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## Pictures of the Northwoods: A Bibliography of Illustrated Children's Literature from Minnesota

Evan Peter Williamson - [evanpeterw@gmail.com](mailto:evanpeterw@gmail.com)

Evan is a Dual MAS/MLIS at UBC.

**Keywords:** northwoods, illustration, Minnesota, children's literature

### Abstract:

A bibliography of illustrated children's books focusing on collaborations of artists and authors with Minnesota ties depicting northwoods themes. The project was first inspired by Antler, Bear, Canoe: A Northwoods Alphabet Year featuring the beautiful woodcut illustrations of Betsy Bowen from Grand Marais. It highlights local creativity, beautiful art, and northwoods subject matter.

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# Pictures of the Northwoods: A Bibliography of Illustrated Children's Literature from Minnesota

Evan Peter Williamson - [evanpeterw@gmail.com](mailto:evanpeterw@gmail.com)

Northern Minnesota's wild forests, rocky ridge lines, and endless lakes create a distinctive sense of place. Its wilderness shelters plants and animals more common in the tundra or northern mountains, such as the last packs of grey wolves after they were eliminated from the rest of the continental US and Eastern Canada. The Anishinaabe, voyageurs, lumberjacks, and miners have also faced the challenges of long winters and hot busy summers to make a home in the northwoods. Northern Minnesota's forests now draw hordes of outdoor enthusiasts, canoeists, hikers, and fishermen, seeking solitude and unspoiled places.



Figure 1. "The white tent in the pine wood." *Canoe Country*, p. 67.

## Pictures of the Northwoods: A Bibliography of Illustrated Children's Literature from Minnesota

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However, the lure of the north is also a magnet for authors and artists. Florence and Francis Jaques famously depicted the northwoods in *Canoe Country* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1938) and *Snowshoe Country* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1944) with a unique combination of beautiful text and nature illustration. The Jaques' style of autobiographical narrative and anecdotes of regional lore, filled with careful observation of nature, shares a sense of awe of the wilderness which is influential to northern writers today. Similar styles of illustrated nature books for adults originating in the northwoods include Calvin Rutstrum, Helen Hoover, and Sigurd F. Olson. Many used their writing to be powerful advocates for the protection of wilderness. In visual arts, institutions such as the Grand Marais Art Colony (active since 1947) have nurtured a thriving community of artists far outside of urban hubs. Especially relevant to illustrated books, the Northern Printers Alliance based in Duluth has helped nurture the traditional craft of printmaking in Minnesota since 1999. It features a number of well known illustrators such as Betsy Bowen, Beckie Prange, and Jim Meyer. Members also create truly unique works, such as St. Scholastica Librarian Todd White's completely hand printed and illustrated edition of *The Selfish Giant*, by Oscar Wilde (Duluth, MN: The Recknyng Press, 2000).

Northern Minnesota also supports a number of tiny publishers that produce high quality works featuring local authors, artists, and subjects. For example, Raven Productions in Ely, on the edge of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, prints a great selection of children's literature *and* shows up at the farmer's market every week to sell books! They build close relationships with local artists and authors (some who have works by major publishers, such as YA historical fiction author William Durbin) helping vitalize writing in a tiny town. The University of Minnesota hosts the Northeastern Minnesota Book Awards to recognize outstanding works from the region, including a children's literature category (University of

Minnesota, Duluth, n.d.). Further south, Minneapolis and Mankato are powerhouses of children's publishing, especially for the school and library curriculum market (Kirch, 2008). This combination of writers, artists, and publishers provides fertile ground for great children's books.

This project was first inspired by *Antler, Bear, Canoe: A Northwoods Alphabet Year* featuring the beautiful woodcut illustrations of Betsy Bowen from Grand Marais. I knew of a number of books with similar bold yet rustic illustration and wanted to explore if this constituted a regional style. I was surprised by how many wonderful collaborations of artists and writers had northern Minnesota connections. Interestingly, I found that many of the books I explored featured collaboration with residents of other northwoods states such as Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine—so perhaps there is something about dreaming through the long winters that creates a shared artistic culture! I wanted to focus on local creativity, beautiful art, and northwoods subject matter. Since this bibliography was inspired by Bowen, it will start with *Antler, Bear, Canoe*, and spiral outward following along the theme of depicting the northwoods and Minnesota connections. It is divided into six thematic sections: Alphabet and Counting, Flora and Fauna, The Poetry of Nature, The Seasons, The Northern Lights, and Unique Northwoods Stories.

## **Alphabet and Counting**

***Antler, Bear, Canoe: A Northwoods Alphabet Year, Betsy Bowen (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991)***

Betsy Bowen's first book takes the reader through the alphabet and the seasons, painting a distinctive picture of northwoods life, landscapes, and cycles. The format

is simple: each page is one rectangular woodblock print, framed by thick black lines and divided into a square on top and rectangle on the bottom. Each square contains a detailed scene of northwoods life or nature. Each rectangle contains the alphabet letter, the word, some decorative elements, and a narrative text.



*Figure 2. Evening, February.  
Antler, Bear, Canoe.*

Everything except the smaller narrative text is cut into a white pine block. The blocks were inked in black, printed using the Grand Marais Art Colony's letterpress, and then hand painted (for images of Bowen at work, see Phil Bowen's photo essay (n.d.)). The colours have a watercolour style look, with delicate gradation of hues and subdued washes. Rather than simply filling the spaces suggested by the black contour lines, the colour is used expressively to further build form. While the images have a robustness of the heavy lines created by the woodblock, Bowen is also able to create sketch-like gradations in the black ink.

The images are filled with highly stylized forms built from lines, patterns, and rustic blocky figures. Bowen often includes large blocks of black for night or of white for snow, elegantly using the negative space to define forms and enliven the composition. The images move seamlessly between elements given proper

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perspective and flat folk-art/primitive figures. For example, compare “Minnows” which depicts a cross section of a person on a dock peering into the deep lake (stylized simplicity with no detail, nearly an abstract flat pattern) to “Outboard” which shows a man and two kids fishing from a boat (represented in a more complex composition, the boat is sketched with three dimension perspective with detailed figures and activities, and a landscape fading into the distance). Bowen introduces us into intimate spaces such as “Evening” with cozy immediacy, and broad observational landscapes, such as the two page spread formed by “Pond” and “Quiet”. The images range from serious and contemplative to playful scenes such as “Upstairs” where disembodied legs and arm peek down from the attic throwing a pile of winter clothes to the foreground.

