



The Avicultural Society of New South Wales (ASNSW)

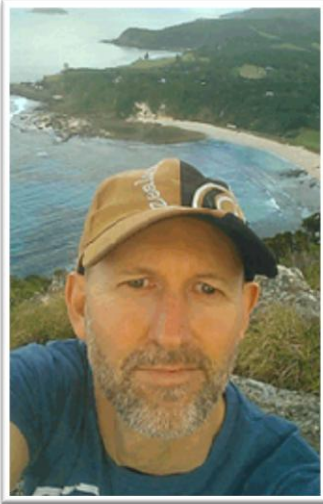
(Founding in 1940 as the Parrot & African Lovebird Society of Australia)

St Maarten Zoo in the Caribbean

(ASNSW Meeting - November 2013)

Presented by Nick Atchison

Graeme Phipps introduced Nick Atchison saying that he had known Nick for a very long time; ever since Nick had been a keeper at [Taronga Zoo](#). He said that Nick was a fantastic bird keeper generally, but particularly fantastic with small passerines. Graeme said that Nick has had a phenomenal career around the world and is now back at Taronga adding that he was glad to see him back in Oz now!



Nick Atchison

Nick thanked everyone for having him and said that it was his pleasure to be at the meeting.

For five years I was managing, in fact I was part owner of a Zoo on the island of St Maarten in the Caribbean.

I grew up reading [Gerald Durrell's](#) stories, reading about him and his zoo in the British Isles, and it was always a dream (like so many people I suppose) to have my own zoo. I guess I was really lucky that the dream came true for a little while.

So I thought I would just tell you a little bit about the zoo and my experience over there for five years.

A brief geography lesson

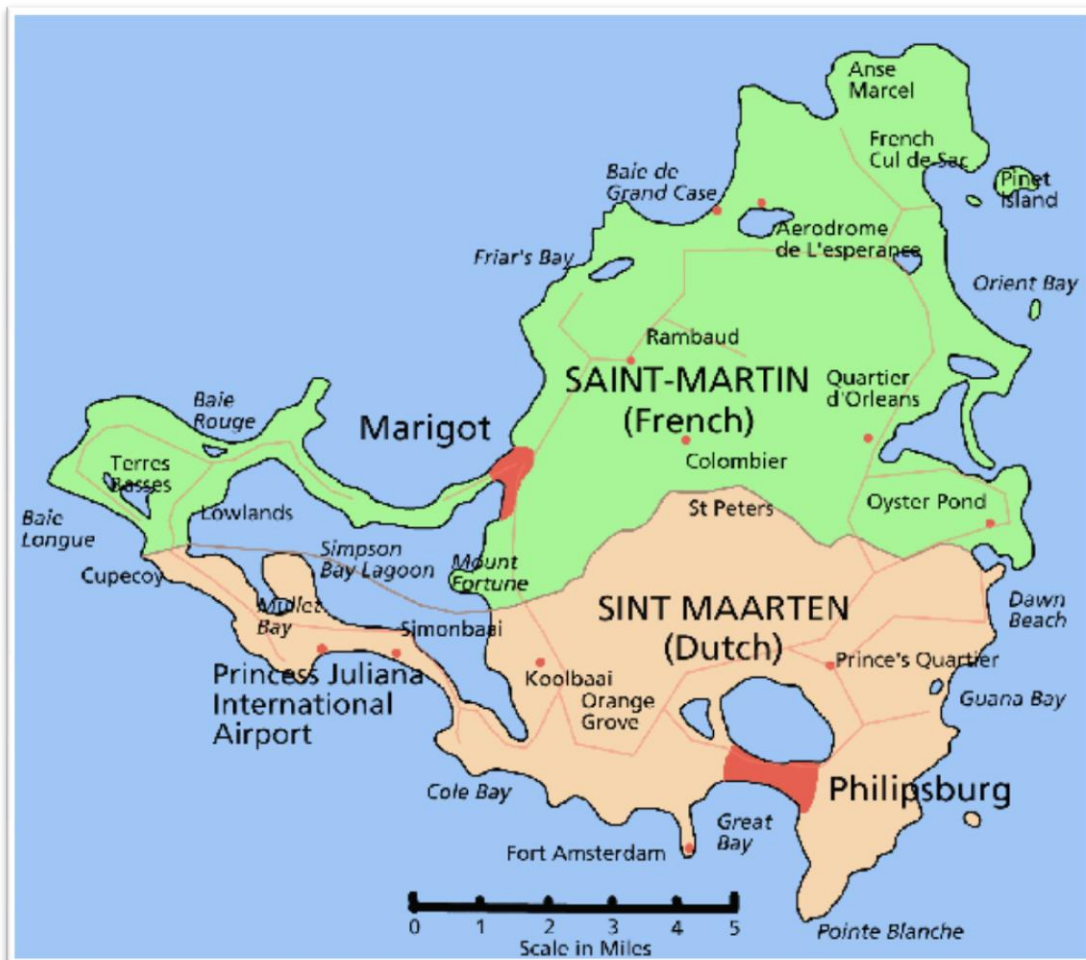
When I accepted the job at [St Maarten Zoological Park](#) I had never heard of St Maarten before. I didn't know anything about St Maarten and I couldn't even find it on the map. So I thought it might be handy to go through a brief geography lesson first to give you some idea of what I am talking about.



