THE BULLETIN

Chapel Hill Bird Club

March, 2001

(Vol. XXX, No. 3)

c/o Ginger Travis
5244 Old Woods Rd.
Hillsborough, NC 27278

March meeting

Date and time: Monday, March 26, 7:30 p.m.

Place: The lounge, **Binkley Baptist Church**, corner of Willow Drive and the Hwy. 15-501 Bypass (next to University Mall) in Chapel Hill. Entrance to the parking lot is on Willow Drive.

Program: **Birding Attu** by Lena Gallitano and Brad Carlson – or, birding the end of the earth in cold and rain and feeling happy to get this last chance! The Aleutian island of Attu, off Alaska, is closer to Asia than to North America and attracts birders in search of rarities. But commercial flights to Attu were to end in 2000 because FAA certification of the airstrip would cease at the end of the summer. Brad and Lena were on the same birding trip to Attu, one of a handful in the final season. Primitive conditions, great birds, a memorable adventure. Come hear about it! (Refreshments served at 7:15 p.m.)

Upcoming programs

April 23 – Debbie Zomback, bird exhibits at the North Carolina Zoo.
May 21 – Picnic (potluck). Place to be arranged, probably Jordan Lake.

March means field trips

Spring migration is just under way, and neotropical migrants are beginning to drop out of the skies onto our fields and woods: warblers, vireos, flycatchers, thrushes, tanagers, hummingbirds, and more. A real rarity is also possible in the next few weeks – similar to Doug Shadwick's finding Warbling Vireos last year at Anilorac Farm in Orange County. (They even stayed to breed!) This is a great time to shake off winter and get outside. Please join the Chapel Hill Bird Club on any of its regular Saturday morning field trips. Trips leave the Glen Lennox parking lot (on the north side of Hwy. 54 just east of the 15-501 Bypass in Chapel Hill) at 7:30 a.m. sharp and return by noon. Beginners and visitors are welcome. Reservations are not necessary, but if you want details on where you'll be going, call Doug Shadwick (942-0479). Bring binoculars, a scope if you have one, and boots or old tennis shoes, and be prepared for a hike.

The Wildathon needs you!

by Kate Finlayson

If you heard Walker Golder's fascinating and informative CHBC talk in February, you might be wondering, "What can I do to help the Audubon Coastal Island Sanctuaries?" Well, how about participating in the Wildathon! The New Hope Audubon chapter's big fundraising event to benefit both the Coastal Island Sanctuaries and Mason Farm Biological Reserve will be held on Saturday, May 12. Birders, botanists, and wildlife and nature enthusiasts of all kinds can participate. How can you do this?

One way is a 24-hour marathon with teams identifying as many species as they can in that time period (birds, insects, wildflowers, reptiles, amphibians, etc). Each team member gets pledges for donations before they go out in the field, for example, $1 per species. But you don't have to make it a marathon. You can just go out and identify species in the daytime – birds only or birds and everything else you want to count.

Another way: For the week before May 12, count the birds in your own backyard. With migration going on, you could have a few surprises! Ask friends, family, or co-workers to pledge what they can for your private wildathon!

Or take a road trip with a group on a weekend, IDing birds (or butterflies) all across the state at favorite hot spots!

Or take your hour lunch break and bird around your workplace, asking co-workers to donate for every bird you see in that hour. You would be amazed how shocked they will be when you ID a bunch of birds!

Not feeling well? Bird on TV. Count the birds you hear and see on the tube. You would be amazed what you will find, and it is just odd enough to get people to give you a little donation!

Or do what Chris and I do: We spend the day looking for all kind of species all over our neighborhood and pond (about 100 acres) and ask donations from every home in the neighborhood. If they donate at least a dollar, they get a copy of all the great wild things we found for that day!

And maybe you can come up with other creative ways to have fun and help out the Coastal Sanctuaries and Mason Farm. I am incredibly grateful places like these exist. But they need our help. Last year's Wildathon raised more than $8,000; this year's could be even better – with your help. Please call me at 919-545-0737 if you are interested in being a team leader, participant or sponsor!
Kate Finlayson (katefin@yahoo.com)

Lure of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker

by Rob Gluck

"Reports of my death are greatly exaggerated!" (Mark Twain)

The Ivory-billed Woodpecker first captured my imagination at about age 10 . . . and, I suppose, never let go. I dare say my experience is not uncommon among birders. So when the chance presented itself to participate in a search for this Southern ghost, while the practical side of me mumbled "well, maybe," the 10-year-old inside me screamed "YYYYEEEESSSS!!!!"

