by a combination of grazing (mammals, insects and wild birds) and field work such as ploughing. The grazing mammals are mostly our sheep and cattle, but we have a fair few additional volunteers out there including roe deer and rabbits.

Pest control is mostly done by the food chain and farming practice. By having creatures further up the food chain to prey on the ones we don't want, we can control them. A great example is having lots of ladybirds who feed on greenfly and blackfly aphids.



We therefore leave areas of rough grass in our fields called beetle banks, that give the ladybirds overwintering sites, where they can crack on with the aphid management in the middle of the fields as soon as possible. We also wherever possible, time our field work to take advantage of the weather. An example of this would be if we have a field that has a lot of grass growing which competes with the crops, we would plough it in the Autumn after harvest and leave it over winter in this state. Any roots on the surface that would normally be safely tucked away from the elements would die of cold and/or dry weather. We can always cultivate any particularly bad bits when we can see this type of weather in the forecast.

Having to be in tune with the Mother Nature means we are able to help a lot of wildlife just by the way we farm and that wildlife is always part of the decision-making.



Chris G heading over to Sainfoin to spread digestate which is delivered to us from anaerobic digesters which only use grass and natural biomass to produce gas which in turn generates electricity for the grid.





Example of a tree guard

## An unexpected wildlife habitat

by Nick Adams

I was recently walking through some of the woodland along the edge of the A350 in Rookery field and noticed all the now-redundant tree guards on the ground.

These are ones where either the tree died, or the guard has split along the perforated line when the tree has grown to the size of the guard. I thought I would start to pile them up to return with the Land Rover to pick them up.

As I always have my wildlife hat firmly on my head, I always check inside things like this for wildlife and a good job I did!

Just LOOK at what I found inside...

As you can see from the first picture, one end is open and the other has been covered by moss over the years. The leaves inside look pretty fresh though, so something must have taken them in there to make a nest or a food larder. I'm guessing it's a wood mouse. I decided to leave well alone and add it to my sites to put the trail cameras in place.

A brief search showed the vast majority of the unbroken tubes are now mouse houses – which is just perfect!

So always think about what you're doing when you're 'tidying up', the wildlife might have already taken over!



## The Manor Farm hedges

by John Robins

**We are very pleased to be able to include this article written by the owner of Manor Farm Longbridge Deverill, Mr John Robins, who still resides in the Farmhouse on the edge of Longbridge Deverill. He explains his passion for the countryside and the rationale behind his hedgerow enhancement project.**

I have always been interested in hedges and their plants. My inspiration came from years of riding and hunting on horses. So often when you are on a horse you are riding beside a hedge and see it from a different angle. You can see into the hedge, appreciate the plants and sometimes see the inhabitants.

Hedges are wildlife corridors to provide the environment for birds to nest, shade and shelter for various plants and mammals such as Stoats, Weasels, Foxes and Roe Deer. Great credit should be given to the local Hunts who organise Hedge Laying competitions, I think this inspired my interest in hedges.

Now it is 10 years since I finished my hedge planting and it is a joy to see the finished grown up article. The characteristic of Wiltshire Downland is famous for many things and in particular the absence of hedgerows.

Why are there so few hedgerows? The answer to that is probably because the Downs were traditionally grazed by sheep and the great sheep walks of the past. They just did not have hedges, the sheep would browse the shrubs and eat the bark, this action kills the plants. When the sheep had to be contained in smaller areas to eat Turnips, Kale or similar in the winter, this was controlled originally by sheep hurdles and latterly by electric fences.

Hedges require maintenance and that costs money. Nevertheless, the hedges that were there needed to be cut and laid, some were and many were left to grow.

Then a few years ago, along came the mechanical hedge cutter. The hedges that had not been maintained were now cut by a variety of machines, from spinning saws to cutter bars.

