

In the Political Crosshairs

2025

10

Species jeopardized by
politicians in Congress



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Introduction

For over fifty years, the Endangered Species Act (ESA) has ensured the survival of vulnerable animals and plants. One of our most effective laws, 99% of species protected under the ESA have avoided extinction. Now fully recovered, bald eagles were nearly lost forever before science-based conservation measures ensured their recovery. More than a thousand species, worldwide, have received vital protection and recovery commitments under the ESA. Iconic species like the gray wolf and grizzly bear had been eradicated from 99% of their habitat in the United States, and the ESA has inspired their reintroduction and ongoing recovery efforts.

It is also one of our most beloved laws. Americans across political ideologies favor wildlife conservation afforded by the ESA: 84% of Americans support it, 80% support fully funding it, and 70% believe that species listing decisions should be made by scientists, not politicians.

Despite its success and popularity, attacks by politicians in Congress on the ESA are second only to the Affordable Care Act. Powerful industries and anti-government activists have long targeted the ESA as an obstacle to development. Backed by deep-pocketed lobbyists, they've pressured Congress and the White House to weaken its protections. During President Trump's first term (2017 – 2021), industry allies re-wrote the rules, drastically undermining how the ESA was managed and enforced.

Many of these policies were reversed by President Biden (2021- 2025), restoring science-based management of the ESA. Since returning to the White House in 2025, President Trump has again wreaked havoc on America's favorite legislation. New policies prioritize drilling, mining, and logging, while sidelining protections for threatened and endangered species. In one of the most brazen attacks yet, Trump appointees are proposing that destroying habitat doesn't count as "harm" under the ESA, even though habitat loss is the leading driver of extinction.

Meanwhile, some politicians in Congress are changing the law itself to make these abuses permanent. Crafted by a small group of powerful politicians to appease billionaire donors, the "*ESA Amendments Act*" will eliminate species safeguards, weaken scientific standards, turn industry reviews into a "rubber stamp," and cripple the ESA's ability to protect species. Other legislative proposals seek to sidestep the ESA entirely and remove protections for iconic species such as the gray wolf and grizzly.

In this report, we provide updates on ten species featured in previous Endangered Species Coalition reports — "*No Room to Roam: 10 American Species in Need of Connectivity and Corridors*" (2015), "*Extinction Plan: Ten Species Imperiled by the Trump Administration*" (2018), "*Last Chance: Ten U.S. Species Already Imperiled by Climate Change*" (2021), and "*Ten Stories of Hope: The Endangered Species Act at 50*" (2023) — and explain how politicians in Congress could eliminate the very protections that save them from extinction.

1 West Indian manatee



“Manatees and seagrass communities have co-evolved over millions of years. Uncontrolled development, lax regulation, and pollution from Florida’s growing human population have fueled the cycle of algae blooms that cause seagrass loss.”

-Patrick Rose, Aquatic Biologist and Executive Director, Save the Manatee Club

West Indian Manatee

Trichechus manatus

Life is slow and sweet for sea cows: eating, relaxing, slow winter swims in warm southern waters, gliding to the surface every 20 minutes for the next breath. This plant-eating, fully aquatic mammal's closest relatives span a curious spectrum from the lumbering elephant to a pudgy, round-eared, tailless rabbit-looking creature called hyrax.



The West Indian manatee, including the Florida manatee subspecies (*T. manatus latirostris*), weighs in at an easy one thousand pounds and can live up to 60 years. With few natural predators, manatees only faced serious threats when humans altered their habitats. And although watercraft collisions, propeller cuts, drowning by canal locks, and suffocation by fishing gear are significantly impacting manatee numbers, the biggest threats to manatees are red tide, algae blooms, and water pollution.

Excerpt adapted from “Extinction Plan: Ten Species Imperiled by the Trump Administration,” 2018

In 2017, the Trump Administration downgraded manatees to “threatened,” removed slow-speed zones, and weakened the Environmental Protection Agency’s water quality rules and pollution restrictions. The consequences were devastating: massive seagrass die-offs, which are manatees’ primary food source, resulted in a 20% population decline. The “*ESA Amendments Act*” will have serious consequences for manatees, making it nearly impossible to regain protections against water pollution, shifting the decision-making from scientists to political appointees, protecting developers, and blocking protections. It’s one of the broadest attacks on the ESA we’ve seen, and if passed, we could lose manatees forever.

