



The group at Cika Pass. Names from left to right: Ole Jonny Larsen, Egil Valderhaug, Bent Ernebjerg, Esther Pedersen, He Zhi Jian (Dennis, our guide), Ruddi Perriard, and Sture Bengtsson. Photo by ??????

Beimashan and Biluoshan, Yunnan, China Revisited

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In 2010 we arranged an expedition of six people to Biluoshan and Beimashan (Ernebjerg and Larsen 2011) where we saw some interesting places that were new to western rhododendron explorations. The most interesting findings were in an area on Biluoshan that had a pink flowered *R. roxieanum/cuculatum* and a mountainside on Beimashan with thousands of *R. roxieanum*.

There was a lot of snow then on Biluoshan, so much was hidden under the snow, and we did not have as much time as desired for exploring. For these reasons, we decided to go back again with more time and later in the year, so

that the snow should have melted. This next expedition—the “Scandinavian Beimashan and Biluoshan expedition 2013” was thus planned to start when the other had ended, on June 12, and to go until July 4. We found four more keen rhododendron enthusiasts to go with us, so our group consisted of Egil Valderhaug and Ole Jonny Larsen (Norway), Sture Bengtsson (Sweden), Esther and Ruddi Perriard (Denmark) and Bent Ernebjerg (Expedition leader, Denmark). The objectives for this expedition were to go back to the above-mentioned areas and explore them more thoroughly to see what rhododendron species might have been



Our Chinese tour operator and guide He Zhi Jian (Dennis). Photo by Bent Ernebjerg.

hidden under the snow in 2010, such as *R. prunum*, which is known to grow on Biluoshan.

Going to China

We left from Copenhagen on June 12, 2013, and flew to Lijiang, China, via Bangkok and Kunming. In Lijiang, our Chinese expedition operator and guide, He Zhe Jian, was waiting for us. We passed the night in a small town on the Yangtze River and the next morning, we drove on and soon reached the Mekong River, where we continued north along the river on a new road. It was a long drive to Yanmen, where we boarded two small buses and went high up the steep valley side to the little village of Upper Nonglong at 2850 m (9350 ft), where we

spent the night in a local house. Our first trek to the Cika Pass in the southern part of Beimashan started from there.

Trek to Cika Pass

The next morning, the mules to carry our luggage and equipment arrived and we started walking uphill. First through cultivated land, but soon we entered a broad-leaved forest with scattered pine trees. It was very dry, and the weather was sunny and quite hot, so it was nice to walk in the shadow of the trees. We had beautiful views back onto the Biluoshan Mountains on the other side of the Mekong River. As we went higher up, the first rhododendron appeared, and as in 2010, *R. decorum* was the first species to greet us. *R. yunnanense* were plentiful,

but their flowering was finished, as was the flowerings of *R. rubiginosum*, *wariifolium* and *anthosphaerum*. Large shrubs of *R. oreotrephe*s were in full flower and made a pinkish canopy over the path. A few *R. heliolepis* were just about to open their buds, which were easily recognised by the scent of their leaves, and we found some late flowers on *R. floccigerum*. A good red form of this species grew at 3700 m (12,139 ft). Maybe this form will be more hardy than the tender forms grown today in some of the milder gardens in Scandinavia!

A single plant of *R. wardii* had white flowers, so it should be var. *puralbum*. We also found white flowering *R. selense* and *R. oreotrephe*s, but these do not have variety names. The white *R. selense* were



The leader of the mule men with inserted red treads to decorate his long black hair. Photo by Ole Jonny Larsen.



A good dark pink form of *R. helirolepis*. The flower colour varied between dark pink and a very soft pink, almost whitish. Photo by Bent Ernebjerg.

nice and absolutely of garden value.

Getting closer to our next camp, we encountered one of the most common plants seen on this expedition, *R. rupicola* var. *chryseum*. Altogether we must have seen thousands of them, and virtually all in flower. This is a very fine yellow dwarf species, useful for any temperate garden. They were all very uniform, except some 1.5 m (five feet) high plants in protected habitats and one single plant that had unusual red-edged petals.