Each month of the year is associated with two letters, except December and January which get three—since, of course, winter is the longest time of the northwoods year! Each word in the alphabet is accompanied by a narrative text describing how it relates to the season. The text is longer than the average alphabet book. The narrative is personal, describing the northwoods from the perspective of living in it, but also giving details about nature and the signs of the seasons. For example, the first entry (A) sets this personal tone and introduces the cyclical nature of the narrative:



Figure 3. Antler.

Antler

Once in January I found a moose antler in the forest. Now it is a feeder for the birds. Each winter moose lose their antlers, and each summer they grow them back.

This personal style of writing highlights the interconnectedness of Bowen's setting in the northwoods and her art. Like many northern artists, she seems to connect a specific ethos to the landscape that goes hand-in-hand with living and creating art there. Her artist statement says:

I live and work on the edge of the wilderness near Minnesota's north shore of Lake Superior, on an old homestead bought by my suburban parents in 1963 to establish another way of life. In my early creative years, I focused on hand made crafts. My work in woodblock printmaking has continued the ethic of seeking a straight forward livelihood generated by making goods by hand.  
(Northern Prints Gallery, n.d.)

*Antler, Bear, Canoe* has an interesting creation story that connects many of the books in this bibliography. In the 1980's Bowen started developing her woodcut prints while working at the Sivertson Gallery in Grand Marais (Betsy Bowen Studio, 2010). Sivertson's was founded by a family of commercial fisherman turned artists and became a fixture in northern Minnesota by focusing on "artwork that reflects the character of Lake Superior" (Sivertson Gallery, n.d.). While working at the gallery, Bowen meet Ann Rider, an editor for Houghton Mifflin who lives in Lusten, just south of Grand Marais along the Lake. Rider moved to the area from the East Coast because her family is involved in running the Lusten Ski Resort (WTIP North Shore Community Radio, 2013). She worked with Bowen on *Antler, Bear, Canoe* and many further projects, and with a huge number of other northern artists and authors included in this bibliography. She has gone on to edit five Caldecott Medal winners

and one Newberry winner.

***Gathering: A Northwoods Counting Book*, Betsy Bowen (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995)**

A counting book companion to *Antler, Bear, Canoe*, Bowen's third book *Gathering* celebrates the busy non-winter season of the northwoods—a time to gather everything needed to survive and enjoy the long winter. We see the gathering of berries, friends, and even memories to sustain us through the cold. The book covers the numbers zero to twelve and the months May to December. The other months are represented in the last page “All”, when the people have gathered: “settled in for winter now. Before long, we'll count the days until spring.” The text describing the meaning of each number is slightly longer than *Antler, Bear, Canoe*, but similarly highlights cycles and seasonal change.

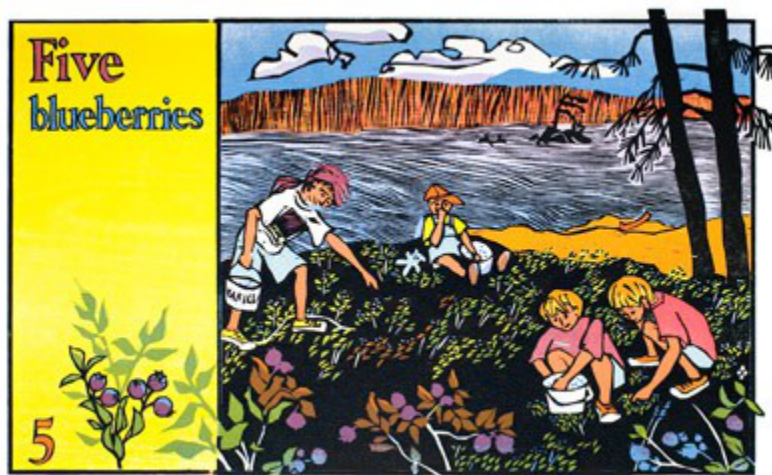


Figure 4. "Five", this image shows the woodblock print before the text is added, [http://woodcut.com/store/gathering/05\\_blueberries.html](http://woodcut.com/store/gathering/05_blueberries.html).

The simple image-square plus text-rectangle layout seen in *Antler, Bear, Canoe* is turned horizontal making each woodblock a two page spread. The woodcuts are prepared in the same manner on white pine, hand inked, and pressed at the Grand Marais Art Colony. However, rather than hand painting in colour, Bowen prepared a



separate block for each colour to create the prints. This makes for bolder, more highly saturated hues than seen in *Antler, Bear, Canoe*. The design is also more inventive and free spirited, making good use of the larger space of the two page spread. The frame boundaries are regularly transgressed and are no longer totally uniform. Figures overlap the edges, bleed into the text area or off the page. Wood grain occasionally peeks through the dense colour, providing a rustic texture. *Gathering* is classic Bowen: bold, rich art with a relatively complex concept underlying the narrative—yet presented in a straightforward, beautiful rustic format.

***One Little Balsam Fir: A Northwoods Counting Book*, Lesley A. DuTemple,  
illustrated by Susan Robinson (Gwinn, MI: Avery Color Studios, 2006)**

DuTemple is the author of a number of generic educational titles, such as *North American Moose* (Minneapolis: Carolrhoda Books, 2001) from Lerner, one of the largest independent children's publishers. *One Little Balsam Fir*, however, was printed by a very small publisher in the middle of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. I appreciate the use of a local publisher, including that the book was actually printed in America, unlike the titles from larger publishers that are outsourced around the world. The author and illustrator live in the Keweenaw Peninsula (MI), directly east across Lake Superior from Grand Marais (MN). It makes a nice comparison with Bowen's counting book as it has more conventional text and illustrations.