Eventually the Tractor mounted flail hedge cutter arrived, and now it seems to have become universal. This flail does create a problem which is if you cut a hedge with one, each year it leaves an extra 2 to 6 inches of growth on the hedge. The amount of time and power required to reduce a hedge to its original size absorbs too much time and power. Then if you cut your hedge every two years, the time and power required becomes even greater. Also a biennial cut, also shakes the hedge to bits, and does too much damage.

I am appalled to hear that certain National agencies, advise, cut every two years. Perhaps this advice is an Ivory Tower syndrome!

To return to the hedges at Manor Farm, when we planned to replace them, a Government grant was available. We embarked on this major replanting with the advice of an Environment Advisor, Dr Jemma Batten, of Black Sheep Countryside Management. She knew exactly which grant to apply for, and where to source the best and correct plants for Wiltshire hedges. Dr Jemma was brilliant and without her aid we would have been lost.

The physical work of planting was done with great skill by my neighbour Richard Creighton. To Jemma, and Richard, there is every reason to be grateful.



Left: one of the hedges planted by Mr Robins, now laid

Below: from the Devon Hedge Group, showing a seemingly English traditional task regarding hedgerows





Above, a hedge being layed

At first, we cut the old hedges down as they were mainly overrun with Elder. With due diligence, we cut the Elder and painted the stump with the correct herbicide. We have discovered that this control of the Elder has been very successful.

These hedges amount to almost two miles in length, and in some places, they are replacement hedges, and in other places new planting.

Finally, we embarked on planting a mixture of shrubs, these had to be suitable for the Wiltshire Downland. Our mixture was dominated by 75% Hawthorn, the remaining 25% being made up of Guelder Rose, Dogwood, Hazel, Field Maple, Spindle, Crab Apple and Blackthorn. We added a few Holly plants for good measure.

I made a point of planting the Blackthorn in groups, so we would see from afar, big patches of that lovely white flower in the spring, known as the Blackthorn Winter. A Wiltshire Downland characteristic. Also, it is a joy in the autumn to pick the Blackthorn Sloes for Sloe Gin.

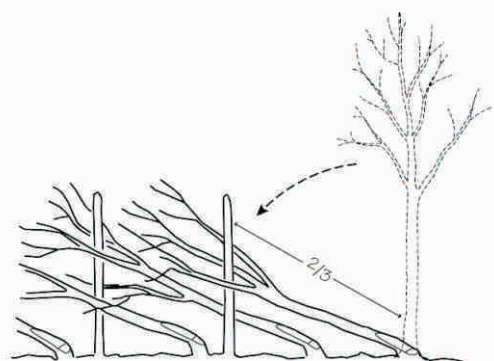
I am going to try to find out which of these Hedgerow plants has survived best. A quick count recently seemed very good, well above 90%. The tree guards supported by Bamboo canes have done their stuff. I am disappointed the tree guards have survived for so long. I remember being told they were bio-degradable, which they certainly are not.

We have noticed that the Crab Apple plants have developed hard fungal type growths, it is possible this has been caused by the Tree Guards reacting with the plant. It may be providing an environment where this hard fungal growth flourishes.

Now, 15 years since I started to plant these hedges, they are being cut, laid, staked and bound, "South of England Style". It is a joy to behold and something I doubted would ever happen, also would I live long enough to see. It eases my conscience, knowing all that time spent on a horse, both riding and hunting has eventually inspired such a worthwhile benefit for everyone to see.

— John Robins

Editor's note: If you are interested in the actual technique to "lay" a hedge, you will find this article interesting: <https://bit.ly/2ImR6b3>



## Wildlife highlights: 1st quarter: 1st January to 31st March 2018

by Nick Adams

It has been another funny old quarter weather-wise. As Climate Change continues to bite, the weather we are experiencing is getting more extreme. The main road that runs along and through the middle of Lower Pertwood was closed during the two periods of snow in this quarter, the dry snow drifted across the road making it impassable. The end of February saw us with temperatures down to -13°C, and through March and into April we seem to have had a continual run of rain of varying amounts.