General Map of the Caribbean Islands (File Courtesy of [Wikipedia Commons](#))

As you are aware the Caribbean Islands are a group of islands between North America and South America. Looking at the map (above) you have Miami Florida, at the top left and some of the more familiar islands like Cuba and Jamaica; and Trinidad down the bottom near the South American coast. Then you have a string of small islands above that which are known as the Windward Islands because they face out towards the Atlantic Ocean. You can see St Martin right at the top of these small islands.

St Martin is a tiny island, it is 36 square miles. It is quite a mountainous island and it is also a very, very well, settled island.



The island of St Martin is divided into two nations (File Courtesy of [Wikipedia Commons](#))

One of the other interesting things about St Martin is that it is the smallest bit of land in the world that is actually divided between two nations. As I said before, the island is only 36 square miles; half the island is French and the other half of the island is Dutch. The story is that the Frenchman and the Dutchman set off on separate directions around the island and from the starting point to where they met on the other side, that is where they drew the line. When you are on the French side you are in France, the same as if you were in Paris, and all the French laws apply. When you are on the Dutch side it has changed slightly now, it is part of the Netherlands basically, but it is an independent country within the Netherlands. Don't ask me how that works but that is how it is now.

There are a number of salt ponds on the island. Philipsburg is the capital of the Dutch side of the island. There is a large salt pond on the northern side of Philipsburg and the zoo is on the other side of the salt pond.

It is a very mountainous island of volcanic origin like quite a number of the islands in the Caribbean Sea. Being volcanic it rose straight up out of the sea, and that has implications for the kind of wildlife on the island because it was never connected by land bridges to any of the big land masses. So basically any wildlife that is native to the island either flew there or swam there or floated there.

You might be surprised to learn is that there is not a huge amount of bird life on a lot of the Caribbean islands. There are some very unique birds on some of the islands but generally the islands are not teeming with bird life. If you were to go to Trinidad, which is an island right in the south of the Caribbean that used to be connected to South America by land bridges in the last ice-age, you really notice the difference in the amount of bird life because the South American fauna has made its way to Trinidad via the land bridges.

Another thing about St Maarten is that it is a very dry island. It is known as a desert island. It has no ground water, or no permanent ground water, there are a couple of creeks that run after rain, it's very scrubby and there is lots of cacti. I remember flying into St Maarten for the first time and looking out of the plane window expecting to see a tropical rain forest, and I saw these dry hills and cacti and very clearly remember wondering where all the forest was. So it was a bit of a surprise. There certainly are lots of forested islands in the Caribbean, but this is not one of them.



Philipsburg and the Great Bay (File courtesy of [Wikipedia Commons](#))

What it is known for is beautiful beaches. It has some stunning beaches and great weather.

The economy of the island was once based on salt. The salt ponds are actually divided up into squares. They used to use rocks to divide the ponds up and then they would harvest the salt and export that around the world. That was the main income for the island and of course initially they would have used slaves to harvest the salt so descendants on the island today are a mix of peoples, descendants from slaves and free men. The background is really mixed; it has changed hands a lot of times over a few hundred years. I think at different times it was Dutch, French, English and Spanish. That is kind of the story with a lot of the islands there.