At mid afternoon, we entered a north-going valley and after an hours walk arrived at our campsite (Camp 1) at a small stream at 3975 m (13,041 ft). One of the most wide spread species in this part of the valley was a good, dark pink *R. aganniphum*. Even the leaves were fine, shiny and with good indumentum. In guide books on rhododendrons, most photos show less desirable flowers. *R. saluenense* ssp. *chameunum* with its beautiful deep



R. aganniphum with good pink flowers. Photo by Bent Ernebjerg.



R. saluenense ssp. *chameunum*, the high alpine form 'Prostratum'. Photo by Bent Ernebjerg.



R. proteoides with pink-toned flowers. Photo by Bent Ernebjerg.



R. proteoides with yellow/creamy flowers. Photo by Bent Ernebjerg.

pink flowers was also common in all the valleys we visited. Some of them had a nice contrasting red calyx to their pink flowers. Other species observed were *R. cephalanthum* and *R. wardii*. The latter were in flower, all good yellows without a red blotch, and with reddish coloured petals when the flowers were opening.

The next morning we explored the inner parts of the valley. The weather was cloudy but it stayed dry. There were a lot of rhododendrons on the west facing side of the valley and almost none on the opposite side. Of greatest interest was *R. proteoides*

in full flower. In the lower parts of the valley, these plants could be quite tall, at least 0.8 m (2.6 ft), and higher up on more exposed rocks they were almost creeping. When we visited Yunnan in 2010, we saw lots of *R. proteoides*, but no flowers. Thanks to our decision to travel later in the season (and closer to the monsoon!) this time, we were rewarded with seeing hundreds of flowering *R. proteoides*. Further up the valley there was a group of *R. sanguineum*. We noted that calyx characteristics varied, some being small and others large and deflexed, with all different forms growing

closely together. We also found some areas with a beautiful dark *R. campylogynum*.

These species were growing on the west-facing mountainside with *R. saluenense*, *primuliflorum/cephalanthum*, *proteoides* and *aganniphum*.

Subsection *Lapponica* plants were flowering in great numbers. Their flower colour varied quite a lot, and at first it looked like several species were present, but with closer examination, we decided most of them belonged to the same species. After much discussion and studying, we ended up calling these plants *R. tapetiforme* aff. Others have called them *R. tapetiforme* or *telmateium*. (See below for discussion on identifying species in nature.)

After lunch we crossed a pass at 4150 m (13,615 ft) to another valley that paralleled the first one. Just after the pass there were great stands of *R. phaochrysum* with both narrow and wide leaves, all mixed together. Some flowers had red blotches. One particular plant was outstanding with both orange and red markings on the white flowers. We arrived in late afternoon and camped in the valley at 4000 m (13,123 ft; Camp 2). The next day was reserved for exploration of this valley. We walked to the bottom and sides of the valley and found many rhodo species. The mountainsides were covered with *R. proteoides* but also more beautiful, dark pink *R. aganniphum* and *R. saluenense* ssp. *chameunum*.

After lunch, two of us decided to climb up higher to where a smaller valley joined



Colour variation within *R. tapetiforme* aff. Photo by Ole Jonny Larsen.



R. campylogynum on the lower pass below Paidi Pass. Photo by Ole Jonny Larsen.



A very compact *R. nivale* ssp. *boreale* at high elevation (4450 m; 14,600 ft). Photo by Ole Jonny Larsen.

the main valley. That was a good choice! The place was beautiful, the weather was perfect and we wondered how many westerners have actually seen what we saw? *R. proteoides* in flower, in three different colours! The usual white one, of course, some pink, and surprisingly, many yellow flowered plants! Well, “yellow” is maybe going too far, and “yellowish” may be a better word, but still very different from the white form, and the opening buds were really yellow. We found later that “yellow” *R. proteoides* are grown in some collector’s gardens, but it is definitely not well known and absolutely not offered for sale through the ordinary plant trade. It was strange that we did not find any *R. sanguineum* or other *Neriiflora* in this valley, which was just 1.6 km (one mile) from Camp 1 in the main valley.