In mid-February I joined 10 other folks from around the country and Canada to search for the Ivorybill in southeastern Louisiana. A detailed sighting of a PAIR of Ivorybills in April 1999 by a Louisiana State University forestry student at the Pearl River Wildlife Management Area had spurred subsequent searches by hundreds of seekers – to little avail. Possible bark scrapings, calls, drumming, large holes, and even glimpses of the birds have all been reported, but nothing at all was definitive enough to confirm the earlier sighting.

Three weeks before our group arrived, the La. Department of Wildlife and Fisheries flew helicopter transects over much of the area in a last-ditch effort to flush out any Ivorybills for sight identification. Twenty-six Pileateds were observed but no Ivory-billeds.

Our group spent several days at the Pearl River WMA where the original sighting occurred. One lady in our group believed she heard three Ivorybills calling together in the distance at one point, but this is unsubstantiated, and we also heard a Blue Jay doing the Ivorybill call, as, interestingly, they are known to do. Otherwise, we were unsuccessful at finding the bird, although heavily worked trees are prevalent throughout the area, as are Pileateds.

We also spent some time at the Bogue Chitto WMA north of Pearl River WMA and, still farther north, at the Three River WMA, which is the largest, most remote and quiet of the areas we explored. (In fact, I'd be amazed if there AREN'T Ivorybills there!!! We did not venture to the old Singer Tract (now known as Tensas WMA) where Ivorybills were studied in the 1930s and 40s and which continues to hold potential. Jim Williams was with us on assignment from *Birding* to write a story for later publication, and Bob Russell with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service led our group.

In an earlier time, Ivorybills were regularly described as "regal," "majestic," and "noble," as well as "archaic," prehistoric," and "primeval" – what a combination! Often dubbed "the Holy Grail" of birding, Ivory-billed Woodpeckers are now routinely presumed by birders to be an extinct species, yet still hope lingers. Indeed, the foremost current authority on Ivorybills, Dr. Jerry Jackson, states that there is simply "no basis" for declaring the bird extinct, and to this day the government officially lists them only as "endangered." Having witnessed the vastness and inaccessibility of much of this area and the impossibility of thorough searches ever being conducted, I am optimistic now more than ever. It also is fascinating to listen to the many anecdotal reports that never make their way into press but that nonetheless have some ring of authenticity. Even the quality, thoroughness, and conclusions of James Tanner's original study of the birds, once taken as gospel truth and from which most of today's Ivory-billed pessimism derives, is now itself open to question.

Whether human eyes will ever be laid on this species again I'm not sure, but that it is out there lurking, foraging along remote, possibly inaccessible byways, wary of people and stealthily eaking out an existence in small numbers in multiple locales, I no longer doubt. It was scientists, after all, who in their infinite wisdom declared the Coelacanth (a primitive fish) extinct for 65 MILLION YEARS, when one was suddenly pulled up by surprised fishermen off Madagascar in 1938. What say we give the Ivorybill another few decades of consideration before rushing to judgment!

Anyone wanting more detailed information my trip can email me: thrush@hotmail.com

A golden opportunity

by Steve Shultz

Although quite rare in the Carolinas, Golden Eagles are somewhat more commonly found a bit farther north. An excellent place to see Golden Eagles and other wintering raptors is the western Virginia community of Burkes Garden. ["Burkes" as in Burke's. Possessive place names often lose the apostrophe and sometimes the "s" over time.] Each winter several Golden Eagles take up residence in this high mountain valley, frequently joined by the also-rare-in-the-Carolinas Rough-legged Hawk.

January and February are the best months for seeing these winter residents in Burkes Garden.

Burkes Garden consists of a relatively flat valley surrounded by a nearly continuous ridge of mountains on all sides. A narrow pass in the northern ridgeline allows year-round automobile access, and a rugged four-wheel drive forest road provides access from the south. The lowest elevations in the valley remain above 3000 feet, while the adjacent mountaintops peak at over 4700 feet. The majority of the valley floor has been cleared for agricultural use, mainly dairy farming and crops used for silage. The combination of high, forested ridgelines with open, prairie-like fields must look quite inviting to a wintering Golden Eagle or Rough-legged Hawk.