On the French side of the Island they speak French, on the Dutch side of the island the official language is Dutch, but really most people there speak English. A lot of American tourists go there and it is not until you go somewhere like a police station or a post office where you get official forms in Dutch that you realise it is a Dutch island.

Tourism is how they make their money these days.

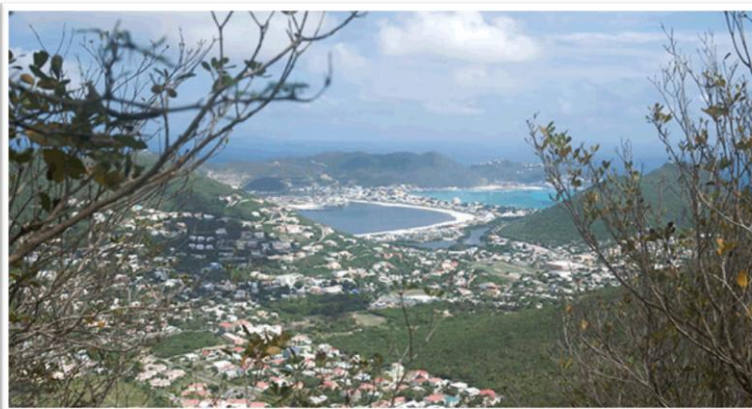


The Caribbean Princess - 1.3 million people a year arrive by cruise ships alone
(File Courtesy of [Wikipedia Commons](#))

They get a lot of cruise ships arrive; 1.3 million people a year arrive by cruise ships alone. On a busy day there can be up to eight ships in that port and each of those ships carry between three and four thousand people. Basically that equates to almost half the population of the island landing on the island for just the day. They just pour out of those cruise ships and we thought that, that was how we were going to make the zoo work, by organising tours with the people from the cruise ships because all of those people are just looking for something to do.

The main reason that tourists come to St Maarten are for the beautiful beaches, the duty free shopping and the Casinos and I will talk about it a little bit later, but those reasons for coming to the island are quite significant.

Some of you may have seen photos or videos with these enormous jets looking like they are just about landing on the beach. That is St Maarten. The runway is literally at the end of that beach and it is quite a sight to see these massive planes coming in. It is a very, very busy airport. There are jumbos arriving all day every day and they just about land on that beach. There is a road there (you can see some cars in the video). In my little zoo truck I had to wait at the end of the road because if there was a plane coming I would have been blown off straight onto the beach.



Those planes bring in another 500,000 tourists a year.

The other thing of course is that the population there is about 80,000 people split between the two sides of the island and so there is a lot of development on the island and it is in fact getting quite crowded.

Early Days

The photo (right) shows the entrance to the zoo which was opened in 1991 as a non profit community project and it ran that way for about 10 years.

It always bewildered me why they painted everything white like some 1960's hospital. Especially when you are in the Caribbean, the land of colour, but we soon put an end to that.



When I started there in 1998 the zoo was almost bankrupt and the place was very, very run down and overgrown.

During that first year that I was there it was privatised. It was bought out by a Frenchman, Franck and his wife Angelique.

That is myself there in the photo on the right with Franck and Angelique and a couple of the board members who were managing the zoo previously.



Franck had a zoo on the French island of Guadeloupe and he bought the zoo out as a business and that is when he made me a business partner. That is how I became a part owner of the zoo. I didn't actually invest any money in the zoo. I had the experience and the expertise and Franck was able to provide the finance for the zoo. What he offered me was kind of unique; he offered me a growing partnership where every year that I was there I got a larger share of the business financially.



So we set about brightening the place up, we used a lot of different colours. One of the things in the Caribbean is that too much colour is not enough so everything is painted bright colours.



We did the same thing with the playground, we made the shop a bright colourful place and we put those tiles on the floor from broken tiles that we had donated to us. We made this really groovy little bar called the Monkey Bar and painted it with cartoon monkeys.



We developed tours. Tours for the cruise ships most significantly. We developed night safaris where we took tours around at night, which was absolutely fantastic; but unfortunately it didn't really take off in a big way. We tried just about anything to get people to come along.





We tried different things on different days because you would never know what would attract people. We had Father Christmas, we had Creole dancers, we had a puppet show, we tried lots of different things and so slowly over time the zoo started to increase in visitation with the local people but also with a number of tourists coming on tours.