The simple and playful text describes a growing assemblage of northwoods flora and fauna (including the typical loons and moose) around a lone balsam fir. The group is finally spooked by a little child crying "Look!" Each number is represented by a two page, full-bleed spread. The illustrations are naturalistic paintings with soft colours and inked in contour lines. They are detailed, but remain painterly, rather than scientific. The framing alternates between wide scenes and close up details of

each element joining the group. The text and illustrations are simple, charming, and conventional. The overall format is nicely printed, a good example of what a small publisher can do with local talent and themes.

## **Flora and Fauna**

### ***Tracks in the Wild*, Betsy Bowen (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993)**

Bowen's second book presents thirteen animals who make tracks near her home in the northwoods. It is a unique artistic guidebook full of nature observation, personal anecdotes, insights, cultural meanings, and quotes from other authors (often Native American leaders). It is not a scientific guidebook, but something much more intimate, highlighting the deep reverence and connection Bowen feels with her animal neighbours in the wilderness. The woodcuts are carried out in the same manner as *Gathering*, displaying the bold hues of the colour separated prints.

Each animal is represented with a page of text with the tracks and a full page image. The tracks typically connect across the two pages, unifying text and image. The representation of the tracks is reflects of the complexity of this book. They are presented roughly accurate and actual size, yet are clearly stylized in Bowen's typical rustic fashion. They are not scientific illustrations, but nonetheless reflect close observation and experience of nature, illustrating that as Bowen says, "each track tells a story."

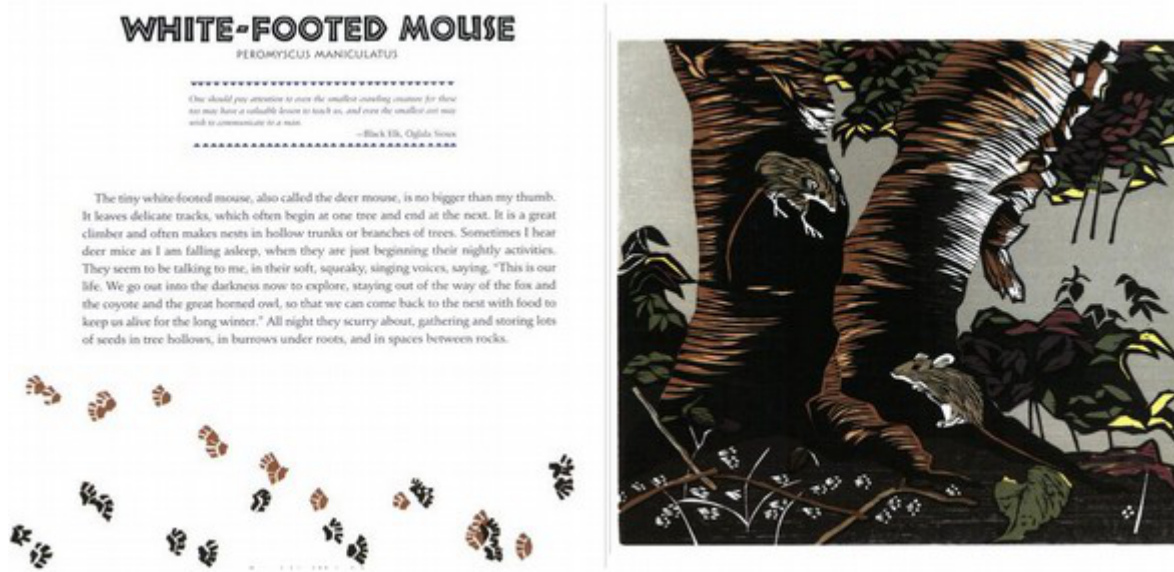


Figure 5. "White-footed mouse." The two page spread for the first animal in Tracks.

**Twelve Owls**, Laura Erickson, illustrated by Betsy Bowen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011)

**Hawk Ridge: Minnesota's Birds of Prey**, Laura Erickson, illustrated by Betsy Bowen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012)

University of Minnesota Press managed to form an all-star team of "two of the state's most beloved authors" to create these distinctive northwoods ornithology books (University of Minnesota Press, n.d.). Duluth resident Laura Erickson is an author, editor, teacher, and long-time radio personality. Her daily radio segment "For the Birds" has brought her unique blend of ornithology, practical advice, and anecdote to the airwaves since 1986 (or podcast at [www.lauraerickson.com/Radio/CurrentPrograms.html](http://www.lauraerickson.com/Radio/CurrentPrograms.html)). Although the over-sized, heavily illustrated format appears similar to many children's books, these volumes are not aimed at a young audience and run to about 100 pages. However, the causal style of relating complex scientific and cultural information combined with the

lively illustrations will appeal to readers of all ages. Budding scientists and their adults will also appreciate the practical advice about how to find and identify the birds.

*Twelve Owls* describes the owls native to Minnesota, where they are more numerous than most of North America. *Hawk Ridge* describes Minnesota's birds of prey, which congregate in huge numbers over Duluth's rocky ridge line during their annual migrations. Each year birders from around the world come to the Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory to count the raptors, where they have held official counts since 1972 (Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory, n.d.).

## 18 - BURROWING OWL

Athena and her owl. The Burrowing Owl's biggest claim to fame in American culture is being the subject of the Carl Hiaasen novel and movie *Hoot*.

Burrowing Owls live in a variety of dry, open, short-grass, treeless plains. The species is one of the few in America with two widely separated ranges. One population lives in Florida. The rest live in plains and deserts from California to the Dakotas, where they usually associate with burrowing mammals such as prairie dogs, ground squirrels, and badgers, taking over abandoned burrows. These western birds occasionally nest as far east as extreme western Iowa and Minnesota. Burrowing Owls were probably never common in Minnesota. Reports of them in recent decades have been very rare and scattered, centered mostly in and near the Glacial Ridge National Wildlife Refuge. The Burrowing Owl is the only owl listed as endangered in Minnesota by the Department of Natural Resources, its scarcity due to dwindling grassland habitat in the state.

Those in Florida, where burrowing animals are less abundant, tend to excavate their own burrows. Florida's Burrowing Owls occasionally nest in trees, perhaps because acceptable burrows are at a premium, but they always

nest in some kind of burrow. Within both ranges, Burrowing Owls also live in developed areas such as golf courses, airports, vacant lots in residential areas, and fairgrounds. Some birding guidebooks direct birdwatchers to old cemeteries in the Southwest, where ground squirrels and Burrowing Owls scurry in and out of tunnels crisscrossing the graveyard. A fanciful birder seeing a Burrowing Owl perched atop a headstone or cross may wonder if the owl is thinking, "Alas, poor Yorick. He was my loving moon."