A network of well-maintained state roads allows the visiting birder to navigate the valley in relative ease. A large loop of approximately 16.5 miles will allow the visitor access to most of Burkes Garden. This large loop may be divided into two smaller loops of 12 and 8.5 miles. Light traffic and ample room to pull onto the road shoulder make birding from a vehicle the most logical and easiest way to view the eagles and other avian attractions. (And birders should note that the land along the roads is privately owned.)

Even without the lure of the raptors, the valley is enjoyable to visit. The only two retail operations, a post office and a tiny general store, provide a look back at how commerce occurred before discount stores, mega-malls and fast food. The single gas pump at the Burkes Garden General Store dispenses only one grade of gasoline, and the store dispenses the only food in the valley. A look at the dry goods on the shelves reveals a selection of Pennsylvania Dutch foods straight from Lancaster as well as a large by-the-pound selection of trail mix, dried fruits and other goodies. As for the other retail operation, the post office, you have to see it to believe it. The small wooden building proclaims, "Burkes Garden Post Office, God's Land" on the marquee. The establishment vends used paperback books as well as stamps. According to the owner and operator of the post office, the building was constructed in the 1800s and has not been significantly altered. While the general store's wood-burning stove is a great place to warm frosty fingers, the post office is not. The chinks in the wooden walls allow the cold north wind to blow right on in. The postal cage is the only heated area here.

At this point you might be hooked and planning a "Great Eagle Expedition" of your own. Point the car toward the Virginia line and take I-77 north through Wytheville, Virginia toward Bluefield. At exit #64 take VA 61 west for approximately 16 miles. Turn left on VA 623 to enter the valley. Once in the "Garden" you come to an idyllic millpond on the left side of 623. Ducks and geese frequent the marshy edges of the meandering pond. The pond marks the intersection of 623 and VA route 666. VA 666 provides a good way to explore the eastern portion of the valley. VA 666 becomes VA 625 and rejoins 623 after a total distance of 8.9 miles. This area was our most productive for Rough-legged Hawks on a recent visit. Check the small cornfield 1.9 miles from the 666/623 intersection for the resident Horned Larks.

After reaching the intersection of 625 and 623 you may turn right and return to the millpond (3.7 miles) or turn left, drive 0.5 mile and then bear right onto 667. This road runs along the southern ridge (Garden Mountain) for 2.2 miles before intersecting with VA 727. A left turn and 2.6 miles brings you back to 623. A right turn onto 727 (a.k.a. West End Road) leads to the western part of the valley. We had particular success in finding Golden Eagles along this stretch of road. Interestingly, some of the Goldens we observed were hunting not from a lofty height but by coursing low over the fields with an occasional climb followed by a short glide to the next field. With the blazing white tail patch, a young Golden Eagle can resemble a huge Harrier!

Although a Burkes Garden trip may be made as a daytrip from some locations in the Carolinas, many would prefer to spend a night somewhere along the way. The two most convenient locations with a fair selection of hostelries are Bluefield, West Virginia (about 25 minutes from Burkes Garden to the north), and Wytheville, Virginia (about 1 hour to the south). Few gasoline stations are available between Wytheville and Burkes Garden, although the single pump at the General Store can provide those in need with some mid-grade. The only public restrooms in the valley are one at the General Store and an outhouse behind the Lutheran church on 623 just past the post office.

An excellent article on Burkes Garden was written by Wallace Coffey and published in the February 2000 issue of the ABA newsletter "Winging It." A copy of this article and the accompanying map of the valley were indispensable during our recent trip.

Good luck and may your eagles be Golden!

Feeder bird: big <u>and</u> golden

by James Coman (from Carolinabirds)
Ed. Note: James Coman is a CHBC member and lives on a sheep farm in Alleghany County.

The immature Golden Eagle has been back on the deer carcass from 2:45 to 4:30 this afternoon [March 6]. I have seen eagles previously, of course, but always very distant or very fleeting sightings. I never thought that in North Carolina I would be able to watch a Golden at reasonable range for two hours. I think I will list this as a "feeder bird."