About the Zoo

It is a tiny little zoo, it is only three acres but we managed to cram an awful lot in there.



The theme of the zoo was the South American tropics and most of the animals are from the South American tropics. We did have a few "ring ins" there. We had Hamadryas baboons which are African, and some of the birds we had were also African, and a few Australian birds in there as well.



The zoo had some really amazing species. Things like the ocelot there and these guys on the right (above) are bush dogs. I had never even heard of bush dogs before. They are these weird little South American canids, they are like wild corgis. They live in the rainforest, they have webbed feet and they are great swimmers. They are very rare in captivity but there is a species management programme for them and St Maarten Zoo is part of that, and we had a pair of the bush dogs there.



Cotton-top tamarin (above left), Capybaras (above right).



Jamaican fruit bats, we had a fantastic nocturnal exhibit for our bats (left), the Coati, which is a type of raccoon (above top right) and Golden Lion Tamarins, we were part of the international programme for those.



Peccaries and raccoons. But even though we had those amazing species there, it really felt as if the zoo was missing something, and of course what it was missing was birds. So Franck bought a large private parrot collection off a guy on the island. There were about 200 birds of different species, mostly parrots, but some other interesting birds amongst those as well.



They pretty much all arrived in these suspended cages (above) that were on these rickety stands. So although we had this great collection of birds, and they certainly brought a lot of ambience and noise to the place, we obviously had to do something with the way that they were presented.



This is one of the guys, Lusnor, he was a zoo keeper, but he had a construction background and there was nothing this guy couldn't do. So we tuned our old petting zoo area into a shaded walkway where we presented all of the suspended cages with the parrots in and we ended up with quite nice presentation of them.



We put the cages in a nice frame and on a nice base.

To be honest with you I can't remember all the species that we had but there were various Amazons, there were different kinds of Eclectus, there were lovebirds, it was quite an interesting mix.



We built stands for the our Macaws and we had a lot of Macaws, I think we ended up with nearly 30 Green-winged Macaws, probably about 10 or 15 Blue-and-golds and we also had Scarlet Macaws and we could not stop them breeding. I will talk about that later.



We had this little rocky outcrop that we tried to turn into an orchid display but it hadn't really worked. So we got some sponsorship and we dug a moat around it and we turned it into an island for our Squirrel monkeys. It is quite a narrow little moat as you can see in the photo (above).



We ended up with this beautiful little Squirrel monkey display and it worked very well for them, it was quite a fantastic little display.



We also invested a lot of time in taking care of the gardens, pruning back the trees and cleaning the pathways, and just making the place look more presentable. So it ended up a really attractive little zoo.

That is Delphine and Prudence, two of the girls who worked in the shop and the office, always looking completely glamorous. I think they were totally ashamed of me because I always looked like a complete slob in shorts and a T-shirt.



All of the improvements that we did were done in-house with a tiny team, there were six of us. Prudence took care of the shop and she also looked after the reptiles, the guys did the construction work but they also did all of the zoo keeping work. On the left are some aviaries that Lusnor and Wesner are building, some viewing into the Macaw aviary there, we had about 17 or 18 Green-winged Macaws in that aviary. And like I said, all of this on top of our day to day chores that we usually do.



There we are putting up signs because the zoo was very well hidden down a side road, so we had to make sure that people could find us. Before the signage people would sometimes spend days trying to find us.



Some of the other bird species that we had as well as the parrots, we had Spectacle Owls which are an amazing South American owl species, and we had Black-bellied Whistling Ducks.



We had Coscoroba Swans which are very interesting swan. They are actually more related to the Whistling Ducks I think. They are a swan but they are not really a swan, they are sort of half and half in-between.

Several Amazons. We've got Yellow-fronted, a lot of Blue-fronted, Red-fronted, Hispaniolans, Barbadosis which are the ones found off Venezuela and are quite a rare species.



Scarlet Ibis and Red-billed Toucans. The Toucans were part of that parrot collection that came in.



The Channel-billed Toucan. These birds are my favourite. They are really the most stunning birds. They are just such great birds to work with, so much personality and so much character about them, they were a real joy.



Coming back to the Macaws and what I said a little earlier, the Macaws just bred and bred and bred. It sounds fantastic but when you are on an island you have no way of selling these birds. Exporting Macaws to America is like sending coals to Newcastle. They are only worth about \$600 or \$800US each over there I think and by the time you exported them it just wasn't worth doing. I actually put more energy into stopping the Macaws from breeding rather than encouraging them to breed. I know that is hard to believe in Australia.