Most of the year, Burrowing Owls are nocturnal or crepuscular, but during nesting season when they have young to feed, they spend daylight hours catching insects and lizards, and nighttime hours catching rodents.

Unlike most owls, in this species the male and female are about the same size. Each male selects or excavates a burrow and then begins defending his territory and trying to attract a mate. Pairs in Florida and the Southwest remain together year-round, but those that migrate from farther north don't appear to maintain their pair bond beyond the nesting season. The female lays two to twelve eggs. Males in Florida often drop belly feathers to form what mimics a brood patch, but the underlying skin lacks the rich supply of

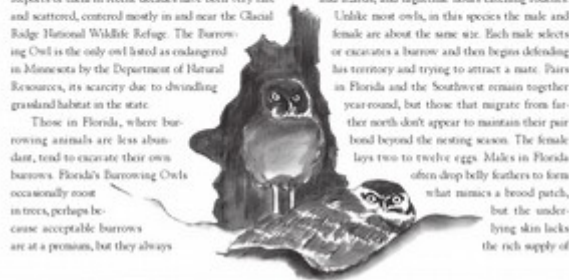


Figure 6. "Burrowing Owls." *Twelve Owls*, p.18.

The illustration style is unique for Bowen who did NOT use woodblocks due to time constraints on the project (Goetzman, 2012). In both books, almost every page of text is decorated with ink drawings created with pen and brushes on watercolour paper. The brush allows Bowen to create subtle gradations in the black ink. These sketches include many scientific details as might be seen in a standard guide book (e.g. wing pattern, skeletons), as well as more impressionistic representations of the birds. The text wraps around the images, weaving them into the narrative.

The books also feature many larger colour images which were painted with acrylic on gessoed paper. The owls are intended to be depicted at near life-size. The compositions have much in common with Bowen's woodcuts, with thick contour lines and large blocks of colour, but distinct brush work gives the images a vibrant liveliness—a tiny captured moment of stillness before the birds spring away. The brush work becomes more painterly in *Hawk Ridge*, moving further from the woodcut influenced composition of *Twelve Owls*. The text and illustrations convey a sense of immediacy to nature—instead of a disembodied guidebook, they describe personal observation, distinct places and activities.



Figure 7. "Merlin." *Hawk Ridge*, p.75.

***Great Northern Diver: the Loon*, Barbara Juster Esbensen, illustrated by Mary Barrett Brown (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1990)**

***Tiger with Wings: The Great Horned Owl*, Barbara Juster Esbensen, illustrated by Mary B. Brown (New York: Orchard Books, 1991)**

***Playful Slider*, Barbara Juster Esbensen, illustrated by Mary Barrett Brown**

(Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1993)

The nature books of prolific children's author Barbara Juster Esbensen are an interesting comparison to works of Bowen and Erickson. Esbensen was known as a children's poet, but teamed up with wildlife artist Mary Barrett Brown to produce a number of titles about northern animals which won numerous awards. The illustrations are vivid and highly detailed naturalistic paintings, more comparable to the carefully constructed, yet dramatic representations of Audubon, than Bowen's impressionistic images. In contrast to highly personal narratives of Bowen and Erickson, the text is more formal, impersonal, and scientific. Rather than seeing the northwoods through the eyes experiencing it, we step back as a careful outside observer. They are classics of the genre and will delight young naturalists. Brown lived in Vermont, and unlike Bowen is not specifically depicting a Minnesotan northwoods—occasionally a large bald hill more appropriate to mountains of the Northeast appear in the images.



Figure 8. "Great horned owl." *Tiger with Wings*, p.1.

Esbensen grew up in Madison, Wisconsin, and taught K-12 and creative writing for education students in Duluth and the Minneapolis area for most of her career. She received the National Council of Teachers of English Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children and the Kerlan Award for her body of work in children's literature. University of Minnesota Press reprinted *Playful Slider* in 2011 (same year as *Twelve Owls*) as part of the Fesler-Lampert Minnesota Heritage Book Series that seeks to republish significant out-of-print books. As a side note, this series also includes titles by the famous Wanda Gág, who grew up in Minnesota and went to art school in St. Paul.

## **The Poetry of Nature**

***Echoes for the Eye: Poems to Celebrate Patterns in Nature*, Barbara Juster Esbensen, illustrated by Helen Davie (New York: HarperCollins, 1996)**

Esbensen was best known for her poetry for children and worked with California artist Helen Davie on several lavishly illustrated books. This book was a collaborative effort between Esbensen and Davie who shared a fascination with repeating patterns in the natural world. Poetry offers a significantly different approach to nature than the more mundane text of Esbensen's non-fiction titles. However, the poems and images encourage the reader to carefully observe the world around them and take joy in the amazing physics of life.

The illustrations and poetry are full of action and lively details, but do not stray far from typical children's illustration and the typography is conventional and flat. It should be compared to Joyce Sidman and Beth Krommes much more adventurous *Swirl by Swirl: Spirals in Nature* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011) where even the copyright notice is in spiralled text. The imagery of *Echoes for the Eye* is

not focused on the northwoods, however, it is a good introduction this group of works focused on the poetry of nature and I believe Esbensen's work was influential encouraging writers to depict complex ideas in poetry and illustration for children.

***Fabulous Frogs*, Linda Glaser, pictures by Loretta Krupinski (Minneapolis: Millbrook Press, 1999)**

Duluth resident Linda Glaser is a currently active and prolific children's writer who often covers environmental themes. This book is a part of a larger series of Glaser titles for the "young naturalist" from Lerner Publishing. *Fabulous Frogs* is a true picture book where the playful text and imagery are fully integrated and interdependent. The text is sparse, carefully broken across pages and strategically placed within each illustration. The typography is lively with arches tracing movement, expressive fonts for sounds and actions, and dramatic layout. The narrative is simple, starting from the author recalling the sound of the frogs calling every spring, but covers the general biologically accurate details of a frog's life cycle. The last four pages are an appendix with detailed "Fabulous facts about frogs." Rather than a read-aloud section, the frog facts are set up as information for parents to help answer all the questions curious kids will have.