Close encounters of the canid kind: Red Wolf hunting Blue Heron

by Linda Ward, Coinjock, N.C.
(from Carolinabirds)

Today (Feb. 20) we birded Alligator River NWR. Following Jeff Lewis's directions, we were hoping for Lincoln's Sparrows when, on Milltail Creek Rd., Skip spotted a Red Wolf on the road. We were about one-quarter to one-half mile from it and got out our scope. Nearby, on the bank of the ditch (canal?) was a Great Blue Heron standing still. The wolf was a short distance away, and that seemed odd to me, but Skip speculated that the wolf may already have made a try for it and missed. We watched it walking away from us (and the heron) and decided to get in the car and see if it would allow us to ride by and look, thinking it unlikely.

When we got to the intersection of Milltail and Long Curve Roads we saw the wolf turn left in front of us, entering the next road (parallel to Long Curve). We drove along Milltail and looked up this road and saw the wolf looking back at us. He entered the brush by the road and reentered the road 3 to 4 times, each time looking at us. I concluded it was waiting for us to leave. So we turned around in full sight of the wolf, made a U-turn, and then turned right onto Long Curve; I pulled the car over and we got out. My bet was that the wolf was returning up Milltail--and it did! It ran back the way it had come and turned left onto the same road (parallel to Long Curve, where we are now). We decided to bird along the ditch looking for sparrows and did for a few minutes, our backs to the area the wolf would have entered. When we turned to go back to the car Skip saw it standing on the opposite side of the other ditch framed by the reeds, watching us. We could see its yellow eyes without binocs! We stared at it and it stared back a few minutes, then turned back into the brush. We got in the car and drove up the road almost a quarter of a mile. We birded for sparrows (sighted one Lincoln's), turned to go back to the car, and the wolf was out on the road chasing a Great Blue Heron--we must have been right--that's what it was after when we first sighted it. The heron flew off (thankfully--not a successful hunt I care to witness) and the wolf began trotting toward us, very confident looking. We watched it (it had a characteristic lope); when it came to another side road, it turned and went out of sight. It was collared. We were very fortunate to see 2 Red Wolves when they were flown in for the reintroduction program. This was our first in the wild.

Dragonflies for birders

by Josh Rose

Editor's note: I asked Josh to write this piece for CHBC members like me -- folks who see a lot of dragonflies while they're out looking for birds but who don't have a clue what those 'flies are called. Josh would know – he's the Triangle's resident odonatologist – also a birder, connoisseur of road food, and Duke U. grad student. Thanks, Josh! G.T.

In the beginning, there was Roger Tory Peterson's *A Field Guide to the Birds*. This publication almost single-handedly turned the study of birds from ornithology, an academic pursuit for advanced researchers with mist nets and shotguns, into bird-watching, an amateur activity with vast and rapidly growing popularity. This conversion led both to greatly increased knowledge of bird biology and greatly increased support for conservation in the United States and worldwide.

Birdwatchers eventually began to notice many other brightly colored flying organisms. However, they lacked field guides with which to identify them. In the early 1990s, Paul Opler's *A Field Guide to Eastern Butterflies* and, shortly thereafter, Jeffrey Glassberg's *Butterflies Through Binoculars* were published. This caused another revolution, as traditional lepidopterists with butterfly nets found themselves suddenly surrounded by butterfly-watchers with binoculars.

Dragonflies, however, are still a mysterious group to all except traditional odonatologists, who catch them in butterfly nets and identify them laboriously using dichotomous keys. However, last summer odonatologist Sid Dunkle, after years of work, published *Dragonflies Through Binoculars*. With another specialist, Blair Nikula, working on a beginner's guide, this group of fascinating creatures should soon be following birds and butterflies into widespread popularity. The beginner's guide is probably still a few years from publication, but *Dragonflies Through Binoculars* is available at the Wild Bird Center in Chapel Hill. It also can be purchased for $33 from the International Odonate Research Institute (see http://www.afn.org/~iori/). The ISBN number is 0-19-511268-7 for anyone who needs to special-order it.