In the photo on the right (above) are the parrot stands. I had 10 Macaws on those stands. The pair you can see on the left (above) just nested on the ground up against the wall, so I put a piece of tin over them and they successfully raised the youngsters they have there. Interestingly with the Green-wings, they are very social, so they would all come together and socialise, but they all each had their own stand where they would go back to, and when this particular pair were nesting they would defend that immediate area around that piece of tin and around their stand and the other birds would just carry on as usual. So they had it all pretty much worked out.



In the photo (above) you can see Wesner with a handful of baby Macaws. This is another pair that that nested that would be back on eggs as soon as the chicks fledged. They just bred non stop.



In the photo (above) we have Scarlet Macaws, the family went up into the tree, they would often go up into a tree and then they would come down again in the evening.

Everything seemed to be falling into place. The zoo was looking good and there were more and more people coming. Most importantly we had established tours off the tour ships so we had people coming by buses on organised tours so they would do a two hour tour of the island and one hour of that was spent at the zoo with a tour guide to look around the zoo and we would obviously get a cut of that tour.

My decision to return to Australia

Sale of tours to the cruise ship market was a very hard market to break into. Basically it was what the island existed on. Once we got the tours going we thought that the zoo would do very well, would employ enough staff and I would be able to run the zoo from the beach and just call in once or twice a day to see how things were going. That was the dream. However, it just didn't happen. After five years the visitor numbers had continued to increase significantly and we had got to a point where we were just breaking even, and then the numbers just plateaued and they didn't go up after that.



I was living on site. That is the walk back to the bar in the photo (above) and my apartment was on the other side of the bar so I was living right in the middle of the zoo and working 12 to 15 hours a day. You can only do that for so long and I was completely burnt out. It was really clear to me that the zoo was never going to be a profitable business or even a business that could be run in a way that we could afford to employ the amount of staff that we needed so that we all didn't have to work so hard and everyone was working particularly long days just to get through everything.

What I learned through the cruise ship industry is that the islands are marketed on all of these cruise ships and they are all marketed with a particular slant. When people get onto those ships they think okay we are going to go to St Kitts we are going to do our nature thing there because it is all rainforests; an another island we are going to do all of the historical things; and when they go to St Maarten they go for the beaches, the duty free shopping and the casinos. So having a tourist operation which is based around nature or animals, it was difficult to make it onto people's radar and so you would get the small end of the market where people may be a little bit interested in that, but the bulk of the market were more interested in going to Front Street and buying jewellery duty free. Beaches, duty free shopping and casinos were the pull of the island and that was the reason that the zoo was struggling.

I made the decision to leave the zoo, I had been there five years, and it was a really heartbreaking decision because I had invested so much into that place. We had a very small team and we all worked very hard together and so it was really hard to leave everyone there and move on, but there was no light at the end of the tunnel for me. All I could see into the future was continuing to work so hard on the place in order to keep it running and that couldn't be maintained.



St Maarten Zoo is still open and most of the core staff are still there. That is Prudence (on the left) she is still there working in the shop and with the reptiles and Wesner (on the right) is still there as a keeper, he is a really good bird keeper actually.



Lusnor (above left) he is the guy that did all the buildings, there with a young tortoise, and Jean who has been there forever.



Delphine (above left) singing there in front of the Monkey Bar, that was another thing that we used to do. Actually Delphine has gone back to Holland now which is where the family is.

Franck and Angelique, they sold the zoo in 2009 I think it was. They sold the zoo to an American Company. They still manage the zoo in Guadeloupe and they have also got a zoo down in French Guiana in the northern part of South America.

(Graeme thanked Nick for his very interesting presentation. Members responded with a few further questions for Nick and their appreciation of his presentation.)

Questions

Is there any quarantine for animals coming in?

It depends. The quarantine is done beforehand. For instance there has to be a certificate to say that it has come from a rabies free area and there has to be some testing done when they first arrive. But is certainly not as strict as it is in Australia.

How are the Macaws housed?

In a number of different ways. A lot of them are on those stands that you saw. They are wing clipped, so we would have to catch them every month, we would leave the last two primaries so they still looked good when the wings were folded, but they would only have to grow a couple of primaries and they could fly and take off over the fence. The guys got really good at catching them and clipping their wings.