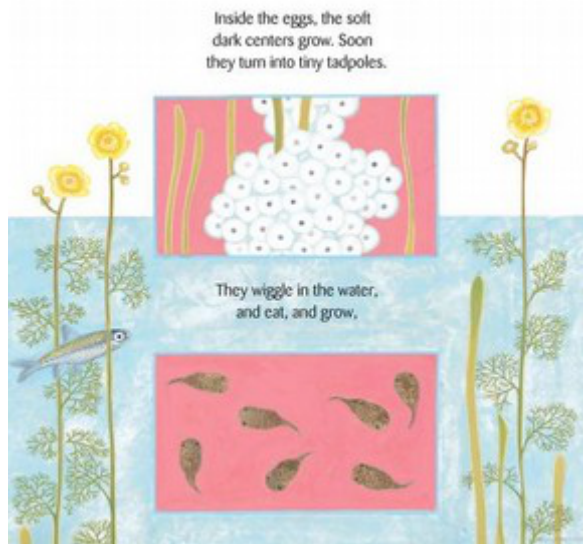


Figure 9. "Eggs." *Fabulous Frogs*.



Krupinski is a graphic designer, illustrator, and author who lives in coastal Maine. The illustrations are wonderfully detailed and active, with a soft colour pallet. Inventive and free, they easily switch between conventions, points of views, and scale. For example, sequential comic-like frame are used to represent the period of growth from egg to young frog. None of the images are full bleed—instead Krupinski makes playful use of distinct frame elements and large patches of flat coloured shapes that look like a woodcut style, although I believe it is acrylic painting. The landscapes, flora, and fauna suggest a northwoods location, but not a distinct area.

***Dazzling Dragonflies: A Life Cycle Story*, Linda Glaser, illustrations by Mia Posada (Minneapolis: Millbrook Press, 2008)**

*Dazzling Dragonflies* follows the same format as *Fabulous Frogs*, but features an illustrator with a very different style. Posada lives in Minneapolis and is the daughter of Sharon and Henry Lerner who created the Lerner Publishing group. She works in mixed media with cutout collage and watercolour. The softer, muted tones and textured shapes from cutout paper contrast with the flat bold colours of block prints or Krupinski's painting. The mixed media also does not highlight detail as much as other illustrations since there is no strong contour lines. However, the dragonflies are wonderfully depicted with wings of transparent materials that capture a sense of their diaphanous beauty. Unlike *Fabulous Frogs*, the typography is plain and conventional. This makes the text less expressive on the page with only an occasional variation of size for emphasis.

***Song of the Water Boatman & Other Pond Poems*, Joyce Sidman, illustrated by Beckie Prange (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005)**

Joyce Sidman moved from the East Coast to Wayzata, where she lives in a “wrinkle between rural and suburban” on the edge of Minneapolis (Ode, 2013). She always wanted to be a poet and since the 2000's has become a children's poetry superstar, raking in awards. Like Bowen, she works with editor Ann Rider from Lutsen, who connected her with Ely artist Beckie Prange to illustrate *Song of the Water Boatman*. Prange studied biology and completed a graduate program in natural science illustration (Prange, n.d.). She grew up in Illinois, but the northwoods captured her imagination during a month long Outward Bound canoe trip into the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. She decided to return to Ely in the 1990's, and was inspired by Bowen's art to pursue printmaking. Following Bowen, she became active in the Grand Marais Art Colony and Northern Printers Alliance.

*Song of the Water Boatman* has a unique format where each two page spread includes a poem, a woodblock print, and a sidebar of scientific details. Sidman describes it as “a compromise between my wish to give each pond creature an imaginative voice (the poems), and my fascination with their real-life behaviour (the nonfiction notes)” (Sidman, n.d.). This is not dumbed down kiddie poetry—the words are fresh and clever, challenging the way we relate to “lowly” pond life.



Figure 10. "A Small Green Riddle." *Song of the Water Boatman*, woodblock print before adding the text.

Prange hand coloured each print with watercolour using a palette dominated by the green tones of the pond water. Her use of colour seems more complex than Bowen, with more shades and deeper gradations of hues built by multiple colour washes. Her composition is also more complex and adventurous with figures leaving the frames or bleeding off the page. She creates many unexpected points of views, such as odd underwater angles or microscopic scenes.

“In the depths of the summer pond” is a particularly wonderful piece, a four page spread depicting a complete food chain. It starts on the far left with microscopic algae and animals, shifting with a green swirl that contains the poetic text into underwater cross section of frogs, bugs, and fish. The frame bleeds into the next page, where the fish's body continues, but is now a top-down look onto the pond surface, with a blue heron coming in from off the page—looking for a meal! Full bleed spreads of the pond in spring and frozen over in winter without any text nicely bookend *Song of the Water Boatman*, reinforcing the seasonal cycle and contemplative aspects of the poetry. The poetry and illustrations work perfectly together in this book. It won a Caldecott Honor Medal.

***Ubiquitous: Celebrating Nature's Survivors*, Joyce Sidman, illustrated by Beckie Prange (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2010)**

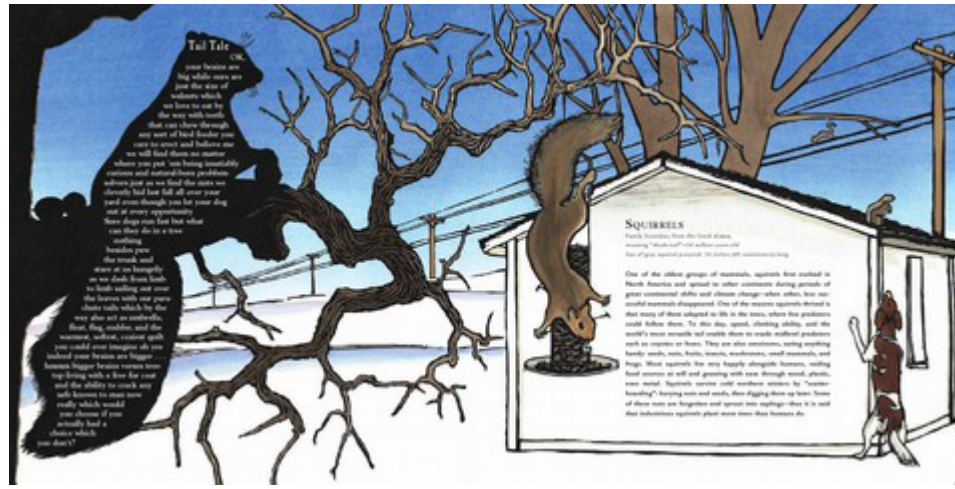


Figure 11. "Tail Tale." Ubiquitous.