The next day we crossed three passes and come to the Yangtze River side of Beimashan. The weather was fine and stayed fine during the day. It was a steep ascent to the first pass at 4450 m (14,600 ft). The mountainside was covered with rhododendrons, mostly *R. aganiphum* and *R. beesianum* with some *R. proteoides*, but one plant puzzled us a lot! It was obviously a *Taliensia* species with lanceolate leaves and small rounded trusses of white flowers. We understood that this could be something near the very confusing group of plants called *R. alutaceum*. Names like *R. globigerum*, *russotinctum*, *triplonaevium*,

tritifolium and *iodes* have been used for different plants in this group. “Our” plants suited best the descriptions of *R. tritifolium* or *R. iodes*. Rhododendron authorities have debated names in this group. Some consider most as separate species (Davidian 1992) while others call them a mix of hybrids (Cox and Cox 1997). Chamberlain (1982) recognised them as varieties. What was clear was that these plants were found over quite a large area and in several valleys, and that they seemed quite uniform. If there are some of hybrid origin, it must be quite stable in this part of Beimashan.

Higher up there were big areas of *R. proteoides* in flower, with different colours: white, pink tinged and yellow. A little below the pass at 4400 m (14,436 ft), we suddenly came across lots of *R. campylogynum*, no flowering specimens but some with opening buds that looked like the so-called Black Form. Maybe the black colour will turn deep plum red when they are fully open?

At the pass we entered a high alpine area with bare rocks and low, creeping rhododendrons. There was no snow, and as the rhododendrons were blooming, the timing was just perfect. No new species were found on the plateau, but those plants present were generally of a lower growing or creeping habit than those in the valley we had left.

We continued to the second pass at

4475 m (14,682 ft), which is the actual divide between the Mekong and Yangtze River watersheds. Near the highest points of two of the passes we found a very dwarf *Lapponica* species. To our satisfaction this was easier to identify than those described above. Scales of two colours, pale gold and dark brown, and one- or two-flowered inflorescence made it clear that this was *R. nivale*. Growing in NW Yunnan, this must be ssp. *boreale*, but the creeping habit looked more like ssp. *nivale*, which grows much further north. It was a beautiful species that every rock garden enthusiast would like to grow in his or her garden—if it is possible! Maybe this would be better in Scandinavia than further south due to its cooler summers?

The last pass was at 4410m (14,469 ft), and from here we descended to our campsite on the Yangtze River side at 4180 m (13,714 m; Camp 3). *R. primuliflorum* grew from the sharp ridge at the pass and all the way down to the camp. At the pass, these were creeping, but they became taller and more erect as we descended. Their flowers were mostly white, but some soft pink ones were also seen.

Being at Camp 3 was our main goal on Beimashan, as we had found a mountainside filled with *R. roxieanum* of all varieties there in 2010. We gave ourselves two full days for exploration of this area. Our Chinese tour operator said that local people had told him that there

was a hidden valley with several small lakes behind a steep mountainside north of our camp, so we decided to explore this valley the next day and leave exploration of the *R. roxieanum*-mountainside to the day after.

The next morning we thus ascended the steep south-facing mountainside to a pass at 4300 m (14,108 ft). No interesting rhododendrons were seen going up, but the weather was glorious. The pass was on a sharp ridge with *R. primuliflorum*. We had a view to the bottom of the valley and a lake there, but had no further view of the valley from the pass. The descent was even steeper than the ascent. The vegetation on this side of the mountain was much richer than on the south side. Here at 4270 m (14,009 ft), we found a large stand of *R. sanguineum*, all in full flower. This elevation is quite high for this species, so again we hope for new and better clones for colder areas.

As we descended, the view of the valley opened up and we saw a beautiful valley with more small lakes and rhododendrons all over. In the valley bottom, we walked on the south side of the first lake along the north-facing mountainside. Then we divided and explored the small lakes area further down the valley. It was a gem! We saw steep south-facing mountainsides with lots of *R. wardii* and we found *R. roxieanum*, *phaeochrysum*, *tapetiforme* aff., *saluenense* ssp. *chameunum* with its beautiful calyx and more of the species we had seen before. The *R. roxieanum* in this valley had various degrees of “bloom” on the upper leaf surfaces. This is a kind of indumentum that looks like a whitish layer, almost like metallic varnish sprayed on the leaf, and some leaves looked almost silvery. When these plants grew together with their different looks, it presented a stunning effect. Leaf size and form also varied a lot, the most common form being long and narrow (var. *oreonastes*), but one single plant with broad leaves and very thick indumentum was found (var. *cucullatum*). Some obvious hybrids between *R. proteoides* and *R. aganiphum*



Ole Jonny Larsen on top of the *R. roxieanum* ridge. Photo by Bent Ernebjerg.

also occurred where these two species grew together.