I was really pleased with the staff there because when I started there they basically followed instructions but running the zoo on my own I needed a team that could take some responsibility and manage the place when I was off doing things. Rather than me having to go into a hardware store and buy materials for all the things that needed to be fixed it got to the point where if the guys needed something they would go to the shop and get the money from the shop girl, go and get what they needed and come back with the receipt and fix it. So I would learn about it after it had been done. Probably my proudest moment about that place was when I came back to Australia for four weeks at one time and I came back to St Maarten not knowing what to expect and perhaps needing a lot of work. I walked around the zoo and I had nothing to say because the place looked terrific. Those guys had looked after the zoo in my absence and they had the skills and the confidence to manage it for four weeks and it did not slide at all and I think that, that showed that they were a great team of people and they had the abilities to do that.

Channel-billed Toucans, how were they housed? They are a fascinating bird, the Toucans, aren't they?

They are a very fascinating bird. The Channel-bills were actually in the walk-through aviary. The photo that is displayed above where the Scarlet Ibis are, I had a single Channel-bill and that was in there. It had quite a large enclosure that was nicely planted. The Red-billed Toucans, that is actually a shot that I got afterwards. I tried to get that pair together but the male beat up the female within an inch of her life and I thought I was going to lose her. I was never able to get them together but clearly they are living together now so that is great. It would have been a real dream to breed Toucans.

From an evolution point of view, why do they have a beak such as that?

I expect that in the rainforest they use it for signalling and the other thing is that, that bill is very light, and it is like an extension arm. So if they are out on a tree that produces figs on very fine branches, they are quite a big bird so they can sit on a branch and reach out with their beak and pluck the fig.

Did you ever consider having a free flight bird show with all the different types of birds that you had?

That would have been fantastic. We just didn't have the resources. There was no one including myself who had the skills to train the birds to do that kind of show and we just didn't have the time.

You mentioned before that the island is dry and there is no above ground water. Where did you get your water from?

The water is all desalinated seawater. There is a big desalination plant there and the water is very, very expensive, so the water was our biggest bill.

Did you get much rain there?

We get a bit of rain in the wet season so when it rained it really did rain. We built some water tanks which were basically big rubber vats and we attached drainage from the roofs. So we did have quite big water storage areas and we used that for watering the plants. The gardens were very dry when we got there and the trees were all quite stunted, but once we got them on an irrigation system we made it quite a shady place. One of the complaints about the place in the early days was that it was very hot but once we got that irrigation going the trees certainly did grow up. Water and electricity are very expensive.

Diets?

We fed great diets; we imported all of our diets from the states, different diets for all the different species. We had deals with the local supermarkets so we would go and collect all the fruit and vegetables that were too far gone to sell maybe, but the guys would bring it back and pick through it. So the food they got was all good, they would just throw out all the bad bits. Consequently the animals there got an incredible array of fruit and vegetables because basically everything came back to the zoo from the supermarkets.

How did you find out about the zoo before you went to work there?

It was advertised through Peter Dickenson's zoo network online. He often had zoo jobs that were offering around the world and he just advertised in on there.

Where were you when you applied?

I was actually in Morocco. I was doing some work there on a Houbara Bustard breeding programme and spent a few months there. I was looking for something to do from there and I was thinking probably more of things in the states and this came up. You know how it is, timing, and as you used to say Graeme; you have got to put yourself in the way of opportunity. So I thought something over in that part of the world might be a good place to be for a while.

What is your favourite bird at the moment?

It changes all the time. At the moment it is Masked Lovebirds because I have got eight of them at home at the moment.

It is interesting having the opportunity to work overseas and work with all these fantastic species, but it taught me that you have to appreciate and really love what you have. You look at the species that you have here and you think it would be great to have all these exotic species, but you go over to the States and everyone wants Australian species, and to them we are looking after some of the best birds in the world. So it is all relative. In the States you'll see Orange-cheeked Waxbills that will cost you about \$10US each whereas here they are a couple of thousand dollars a pair, so it has really taught me to appreciate what is available in the country. But having said that, after working with Toucans and working with Hornbills, I think that if that was a group of birds that I could bring into Australia, they would definitely be the ones.

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