Following the success of *Song of the Water Boatman*, Sidman and Prange teamed up again to produce this tribute to the most tenacious living things on Earth. While this is not a northwoods book, it deserves mention because of the further artist development of Sidman and Prange who seem to be pushing the envelope of Esbensen's poetry and Bowen's art.

The poetry is full of wit and spunk—often barely containing the unsuppressed energy of the Ubiquitous organisms. For example, in "Tail Tale" Squirrels taunt our pathetic efforts at using our big brains to keep them out of the bird feeder—a scene common to every northwoods back yard! The scientific sidebars have doubled in size packing even more biological information into the book. Prange used linocuts instead of woodblocks, giving the prints much greater detail and precision, and a less rustic look. They are again hand coloured with watercolour, but the palette is brighter and richer, matching the more varied subject matter. The end papers are a beautiful visualization of the overwhelming scale of Earth's geologic time line, and our tiny place in it.

***Dark Emperor & Other Poems of the Night*, Joyce Sidman, illustrated by Rick Allen (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2010)**

At the same time as *Ubiquitous* was in development, Ann Rider suggested that a series of Sidman's poems about the night could be developed into project with Duluth printmaker Rick Allen (Ode, 2010). Allen runs Kenspeckle Letterpress and is known for his distinctive humour and playful imagery ([www.kenspeckleletterpress.com](http://www.kenspeckleletterpress.com)). The book also follows the exact format of *Song of the Water Boatman*: poem, print, and info sidebar.



Figure 12. "Night-Spider's Advice." Dark  
Emperor.

Allen created the illustrations using linoleum blocks, hand inked and printed, with three to six different colour blocks and gouache pigments. However, depicting dusk and darkness presents a unique illustration challenge—how can the shadowed mystery of night that we can not normally see be represented? Allen's prints use muted colours and heavy black outlining to convey a sense of the dark. Each page has a main image block which is fully saturated with colour, allowing him to use white contour lines to bring out some details. This lends a strange vibrancy to the images appropriate to the mysterious setting.

Each rectangular main print is accompanied by several small free form prints spread across the page. Allen packs each page with little creatures hiding in shadows, such as playful salamanders, providing entertainment for young readers who like to spot the details. The typography is mundane compared to its sister books, simply following regular columns near each image.

## The Seasons

***Swing Around the Sun*, Barbara Juster Esbensen, illustrated by Cheng-Khee Chee, Janice Lee Porter, Mary GrandPré, and Stephen Gammell (Minneapolis: Carolrhoda Books, 2003)**

Esbensen's first book, *Swing Around the Sun*, was published by Lerner in 1965. It was originally illustrated by Barbara Fumagalli with simple black line drawings and classic 1960's design. Lerner gathered an all-star team of Minnesota illustrators to commemorate Esbensen's posthumous Kerlan Award in 2002. The original had seven poems for each season, but Lerner decided to reduce it to five for this edition. Each illustrator was given one season, creating an interesting mix of unrelated styles—which are also completely unrelated to the original printing.

The famous Duluth watercolourist Chee illustrated spring, displaying his distinctive “crinkling paper technique.” The colours are muted and bleed together, as if life is still buried in fog and rain, just gathering to spring forth. Porter's crisp oil pastels brightly depict summer. GrandPré (most famous for illustrating the U.S. editions of Harry Potter) also utilizes oil pastels, capturing the conflicting rich and cool colours of autumn. The prolific illustrator Gammell (more than sixty titles and counting) is known for his occasional surrealism. A bit of this eeriness creeps into his images of winter filled with falling snow and the impression of sharp winds—however, the

images are also closely related to his book *Is That You, Winter?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997). Overall, I don't believe this edition makes for a great book, but it is interesting as a monument of these important Minnesota artists and publishers.

***North Country Spring*, Reeve Lindbergh, paintings by Liz Sivertson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997)**

Vermont author Reeve Lindbergh (the daughter of the famous Minnesota aviator Charles) has written a number of children's books and poems. Her text displays a lively rhythm and rhyme, as spring urgently calls life to "come out" and emerge from winter. Liz Sivertson, one of the family owner-artists of the Sivertson Gallery of Grand Marais (remember where Bowen used to work?), illustrated this book with her distinctive paintings. Sivertson is known for hyper-saturated colours (like wild northern lights) and playfully fluid creatures, especially bears, otters, and moose.



*Figure 13. "Amble out, sniff the air, it says next to the bear. Let your brown cubs tumble everywhere." Paintings that form the two page spread, without the text added.*

All pages are full bleed spreads, but many include smaller embedded frames. Heavy brush strokes and curving figures convey a sense of constant movement to the paintings. Despite the surreal use of colour and abstractness, distinctive

northern Minnesota places are identifiable, such as cliffs on Lake Superior.

The text is often overpowered by Sivertson's saturated colours. The typography is too dull to fit comfortably with the swirling activity of the paintings. Overall, the art works better on its own and as a book it is a bit disappointing. As a side note: Liz's father Howard Sivertson published a series of large format illustrated works for adults that pair anecdotes of northwoods history with his detailed oil paintings, such as *Tales of the Old North Shore: Paintings and Companion Stories* (Duluth: Lake Superior Port Cities, 1996).