After lunch we went down to the last lake, and from there we could see where this valley met the valley with our camp in it. We returned to our camp valley by a much lower wooded pass. This valley was a very exciting find and quite unexpected (it

was hidden by clouds on Google Earth at the time of our trip planning, but is visible now!). We decided to name this beautiful valley: “79 Ponds Valley,” as seven and nine are happy numbers for Tibetans.

The next day was reserved for exploration of the *R. roxieanum*-mountainside, and again we had splendid weather. The



Leaf variation among *R. roxieanum* growing close together. Photo by Ole Jonny Larsen.

day before we had been able to see this mountainside from afar. It turned out to be much bigger than we thought in 2010. Roughly estimated, it must be more than a kilometre (0.62 mi) long and up to 300 metres (985 ft) from the valley floor to the ridge. And almost all of this was covered with *R. roxieanum*, mixed with some *R. aganniphum*, *proteoides*, *alutaceum* aff. and *primuliflorum*! One wonders if this might be the greatest single *R. roxieanum* population in the world, and again, we were there at the right time since most of the plants were in flower.

We next split up and searched the mountainside. It was very dry, especially near the ridge. We studied the different forms of *R. roxieanum* leaves, and these varied between 3-18 mm (0.1-0.7 in) wide. That meant that these plants belonged to both var. *oreonastes* and var. *roxieanum*. Both Davidian (1992) and Cox and Cox (1997) describe var. *cucullatum* leaves to be broader (2-4 cm (0.8-1.6 in) and 2-6 cm (0.8-2.4 in) respectively). It is interesting that one can have such an enormous stand of *R. roxieanum*, and not one single plant of typical var. *cucullatum*, or did we just not find them? Just over the low end of the ridge we found a uniform stand of *R. phaeochrysum* var. *levistratum* with narrow leaves and small flowers and trusses.

The other side of the ridge was dry and arid without rhododendrons. Some *R. roxieanum* on the ridge were big with massive trunks, and some plants were up to four metres (13.1 ft) long. How old they were is unknown. At 4300 m (14,108 ft), the ridge met a higher mountain and from there was a shortcut trail to our camp below. This path was wetter because of water seeping down from the mountain and here we found bigger plants of *R. proteoides*. This day concluded our exploration of the Yangtze River side of the Cika pass, and so we now turned back towards the Mekong River valley.

The next day it rained for the first time, which was not too bad as we were essentially going back through the area we had explored going up. Coming to

the last pass before Camp 2, we went up a ridge and saw the valley that some of us had explored earlier from the Camp 2 valley. Going down we took a shortcut to avoid going to the valley of Camp 1, and so we went a long way down and camped at 3780 m (12,402 ft). When going back, the *R. heliolepis* that were in bud when we walked up were now in flower. We also found *R. mekongense*, but out of flower.

Back to civilization.

The next day, we needed only a couple of hours to walk back to the Upper Nonglong. As soon as our luggage had been loaded on our minibuses, we set off and drove down to the Mekong River and then south along the river. After a week in the mountains, we all longed for a good hotel, so we left the river and went to Weixi where we had a long awaited shower at a good hotel. Weixi was a well known town by the older plant hunters, as they had passed it on their way from Dali to the Mekong River. Since it was only a half day's drive to Zhongpai Village, which was the starting point for our trek to Paidi pass on Biluoshan Mountains, we thus had the morning to look at Weixi and relax in the hot, sunny weather. After lunch, we set off again to the Mekong River, a slow and hot drive down on a road that was being destroyed by a never-ending stream of trucks carrying heavy loads of iron ore. We reached Zhongpai late in the afternoon, where we enjoyed a nice meal and a pleasant warm evening.

Trek to the Paidi pass - BiluoShan

The next morning, we loaded all our stuff and drove over to the other side of the Mekong River to the village of Deqin at 2000 m (6562 ft). Here was the end of the road and we started walking up to our first goal, the small Lisu village of Laowo. Our bags and equipment were loaded on mules that would follow us for the next two days. It was hot and sunny so it was a hard climb. The trail passed by three side valleys, meaning walking down and up three times, so we were done when

we reached Laowo at 2450 m (8038 ft). Among the plants we saw on the way up were *R. arboreum* ssp. *delavayi* and a mysterious subsection *Neriiflora* plant which we could not identify, which only grew at 2500 m (8202 ft), a low elevation for a *Neriiflora* plant. Photos of it were shared with others afterwards, and it seems that it is most likely *R. sperabile* ssp. *weihsiense*.