The wetness has all led to some tricky conditions for farmers as we have been struggling to get out onto our fields. The Winter-sown oats are in need of a good rolling. As the seeds germinate and the crop begins to grow, the soil is broken apart, this means that the roots can sometimes grow into voids, reducing the chances of them collecting the water and nutrients they need. By rolling the field, we get rid of the voids and improve the flow of water and nutrients to the plants. With the fields being so wet lately, it's been too risky. Rolling is usually achieved before the Corn Bunting and Skylark start to nest so that we do not affect them; indeed we accelerate the production of the crop in places where they want to nest.

The other issue for the farmers is getting on the stubbles to manage them to allow the planting of spring crops. This is perhaps six weeks behind now for conventional crops. For us at Lower Pertwood though, it's not such an issue, but we would have liked to have had the spring barley in the ground earlier. Luckily, the spring oats is only a little late. It often means that the weeds are controlled a little better and the soil is a little warmer, so the cereals get going a little quicker than normal.

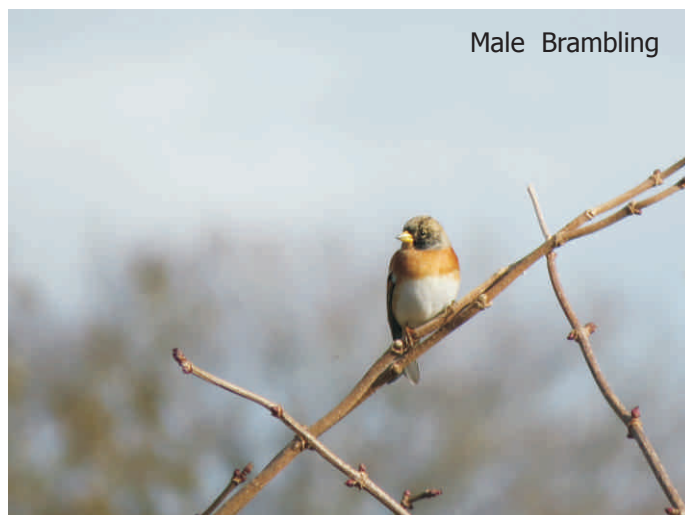
What does this all mean for the wildlife? Often it's a mixed bag for them, and there have been winners and losers. The main losers amongst the birds are those which feed on invertebrates that are on or under the ground surface. Sometimes these species will quickly move on to find a better place to be, sometimes they stick it out. Pertwood went from a population of around a dozen Stonechat, to just one female. We have our fingers crossed that the others moved on.



Female Stonechat

Because it was so windy when it snowed, it blew all the snow off the fields, so the stubbles and wildbird covers were relatively clear. We were ready as always for this, and Gerwyn ventured out to put extra food out for the small farmland birds who were quick to catch on. It always amazes me how quickly they find the best place to be, but it means we can be confident that if you put the food down, they will come.

Linnet and Chaffinch turned up in their hundreds, along with many Yellowhammer and Brambling. The Corn Bunting and Skylark prefer to stick it out on the stubbles in their hundreds. Numbers are still rising for most of these species, as the natural food elsewhere runs out and they all head to feed at Lower Pertwood — so look out for the final tallies in the next newsletter!



Male Brambling

Regular readers of our newsletter might remember a special Linnet we had here last winter, it was a partial albino male with pretty much an all-white body and black wings. He stuck out like a sore thumb with his brown brethren and I suspected he would do well to survive the Winter. Well, the great news is he not only survived last Winter, but he made it to this Winter and returned here to Pertwood! He was far too quick for me to get a picture this time, so this image is from last year.



Linnet

## New bird species spotted this quarter

by Nick Adams



Mediterranean Gull, we do like the white eye-lids!



This time it was a Mediterranean Gull. These are quite similar to our usual black-headed gulls, except that they actually have a black head and white wing tips, instead of the black tips on a black-headed gull.

I again failed to get a picture of the Med gull, so here's one I took last winter on the coast, hence the shoreline.

It's been a slow start to the Spring, but the plants are finally starting to flower and the Summer birds are starting to arrive – let's hope for a steady Spring, with some drier weather.