Population
~12,000

Status
Threatened

Range
Florida and the Caribbean

Habitat
Both fresh and salt water



2 Piping Plover

“Having an awareness that these beaches are living ecosystems makes for a more enriched experience. It’s not just about the sun and surf — this is somebody’s home. The piping plovers, they’re New Yorkers too.”

*-Chris Allieri, Founder and Director of the
NYC Plover Project*



Piping Plover

Charadrius melodus

A newly hatched piping plover weighs less than a nickel! This tiny cotton puff on sticks faces a month of beach life dodging gulls, foxes, feral cats, and other predators before it can fly. Our feet, flying frisbees, and friendly dogs can destroy a nest. Plovers need their caloric reserves to fly great distances. Every flushed bird burns precious energy needed for survival and migration. Few chicks survive the first month.

All U.S. plover populations were listed under the ESA in 1985, when fewer than 8,000 Atlantic Coast birds were left, including just 476 breeding pairs. By 2004, the coastal population boasted 519 breeding pairs, and by 2019, 1,818 pairs—all thanks to the ESA.

Piping plovers remain far from fully recovered on these beaches and serve as an indicator species: their presence or absence reflects the health of coastal and prairie shoreline habitats. Their story tells a bigger story of how human activity shapes—and can protect—the natural world we share.

***Excerpt adapted from “Ten Stories of Hope:
The Endangered Species Act at 50,” 2023***

Piping plovers have benefited from the ESA’s “blanket rule,” which provides automatic baseline protections for populations listed as threatened, instead of endangered, under the ESA. This allows for clear and immediate protections while agency experts consider whether to develop species-specific protections for them. With the “*ESA Amendments Act*,” politicians in Congress have proposed to eliminate the “blanket rule” forever. Without this rule, piping plovers would face a higher risk of habitat loss, nest failure, and population decline because safeguards are no longer automatic. Their recovery could slip out of reach.

Population

Between 7,600 to 8,400 mature individuals

Status

Threatened (Atlantic Coast population)

Endangered (Northern Plains and Great Lakes populations)

Range

Atlantic populations from Maritime Canada to the Carolinas; Inland populations in the Northern Great Plains and Great Lakes regions

Habitat

Sandy, gravelly beaches with nesting sites near water



3 Hellbender

“Strong federal protections for the Eastern Hellbender wouldn’t just guarantee their existence for future generations, it would be an ambitious step to protecting clean water for communities across Appalachia.”

*-Dalton George, National Grassroots Organizer,
Endangered Species Coalition*

Hellbender

Cryptobranchus alleganiesis

The Eastern Hellbender breathes through its slimy, mud-colored, sometimes speckled skin and spends its entire life beneath one river rock in shallow, slow-moving streams. These ancient wrinkled mudpuppies tip the scale at 5 pounds and steal the hearts of all who know them.

Hellbenders feast on insects and small fish, and are eaten, in turn, by snakes, turtles, and larger fish. They are a vital indicator of water quality—thriving only in the cleanest of streams. When their habitat deteriorates, they disappear. Hellbenders have been around for tens of thousands of years, but populations have dropped by as much as 70% across most of their range. Water pollution, dams, and disease are the leading threats to hellbender survival. More and more are being found crushed as people mine river rocks and look for these salamanders. Eastern hellbenders lay between 100 and 300 eggs beneath the stones people stack and play with; entire generations can be lost in an instant.

Excerpt adapted from “Extinction Plan: Ten Species Imperiled by the Trump Administration,” 2018

Endangered Species Act protections could make the difference between life and death for hellbenders. As of spring 2025, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is moving to finalize its status as endangered. Just as hope builds, politicians in Congress may strip away the parts of the Endangered Species Act that would save them.

The consultation process is a cornerstone of the Endangered Species Act. It ensures the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reviews industry impacts on endangered species, such as water pollution and dams, and requires measures to avoid damage and protect their habitats. But politicians are trying to turn this into a meaningless “rubber stamp” gesture, replacing science with political convenience, locking in harmful industry practices. For sensitive species like these salamanders, any changes in water quality are dangerous and will push them that much closer to the brink.