Laowo, where we also stayed in 2010, had changed: there was now electric light from big solar panels and there were two new toilet sheds at the end of the village. However, the schoolroom where we passed the night was unchanged, as it still had neither windows nor electric light.

The next morning we continued up the valley, but the weather had changed and it started raining. It became quite wet, with a lush vegetation and beautiful unidentified *Hypericum*. One rhododendron caused us some trouble until we thought of the *Azaleastrum* section, which is not of great interest in Scandinavian gardens and thus unknown to most of us. It was *R. leptothrium*, unfortunately not in flower. One single plant of the late flowering *R. kyawii* was also spotted, still with flower buds in late June.

We soon reached the altitude for big leaved rhododendrons and found both *R. sinogrande* and *R. rex*. Seeing *R. sinogrande* in nature for the first time is always a great moment. A plant that puzzled us for a long time was *R. fulvum* ssp. *fulvoides*, which we first considered to be a big leaved *Falconera* or *Grandia* species and therefore had problems fitting it into a species description.

The rain got heavier and continued through the day until we arrived to a wet camp site near the lower Nianyobi Lake at 3330 m altitude (10,827 ft). Our mules then returned to Deqin as they could go no further. Around camp we found different colour forms of *R. heliolepis* growing near a magnificent *Nomocharis* species with several flowers. When I pointed it out for one of the porters to let him understand that I liked it very much, he immediately

picked all the flowers to give to me!

The next morning it was still raining, and after our porters arrived from Laowo Village, we continued up to Upper Nianyoby Lake—the habitat of the deep pink flowered *R. roxieanum* that we had found in 2010. Its taxonomic status was still not fully defined due to a lack of material, until now. When we arrived it was a pity to see that more of the very old *R. roxieanum* plants had been cut down for firewood by local people travelling on the trail to Fugong. In the afternoon we went down through the woods and a horrible bamboo thicket to the lake in very heavy rain, where we found more pink *R. roxieanum* at the lake shore. In the camp area and along the path down to the lake, we also found flowering *R. heliolepis* and *dichroanthum*, *selense*, *rotschildii*, *stewartianum* and *campylocarpum* ssp. *caloxanthum* with unusual narrowly elliptic leaves, typical to this area. Some have called this variety the Bilouxueshan form.

The camp site was very wet, and the heavy rain continued, but with difficulty we kept on looking for more plants. *R. calostrotum* grew in numbers in surprisingly wet situations around our camp site. Some of them had good red flowers like the famous ‘Gigha’ form while others were more violet. *R. rupicola* var. *rupicola*, with five stamens and lovely purple flowers, different from all the other more or less blue flowering *Lapponica* species, grew on top of rocks. Obviously this species likes good drainage and dryer growing conditions than does *R. calostrotum*.

Our plan was to move up to a “Paidi Pass Base Camp” the next day and explore around the camp, and then have two full days for exploring Paidi Pass and the slopes of Laowo Mountain (4400 m; 14,436 ft) from the base camp. Considering the heavy rain, we decided instead to go to the base camp and then straight on to Paidi Pass the next day. The porters could then move our camp up to the base camp site later in the day. The rain continued through the night, and it was still raining

the next morning. We started ascending through bamboo and rhododendron and when we arrived at the base camp site, we found it too wet to camp, and another place further on was also too wet. Water was now coming down the mountainside all around us, and so we split up, with some going back down to the lower camp to tell the porters to stay there and the rest of us going on to Paidi Pass.

It was a tough walk in mountain streams and on very slippery rocks. We first came to a lower pass to a valley running parallel to the valley from the Paidi Pass at 4100 m (13,451 ft). Going on the Mekong side of the mountain and up to this pass, we found lots of flowering *R. taliense* with a very thick indumentum, and *R. aperanthum*, nearly all of them with yellow flowers but a few with an orange-yellow colour.