We became very popular with gulls when spreading digestate on the fields as the gulls hope to find a worm or two in there. Here they are checking over the area known as South Marmoles.

These are mostly common gull (so named because they like to feed on grassland rather than that they are numerous) and black-headed gulls, who are still in their winter plumage when their heads are mostly white!

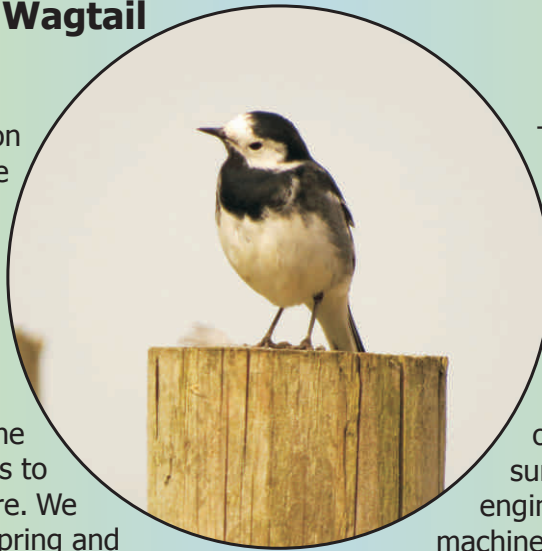


## Species spotlight: Pied Wagtail

by Nick Adams

This is one of our favourite birds on the farm. They are about the size of a sparrow with a long tail, as you can see from this picture the male is a striking fellow, black and white and he wags his tail as he walks around. A well named bird if there ever was one!

Pied wagtails are resident on the farm, every set of buildings seems to have at least one pair nesting there. We also gain more birds during the Spring and Autumn migration as well as during the winter. Birds moving south for the winter, sometimes stay with us. They are insectivores, feeding both themselves and their chicks on insects, so hanging around our buildings where we often have animals is a sensible thing to do.



The winter visitors take advantage of the insects around the mushroom compost piles and cattle barns we have.

Pied Wagtails build their well-hidden nests on a flat surface, tucked away in a barn or outbuilding, usually on top of a wall or on a girder. Sometimes, the flat surface they choose can be on the engine space of a piece of farm machinery that's not being used at that point in the year. There have been a number of cases of this happening and most farmers have seen it at some point during their lives. The birds seem to manage to get the young fledged as well, perhaps the engine keeping the eggs warm is a good substitute for the female sitting on them.

## Trail camera update

It's been an interesting period on the trail cameras. I have mostly had them tucked away in the scrubby areas to see who has been taking advantage of the cover.

On the right, Camera One was a bit slow for this visitor, but somewhere in this image is an easy-to-miss fox! Try and spot him, and if you are not able to see him, the solution appears on page 10 of this issue.



This camera captured a stock dove, a relative of the woodpigeon, perhaps collecting nesting material. They tend to breed on the buildings just to the left of this camera. There's no white around the neck of a stock dove like there is on a woodpigeon.



The trailcams record lots of night photos (presumably) of wood mice. Luckily, we get a decent number of other mammals in the woodland as well luckily, here's a doe roe deer who is a little easier to see.



# Beastly weather

by Stuart Corbett



Snow across Big Down showing the earthworks

The weather event hailed as The Beast from the East hit Pertwood on 24 February and was joined by storm Emma that made landfall in the south-west of England on 2 March, bringing up to 20cm of snow on 17 March.

The Beast, caused by a large arctic airmass stretching from the Russian Far East, covered large parts of Asia and almost all of Europe. The freezing air from Siberia resulted in cold easterly winds, sub-zero temperatures and significant snowfall in the British Isles.

The after-effects of snow being blown from an easterly direction enabled an unusual view of the ancient field systems at Pertwood. The snow had drifted against the west-facing banks and was the last to melt. On Wednesday, 21 March, as I was driving down the farm drive, I was struck by the patterning across the field system and took the photograph above.