***Grandmother Winter*, Phyllis Root, illustrated by Beth Krommes (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999)**

In folktale-like story, *Grandmother Winter* depicts winter as a gift carefully prepared for us each year (it can be humorously compared to Gammell's depiction of winter as a grumpy old man in *Is That You, Winter?*). Root is a prolific Minneapolis author who also often works with editor Ann Rider. Rider discovered Krommes, who lives in New Hampshire, and drafted her to illustrate this story with her distinctive scratch board art (Rider, 2009). This launched Krommes career, leading to many award winning books, including collaborations with several other Minnesota authors orchestrated by Rider. For example:

- Lise Lunge-Larsen, *The Hidden Folk: Stories of Fairies, Dwarves, Selkies, and Other Secret Beings* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004) [Minnesota Book Award]
- Joyce Sidman, *Butterfly Eyes and Other Secrets of the Meadow* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006) [same format as *Song of the Water Boatman*]
- Susan Marie Swanson, *The House in the Night* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008) [Caldecott Medal]





Figure 14. "Minnows and sunfish slowly swim."

Krommes' style with heavy cross hatching and textures inspired by textile patterns fits perfectly with the subject of a mythical quilt maker who spreads her cozy blanket of snow over the north. The northwoods landscapes could equally be New Hampshire or Northeastern Minnesota. It is a gentle and beautiful book. Root went on to work with two northern print makers on truly northwoods books: *If You Want to See a Caribou*, illustrated by Jim Meyer (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004) and *Big Belching Bog*, illustrated by Betsy Bowen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). Both would be good additions to this bibliography, if time allowed!

## The Northern Lights

***The Night Rainbow*, Barbara Juster Esbensen, illustrated by Helen Davie (New York: Orchard Books, 2000)**

Esbensen's poems reference an interesting medley of tales about the northern lights from around the world, centred around an observer on a farm in northern Wisconsin or Minnesota. It is a nice riff on the way the night sky connects us across time and

space, filled with legend and imagination. However, illustrations and text are rather conventional and sometimes hard to follow.

***Nightlight*, Jeannine Anderson, Joy Morgan Dey, illustrated by Nikki Johnson (Apple Valley, MN: Windward Publishing, 2004)**

A gentle story about young bears celebrating the northern lights. Illustrated with beautiful fluid paintings of master watercolourist Nikki Johnson. Johnson lives on Lake Superior near Duluth and is known for her colourful paintings of the northern lights. Her saturated colour washes and subtle brushwork capture something of the ephemeral and surreal colour of the aurora with the playful black shapes of the bears in silhouette. She also collaborated with Joy Morgan Dey on *Agate: What Good is a Moose?* (Duluth: Lake Superior Port Cities, 2007). Morgan Dey is a book/graphic designer and art director at Pfeifer-Hamilton Publishers in Duluth. She designed the award winning *Old Turtle* by Douglas Wood, illustrated by Cheng-Khee Chee (Duluth, MN : Pfeifer-Hamilton Publishers, 1992).

***Under the Night Sky*, Amy Lundebrek, illustrated by Anna Rich (Gardiner, ME: Tilbury House Publishers, 2008)**

Minnesota author Lundebrek captures the mystery, amazement, and anticipation of urban people experiencing the northern lights—a strange event where the neighbourhood drops everything and stands in awe. The main characters are a single mother and her son. The illustrations are beautiful, capturing the darkness and strange colours, sometimes slightly surreal.

**Unique Northwoods Stories**

***Great Wolf and the Good Woodsman*, Helen Hoover, woodcuts by Betsy Bowen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005)**

Famous wilderness writer Helen Hoover left Chicago to live on the Gunflint trail near Grand Marais. She wrote a number of well known books about life in the wilds of the northwoods with her artist husband. The text of this children's tale was originally published in 1967, but University of Minnesota's Fesler-Lampert Minnesota Heritage Book Series commissioned Bowen to re-illustrate a new edition. Bowen's rustic woodcut style perfectly complements the text.

***Shingebiss: An Ojibwe Legend*, Nancy Van Laan, illustrated by Betsy Bowen (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997)**

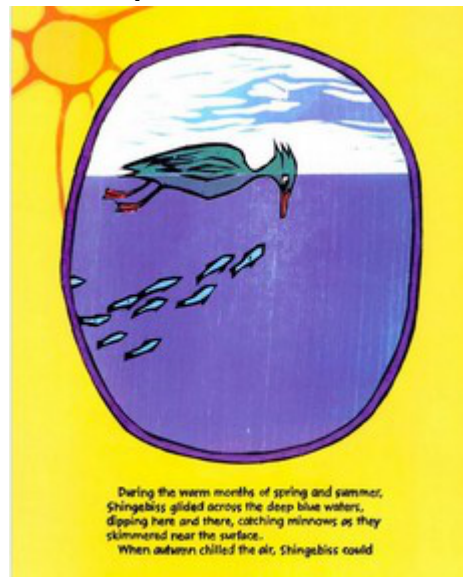


Figure 15. "During the warm months of spring and summer..."

Van Laan retells a Minnesota version of the tale of Shingebiss, a resourceful merganser/duck who manages to survive all the harshness winter can throw at him. Unlike most of Bowen's illustrations, the prints are full bleed, featuring solid patches of colour textured with wood grain filling the page. She used the reduction method

of printing where the same block is used to print multiple colours by carving away different parts and re-inking. Bowen inked each print five times and added more colour with coloured pencils.

***Fearless John: The Legend of John Beargrease*, Kelly Emerling Rauzi, illustrated by Mila Horak (Ely, Minnesota: Singing River Publications, 2006)**

John Beargrease was an Anishinaabe mail carrier who delivered mail between Grand Marais and Two Harbors along the shore of Lake Superior. In the winters he used dogsleds to carry his loads. His trips were vital to the communities along the shore and are commemorated by the John Beargrease Sled Dog Marathon today. Rauzi was a long time resident of Grand Marais and instructor at Lake Superior College in Duluth. Mila Horak is a well known oil painter who grew up in Tofte along the shore. She uses bright oil pastels to portray the icy north shore.

***Marven of the Great North Woods*, Kathryn Lasky, illustrated by Kevin Hawkes (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1997)**

Prolific children's author Kathryn Lasky tells a true story of her father who lived in Duluth. During an influenza epidemic, Marven's Jewish family sent him deep into the northwoods to a French Canadian logging camp near Bemidji. Hawkes, who lives in Maine, uses acrylic paint on board to illustrate the story. A fascinating and unexpected story that charmingly depicts the snowy northwoods.