On this lower pass we found beautiful plum coloured *R. campylogynum*, and were uncertain if plants with this flower colour are in cultivation today. After this pass, we continued on the Salween side up to the higher Paidi Pass. There was no snow left and most of the path was on flat rock with a 30° ascent, excellent when dry but difficult when slippery! There were a lot of yellow *R. aperanthum* on the mountainside, and more *R. campylogynum*. It was colder on this side, as we had heavy rain and a strong wind coming up from the valley. We continued up to Paidi Pass, and on the Pass there was lots of creeping *R. taliense*, some only a few centimetres (inches) tall. At the Pass, they may have to spend up to seven or eight months of the year under heavy snow. There was also *R. primuliflorum*.

It was getting late, and we had a long and difficult walk back to camp, so we did not have time to go down on the Salween River side, nor did we have time to search for *R. pronum*. This had been a main goal for our trip, and we had great expectations for the chosen area, but when we finally were there, the conditions made further search impossible. Maybe this is plant hunting in a nutshell—your greatest finds come by luck, and what you plan for over years, you often end up with nothing!

So to date, no one knows if *R. pronum* actually exists near the Paidi Pass!

The hike back to camp was much worse than going up because of more water and in many places the trail had turned into a mountain stream. Back at the camp, we learned that it had been necessary to move the tents because of too much water, but at least we could sleep dry for one more night. Over dinner that night we decided to turn back the next morning. It was too dangerous to explore on the mountain, and our campsite could be flooded with the continuing rain. Everybody wanted to get away from the rain, so we decided to walk straight down to Laowo Village in one go.

Back to Civilization Again

It was again still raining the next morning and the trail was so wet and slippery that our focus was more on the trail than on rhododendrons. The rain continued until a bit above Laowo Village, but in the village it was dry and warm. After the wet and cold days on the mountain, it was nice to be back to warm and dry weather where we could dry our wet clothes and relax in the sun.

The next day was fine and sunny, and we set off for our last hike down to Deqin and the road. It was a beautiful walk with views down the valley to the Mekong River valley, and in contrast, it was very hot because of a strong warm wind coming up the valley. We reached Deqin Village at mid-afternoon and had a long-awaited cold beer before we entered our bus for Zhongpai. In Zhongpai, we had our first hot bath in a week, and a good meal to celebrate a well accomplished expedition. The two lost days on the Paidi Pass area were spent sightseeing in two beautiful towns, Shaxi and Lijiang, before we returned to Copenhagen via Kunming and Bangkok.

Discussion/Conclusion

The most important lesson from this expedition is that if you want to see high altitude rhododendrons in flower at this



Egil Valderhaug with *R. rothschildii* leaves. Note the red perulae (scales of a leaf bud). Photo by Ole Jonny Larsen.

location, you have to be there in the last half of June—monsoon or not!

This tour showed us that it can be very useful to visit the same area twice at different times of the year. You know the paths and what the conditions for trekking and camping are, and you know what to look for and where. You will see different plants in flower which makes it easier to spot new species. And finally we have learnt how easy it is to overlook things...!

One problem many collectors have faced on Beimashan is to identify the *Lapponica* species. There are lots of plants around, and at the time we were there, most were in flower. At first it seemed like there were many species due to different flower colours, but when you sit down with key and magnifying glass, you realise that they are mostly all the same. But what are they? Better people than us have had trouble identifying *Lapponicas* at

Beimashan. The thing is, they do not fit perfectly to anything! You may think you have the answer, and take a last look at some diagnostic feature, and then you are back to where you started.

This taught us something. When you go plant hunting in China and others places, you have to be very open-minded. Remembering the plants back in your garden can be a real trap. Who says they are correctly labelled? At least when it comes to *Lapponicas*, one has to be careful. They vary a lot in nature, species hybridise where they grow together, wrongly labelled plants are often offered for sale, and selected clones for sale are just that—a selection from what can be a species with variable characteristics. Plants within the same species can look quite different from those that you grow at home. Even the world's leading authorities on rhododendrons have trouble identifying *Lapponicas* in the wild, so keep calm, as you can still be a good taxonomist even if some *Lapponicas* on a Chinese mountain cause you trouble!

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A good colour form of *R. calostrotum* growing in debris on top of a rock. Photo by Ole Jonny Larsen.

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