What effects this event will have had on our wildlife? Media reports stated that the effects could be serious, with lower insect numbers, resulting in less food for birds — particularly migrant species requiring urgent replenishment after migration. I certainly noted effects in my small suburban garden, where Fieldfares and Meadow Pipit overcame their usual reticence to join the throng of more commonly-recorded species who were there to attempt to bankrupt me through the constantly replenished supply of bird food.

Longer term, however, I feel that the consequences will not be as disastrous as predicted by some. After all, we have had winters previously (though, admittedly, they have been mild in recent years) and a lot of our wildlife is designed to cope with periods of low temperature. It is why some species hibernate and others are protected, often in a larval stage, in the slightly warmer conditions below the soil surface. The results of millions of years of evolution was not wiped clean by a few days of snow and so I feel optimistic that life will, in the main, carry on regardless.

Mind you, if there are no beetles or spiders in the pitfall traps I sited after the snow finally melted. I may be writing a rather different article in the next edition.

## The season starts

Tuesday, 27 March 2018 was an exciting day for me. It hailed the start of a new adventure and from then until the end of October, my life will be filled with moments of elation and despair. I will experience the joys of having been proved right, together with the chance of embarrassment of having been proved a fool. All these life-enhancing instances will be contained in a small plastic beaker.

In the life of an entomologist, this means that I am hoping that my beaker will be filled with insects! Not to consume, you understand, but to provide a description of one aspect of the wildlife inhabiting Lower Pertwood Farm.

And here it is:





Left, is a trap sited in a conventionally-farmed field.

Right, a trap sited in an organic field (with snow)



The beaker is used to make a pitfall trap. It is dug into the soil so that its lip is level with the soil surface. Insects do not have large brains and fail to stop when they reach this lip and so they fall into the beaker.

Other creatures, such as small mammals, frogs etc also have a limited cranial capacity and we stop them falling in by surrounding the trap with mesh too small for them to enter. To avoid the trap flooding during rainfall, a lid is placed over the trap. The pitfall trap is an accepted and successful method for capturing ground-dwelling invertebrates.

My particular interests are a group of beetles called Ground beetles (Carabidae) and spiders (Araneae). These creatures occur in many shapes and sizes from small to absolutely miniscule and live almost everywhere from the cellars of Royal palaces to the piles of bat droppings in their roof, as well as the tended borders of stately grounds and the pipework in the local sewage plant.

Each place, or habitat, attracts a certain suite of species and the presence of such a grouping allows us to consider the condition of the habitat. It is this property that is being utilised in this study

Here at Lower Pertwood Farm, we want to ascertain if there is any difference in the numbers and species of beetle and spider found on land that has been farmed conventionally compared with land which has been in an organic system for three decades. In order to take a representative sample from each habitat, five traps are sited in fields with conventional and organic cropping.

The season will contain excitement when an unusual species is discovered, despair when a badger destroys a trap and confusion when a species recorded as living on sand dunes turns up in a field of oats.

Whatever happens, I am looking forward to it !



## Solution to page 8's fox hunt

The trailcam shutter was a fraction too slow, as it captured just the bottom half of a fox! Our guess is that it must have been jumping up at a pigeon or a pheasant in the scrub above

Complete fox, with that giveaway tail!



## A frequently-asked question

answered by Nick Adams

**In the last newsletter, we asked for feedback and questions from our readers. Many thanks to those of you who were in touch; we would love you to keep the questions and comments coming!**

The one question that seemed to outnumber all the others put together, was variations of, **“why do you have so many Corn Bunting present at Lower Pertwood?”**

Admittedly, we have LOADS of Corn Bunting at Lower Pertwood! At the peak time in the hungry gap\*\* at Lower Pertwood, we have about 750 birds, (which is perhaps 5% of the UK population) riding out the region’s food shortages, as we still have many acres of suitable feeding habitat at that time.

During the winter most birds have one objective: staying alive. This then breaks down into don't starve and don't get eaten. If you can manage these, there's a good chance you'll be around for the next breeding season.