Population

Unknown: Of the 700 distinct populations, 40% have been extirpated, and 40% are rapidly declining

Status

Proposed listing as endangered throughout its range

Range


New York to Mississippi and Virginia to Illinois

Habitat

Fast-flowing, well-oxygenated rivers and streams



4 Rusty patched bumble bee



“Addressing the threats that the rusty patched bumble bee faces will help not only this species, but countless other native pollinators that are so critical to the functioning of natural ecosystems and agriculture.”

*-Rich Hatfield, Senior Conservation Biologist,
Xerces Society*

Rusty patched bumble bee

Bombus affinis

This bumble bee is a powerhouse pollinator, working crops like blueberries, cherries, plums, tomatoes, eggplants, and peppers, with a buzz-pollination shimmy that honey bees can't match. It has vanished from nearly 90% of its range, driven out by disease, pesticides, and habitat degradation—especially the destruction of tall-grass prairies and heavy use of neonicotinoids, a pesticide banned in other parts of the world.

Excerpt adapted from “Extinction plan: Ten Species Imperiled by the Trump Administration,” 2018



When the rusty patched bumble bee was listed under the Endangered Species Act, it triggered the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to produce a rigorous, science-based conservation plan and map the places most vital to its survival. These “critical habitats” mark where the rusty patched bumble bees live, and where conservation efforts matter most. These maps revealed that the majority of these bees live on privately owned lands.

However, politicians in Congress are trying to exclude privately owned land from critical habitat designations under the Endangered Species Act. The “*ESA Amendments Act*” would give private landowners a free pass to degrade vital habitats, and discourage willing landowners from accessing conservation support and incentives that would save the rusty patched bumble bee. Instead, it would allow the continued and unbridled use of neonicotinoids and other insecticides that kill bees directly or significantly impair their reproduction, further driving the population steeply downward.

Population

Unknown: In the last 20 years, the bees' population has declined by 87%, with a 90% decline in its historical range.

Status

Endangered

Range

Eastern and Upper Midwest United States


Habitat

Grasslands and tall-grass prairies, woodlands, and pastures





5 Gray wolf


“Removing protection for wolves would reverse the recovery of one of our most beloved species and take us back to a time when wolves were shot, trapped, and poisoned until they disappeared from the landscape. Endangered Species Act protections remain key to ensuring gray wolves return to the American landscape where they belong.”

-Susan Holmes, Executive Director,
Endangered Species Coalition

Gray wolf

Canis lupus

It is estimated that some two million gray wolves roamed North America in the early 1800s, before white settlers began to wipe them out. Few were left by the 1920s, and virtually none remained in a huge ecosystem of more than 20 million acres of intact wilderness spanning Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho. Yellowstone National Park was the centerpiece of this landscape, and it was here that the Endangered Species Act cleared a path to restore wolves to the West with wolf reintroductions in Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho in 1995.

Native Americans have always revered wolves, regarding them as powerful spirits and supernatural guardians. The Nez Perce tribe was the first tribe in U.S. history to contract with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to undertake the field work and monitoring of wolves in Idaho. Thanks to these reintroduction efforts, wolf packs have been bringing balance back to Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho. The film, “Lost Wolves of Yellowstone: (2025), followed the 1995 reintroduction and was a sobering story of how removing wolves led to the absence of everything from beavers to songbirds.

Excerpt adapted from “Ten Stories of Hope: The Endangered Species Act at 50,” 2023

Gray wolves are a keystone species. Their removal causes a chain reaction that negatively impacts the ecosystem, as seen in Yellowstone National Park. An explosion in elk populations led to a significant decline in willow and aspen trees and the near disappearance of songbirds and beavers. Rivers changed course, wetlands no longer purified water, and habitats for fish and amphibians were destroyed.