***Up North at the Cabin*, Marsha Wilson Chall, illustrated by Steve Johnson (New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books, 1992)**

Going to the cabin is an important Minnesota tradition. Many families have an old

place handed down for generations, and crowds of people head north all summer to “the lake.” Minnesotans Chall and Johnson both mention their cherished memories of childhood cabin visits. The book was designed by Johnson's wife Lou Fancher, who works with a number of other Minnesota authors, such as Louise Erdrich in *The Range Eternal* (New York: Hyperion Books, 2002).

The text is simple and poetic, filled with nostalgia and reflection yet remains accessible to young readers. The book ticks off every northwoods subject: fishing, moose, canoes, etc. Johnson's paintings reflect the nostalgic tone with soft lighting and heavy, expressive brush strokes. The text of each page is set in a rectangle of colour laid down with thick brush work tying the text to the image. This book will appeal to anyone with an old northwoods cabin or who spent summer vacation at the lake.

***Leave Only Ripples: A Canoe Country Sketchbook*, Consie Powell (Ely, Minn.: Raven Productions, 2005)**

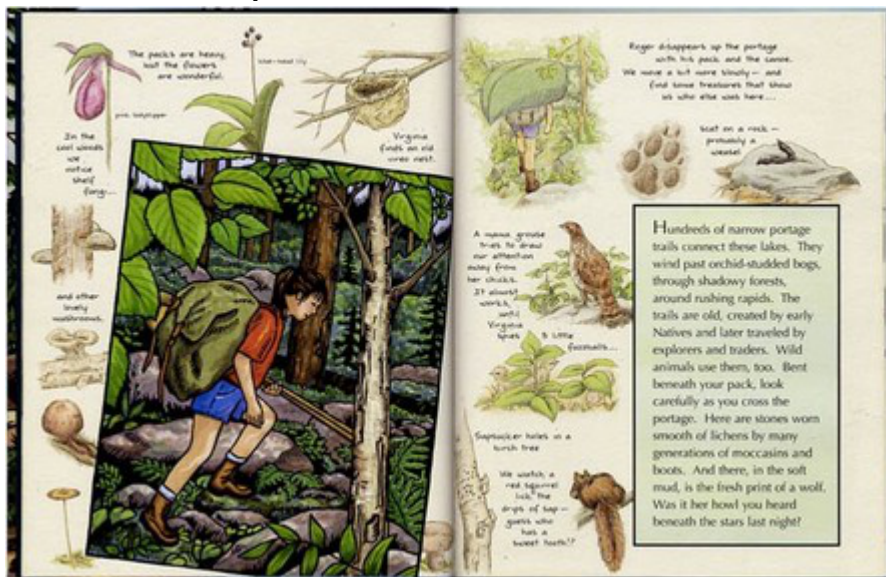


Figure 16. Portage trails.

Powell is a woodcut artist from Ely who was influenced by Bowen and Prange. However, she has created a unique book that blends her woodblock prints,

sketches, and prose into a journal-like narrative of a canoe trip. Powell relates information about history, nature, and wilderness ethics along with observation and reflection about her voyage. The book won the Sigurd Olson Nature Writing for Children Award and John Burroughs List of Nature Books for Young Readers.

***One-Dog Canoe*, Mary Casanova, illustrated by Ard Hoyt (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003)**

Mary Casanova lives in the far north, near the Canadian border on Rainy Lake. She is known for a series of YA novels dealing with contemporary issues in Northern Minnesota such as the tensions between hunting and environmentalism in *Moose Tracks* and *Wolf Shadows* (originally published in 1995, but recently republished as part of the Fesler-Lampert Minnesota Heritage Book Series, University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

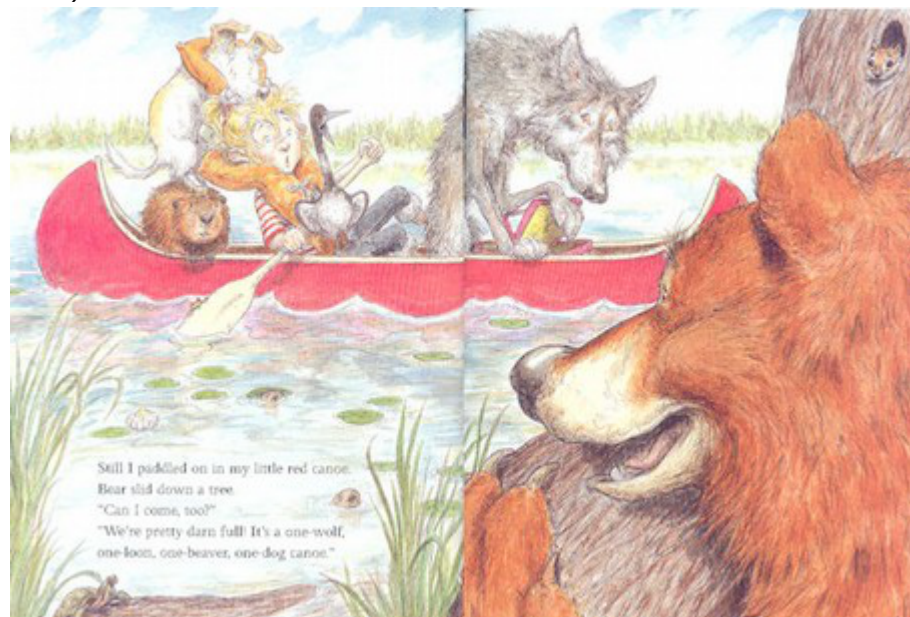


Figure 17. "Still I paddled on in my little red canoe."

*One-Dog Canoe* is a humorous story of a girl and her dog trying to take a canoe ride, but being swamped by all the animals who want to join. The text has a

repeating refrain and rhyme scheme that makes it enjoyable to read aloud. The animals who jump into the canoe make up a list of the distinctive creatures of the northwoods. The illustrations are playful and fun, with lively lines and spare use of colour. Despite the humour, the animals and landscapes are treated naturalistically and with sympathy. Despite living in the Southwest desert, Hoyt depicts the northwoods beautifully!

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