We try to tick both boxes by having the right food in the right place at Lower Pertwood. Corn Bunting are a bird of open fields where they have a good view of what's going on to spot predators. As mentioned earlier in the newsletter, due to the large amount of available habitat, Corn Bunting have the option to flock up as much as they like at Lower Pertwood, or be on their own. It seems that they prefer a loosely gregarious life, so some interaction at times, but mostly spread out thinly, but close enough to hear their neighbours if they spot a predator. The reason for so much habitat is that we grow a majority of spring-sown crops, and being organic, this tends to happen relatively late, with some stubbles still present into April. By leaving them late, it helps our weed control and means the soil will be warmer when we plant our spring oats, giving them less time to germinate and hopefully they can beat the other arable plants that will grow to the sunshine.

There is a thick base to our crops and being organic, we don't have tramlines through the crop as we don't spray it with various treatments through the growing season.

\*\* For our overseas readers: in cultivation of vegetables in a British-type climate, “the hungry gap” is the gardeners' name for the period in Spring when there is little or no fresh produce available from a vegetable garden or allotment.

Singing male Corn Bunting



This is a great habitat for the Corn Bunting to nest, as they helicopter into the nest site and don't mind the thick matt of plants. The chances of a predator finding the nest is very low. Because it is a late-sown crop, the harvest tends to be a little later and allows the Corn Bunting to have two broods. When talking to some wildlife advisors who work with conventional farmers in Eastern England, they feel that their Corn Bunting don't even try to do second broods now. Without that second brood, the numbers will not increase, so suitable second brood habitat is key.

The success of the birds is largely down to the farming practices we follow at Lower Pertwood and because we are organic. As you can see, we have worked out pretty much why it works. This allows us to make decisions about what we do and when, to help this enigmatic bird.

We will leave the best Corn Bunting fields, wherever possible, to last - whether it's harvest or ploughing time or we will try to time any works around the nesting attempts, waiting to see fledged young on the wing before taking a hay cut, for instance. Every one of the tweaks we do at Lower Pertwood is pure profit on the numbers of Corn Bunting and increases the moral dividend we receive for knowing that we are trying our best to do right by the wildlife as well.



## An archaeology project

by Nick Adams

On the day that Stuart took the photo of a snowy Big Down, we were both at Lower Pertwood to greet a hoard of Archaeologists\* who were there to have a look across the farm with a view to helping us understand the history of the site more fully.

We headed from the farmyard up Big Down and everyone was interested in the lines the snow made.

The main ground features in Big Down tend to run across the field, but the snow had emphasised others which run from the top left corner of the photo, towards the bottom right. If they are under the horizontal features, they should be older than the ones on top. Then there was a point where the older lines seem to curve out around something, we are not sure what, but again, it should be even older as it's being respected by the lines. Fascinating stuff!

We then headed to Two Gates to look at the Long Barrow, which we have a fair idea about. It has a twin on a nearby hill which includes bones that have been carbon-dated to 3600 BC. Stuart and I like it, because it has a great mix of downland specialist plants on it, and despite being 5600-odd years old, you can still see marked changes in the plants and other wildlife where the chalk of the Long Barrow meets the top soil. Back in the day, these barrows were kept free from plants as a status symbol and place of spiritual importance.

All in all, a great start to the project we hope, with a number of enthusiastic people keen to come back once the project objectives are agreed upon.

We shall keep you posted!



Archaeologists explaining to rookies (us), slowly, about these interesting surface features



Everyone enjoying the view from the top of the Barrow

\* *Writer uncertain of the correct collective noun, but more than three precious artefacts found together are known as a "hoard"*



## We'd love to hear from you

As a passionate organic farm, we believe in sharing information in the hope that we all learn from it. If you have read some of our ideas and adopted them on your farm or in your garden, please let us know!

Every gardener and farmer, from neophyte to old-timer, has a metaphorical bag of tricks: a diverse collection of clever strategies, techniques and tools that help them save time, frustration, money — please share your experiences with us.

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