Dragonfly identification can be a tricky business. Just as in birding, some species cannot be safely distinguished in the field; to confirm these, one must still net them and use a key. And identification of their aquatic nymphs past the level of family is very difficult. However, as birding has its warblers, dragonfly-watching has one especially colorful, conspicuous group: the skimmers, family Libellulidae. Libellulids, specifically the adult males, defend territories around wetlands all through the

warmer months, making them easy to observe and photograph. Almost all of the best-known, most popular species belong to this family. Most can be identified by differences in size, body color, or the patterns of color spots on their wings. Some require attention to finer details, such as the color of the face. Females and immature males are more difficult, but are also seen much less often; while the mature males are defending territories, females and younger males tend to hang back in the woods and fields.

Other families can be distinguished using body shape and flight style; differences between the species of these families are generally more subtle, usually involving the color and pattern of the thorax and abdomen. Wing patterning is usually either absent or very subtle in non-Libellulids. Another well-known family is the darners, Aeshnidae, which are especially large and derive their name from an old myth that they can sew mouths and eyes shut with their long, needlelike abdomens. This myth probably sprung from females that mistakenly attempted to oviposit (lay eggs) in the legs of wading humans, which to the dragonflies resembled tree stumps. Two members of other families in the Triangle closely resemble darners: the Gray Petaltail, *Tachopteryx thoreyi*, belongs to the Petaluridae, while the Twin-Spotted Spiketail, *Cordulegaster maculata*, belongs to the Cordulegastridae. However, these two species have very strict habitat requirements and very short flight seasons, and so will generally take a special effort to see. The clubtails, family Gomphidae, nearly all have a swollen tip to their abdomen, especially the males. Some of the cruisers, family Macromiidae, also have clubbed tails; but while clubtails all perch horizontally, often on the ground, most cruisers hang vertically below their perches. Skimmers perch like clubtails, while the darners and other families hang like cruisers.

As I write this article, it is January; the last dragonfly was killed off by the cold weeks ago. However, their eggs and larval forms, called naiads or nymphs, are safely waiting out the cold underwater. Dragonfly naiads terrorize aquatic communities, eating everything from large zooplankton and mosquito larvae to small fish, tadpoles, and each other. They have a specialized structure resembling jaws on the end of a hinged arm that strikes with blinding quickness, allowing them to snatch prey from several centimeters away. When threatened by large fish or other predators, they can squirt water out of their abdomen suddenly, jet-propelling themselves to safety. Some naiads have very strict habitat requirements; most rare dragonfly species are rare because their naiads require some uncommon habitat, such as highly acidic or alkaline wetlands.

Approximately 130 species of dragonflies have been recorded in North Carolina (not counting any of their daintier cousins, the damselflies). Many, if not most, are restricted to the mountains or the coastal plain; between 60 and 70 occur in the piedmont. In addition to some species having strict habitat requirements, many exist as flying adults for as little as two months out of the year, spending the vast majority of their lives as naiads. As a result, seeing even as few as 30 species in one day would take some effort.

The key to seeing dragonfly species is habitat and timing. The most common and widespread species are mainly those with wide tolerances as naiads; they can survive even in polluted, eutrophic water, and often breed in backyard garden ponds. Certain species are found only on running water; some of these specialize in small streams, while others use larger rivers. Others require clean standing water. Still others are seen mostly away from water, visiting wetlands only long enough to breed. Some of the most rarely observed species breed only in seeps and springs that have little or no visible water at the surface for much of the year; one of these, the aforementioned Gray Petaltail, has been found in the Johnston Mill Preserve in Orange County (on Turkey Farm Rd.).

The best places to see a variety of species are those that combine habitats. Occoneechee Mountain, with two ponds adjacent to the Eno River and with both upland forests and fields nearby, is an example. The Butner Gamelands is another: it has both fields and forests and stagnant wetlands of different sizes, and it is close to Falls Lake and at least two creeks that feed into the lake. Old Hope Valley Farm, where New Hope Creek feeds into Jordan Lake, is another. And since all of our local lakes are formed by dams, any stretch of river below a dam is worth checking; sediment usually settles out in the lake, leaving very clear water downstream that appeals to different species than those in the murkier water above the dam. Because dragonflies are seasonal, three visits to a given location in different seasons - one in April, one in July, and one in October, for example - will yield sightings of many more species than one single visit ever could.

We usually begin seeing dragonflies around the Triangle in mid-March. Many of the early-season specialties are extremely similar, medium-sized brown critters, the dragonfly-watcher's equivalent of Empidonax flycatchers. These are the Baskettails, genus *Epitheca*, and the very similar Sundragons, genus *Heliocordulia*. Much easier to identify is the turquoise-striped Springtime Darner, *Basiaeschna janata*. Certain clubtails also come out early; these include the small Lancet Clubtail *Gomphus exilis* and the larger Ashy Clubtail *Gomphus lividus*. The chocolate brown Stream Cruiser, *Didymops*

transversa, also has a clubbed tail, but is not related. The Blue Corporal, *Libellula deplanata* is actually mostly brown when it first emerges; males do not turn blue until they reach sexual maturity.

While nearly everyone is familiar with bird migration, and any nature enthusiast knows that Monarch Butterflies migrate, the concept of dragonfly migration often surprises people. The Green Darner, *Anax junius*, migrates down both coasts of the U.S. in vast numbers; flocks can be seen at many migrant traps and hawk-watching spots, often with raptors such as Mississippi and Swallow-tailed Kites, American Kestrels, and Merlins in pursuit. Other migratory species include the Swamp Darner (*Epiaeshna heros*), Wandering (*Pantala flavescens*) and Spot-winged (*P. hymenea*) Gliders, and Carolina (*Tramea carolina*) and Black (*T. lacerata*) Saddlebags. These six species are even collected annually on oil drilling platforms miles offshore in the Gulf of Mexico.

Summer is the real season for dragonflies, as every wetland seems to swarm with them. One of the first summer species to appear is the Common Whitetail, *Libellula lydia*. Its name is somewhat deceiving, as male Widow Skimmers *L. luctuosa* and Twelve-spotted Skimmers *L. pulchella* also have white abdomens at maturity. However, they can be distinguished by their wing patterns: a single wide, dark band across the mid-wing of the Common Whitetail; a wide, dark band at the base of the wing, bordered by a thin white band, for the Widow Skimmer; and three black spots and two white spots on each wing of the Twelve-spotted (its name works if you count only the dark spots, three spots times four wings). The Blue Pirate, *Pachydiplax longipennis*, has brilliant green eyes, a blue abdomen, and a tiger-striped thorax. The Triangle's smallest dragonfly, less than an inch long, is the Eastern Amberwing, *Perithemis tenera*, unmistakable with its orange-tinted wings. The largest is the Regal Darner *Coryphaeshna ingens*, dark brown with green stripes and over three and a half inches long. Perhaps the most vicious is the Eastern Pondhawk, *Erythemis simplicicollis*; while even most large dragonflies eat tiny prey such as mosquitoes, gnats, and midges, this green-and-black beast (the males turn Carolina blue at maturity) eats relatively huge prey like butterflies and other dragonflies, even its own species! The clubtail *Hagenius brevistyla*, appropriately named the Dragonhunter, is the only other species in our area that regularly takes such large prey.

Only a few species linger past the first autumn frosts in late October. Most common are the Meadowhawks, the Blue-faced *Sympetrum ambiguum* and Yellow-legged *S. vicinum*, both small red-tailed dragonflies. Much rarer are the dark, metallic, mysterious Emeralds, the Clamp-tipped *Somatochlora filosa* and Fine-lined *S. tenebrosa*. They are called emeralds because of their stunning metallic bright green eyes.

The number of people studying dragonflies in this area is very small, probably fewer than 5 people in our state. Much remains to be learned about them; some species may be declining, while others thought extinct may still be hanging on. New species have been discovered in the United States, even in the past ten years! So buy a field guide and join the fun!

Join the Chapel Hill Bird Club

Membership is on the calendar year, Jan.-Dec., and costs $15 for individuals or families, $10 for students. Benefits include the newsletter, interesting programs, weekly field trips all over the Triangle and once-a-year trips to the coast and mountains, camaraderie with other birders, and easy access to the Carolinabirds listserv and the CHBC website (both maintained by CHBC member Will Cook). The club meets eight times a year: Sept. through Nov. and Jan. through May (fourth Monday of the month).

To join, please make your check payable to the Chapel Hill Bird Club and send it to the treasurer, **Fran Hommersand, 304 Spruce Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27514**. If you have questions, call Fran at 967-1745.

Everyone with an interest in birds will find a warm welcome at the Chapel Hill Bird Club.

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