Politicians in Congress would upend this balance. They want to strip away protections for gray wolves, ignoring science and silencing the courts. If successful, we could be dragged back to a time when wolves were shot, trapped, and poisoned until they disappear from the wild once more. Recovery efforts would stall, leaving states without the federal support to restore wolves to the places they still belong. When politics tramples science, critical conservation efforts collapse. One of America’s great conservation success stories—the return of the gray wolf—could unravel before our eyes.

Population

Fewer than 7,000 in the lower 48 states

Status

Endangered in the lower 48; Minnesota population listed as threatened; delisted in the Northern Rockies

Range

Alaska, Pacific Northwest, Northern Rocky Mountains, Colorado, Western Great Lakes states

Habitat

Woodlands, forests, grasslands, deserts, tundra



6 Leatherback and Loggerhead sea turtles



“Endangered turtles face too many threats around the world. The U.S. needs to set the example of responsible stewardship for this iconic species when they are on our watch.”

-Susan Murray, Deputy Vice President, U.S. Pacific at Oceana

Pacific leatherback sea turtle

Dermochelys coriacea

Loggerhead sea turtle

Caretta caretta



Leatherbacks and loggerheads share extraordinary journeys. Leatherbacks cross entire oceans between breeding and feeding grounds. Loggerheads swim thousands of miles in their journey from juvenile to adulthood. Along their migrations, these sea turtles help keep their ocean habitats in balance and enrich beaches where they nest by depositing minerals into the sand. They even fuel local economies: one loggerhead center in Florida generates nearly \$60 million in tourism each year.

Yet these ancient mariners are in grave danger. Thousands are killed every year by fishing nets and other human activities. Only a portion of their sea-and-sand habitats are currently protected, and climate change further threatens their already vulnerable habitats.

Excerpt adapted from “Extinction Plan: Ten Species Imperiled by the Trump Administration,” 2018

Leatherback sea turtles regulate jellyfish populations, preventing what’s known as a trophic cascade. Without these top predators, jellyfish multiply unchecked and consume large quantities of fish eggs—the foundation of many marine food webs. The loss of leatherbacks thus ripples through the ecosystem, ultimately threatening fish populations, ocean health, and local fishing economies. Simply put, we need leatherback sea turtles to keep the marine ecosystem in balance.

Unfortunately, the “*ESA Amendments Act*” would fast-track the removal of these two species from the endangered list, remove science from all policy decision-making, and strip sea turtles of critical habitat protections essential for their survival. These changes to the ESA would accelerate an already declining population of both leatherback and loggerhead sea turtles.

Leatherback Turtle Population

Between 34,000 and 94,000 adults; once numbered several million; populations experiencing a 40-90% decline

Status

Endangered

Range

California to Malaysia, Mexico, and South America

Habitat

Terrestrial (nesting beaches), coastal and open ocean (juveniles and adults)

Loggerhead Turtle Population

Currently 50,000; once numbered several million

Status

Threatened

Range

Temperate habitats in the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans

Habitat

Terrestrial (nesting beaches), estuarine and open ocean

7 Western yellow-billed cuckoo



“There is no question that if we want to save this increasingly rare bird, we’re going to have to do more than protect the bare minimum habitat.”

*-Steve Holmer, Vice President of Policy,
American Bird Conservancy*

Western yellow-billed cuckoo

Coccyzus americanus occidentalis

This cuckoo spends its summers in the wilds of the western United States, where rivers wind through whispering willows and towering cottonwoods. Found close to flowing water in native forests and dense understories, their insect prey, like caterpillars and cicadas, as well as amphibians such as frogs, are plentiful in this habitat. In the non-breeding season, this generalist will also eat fruit and seeds.

This migratory bird's nocturnal migration crosses deserts, mountains, the Gulf of Mexico, and riparian forests—from the Amazon basin to the Western U.S. The remarkable journey that sets this cuckoo apart from many other North American birds requires a protein and nutrient-rich diet and large swaths of connected habitat for ample rest along the route.

The western yellow-billed cuckoo is becoming a ghost of the western landscape. When this iconic bird finally received Endangered Species Act protection in 2014, this started a process to evaluate the science and designate its critical habitats for protection. In 2021, nearly 300,000 acres of streamside habitat needed for breeding, nesting, and feeding were officially designated as critical and protected.

Excerpt adapted from “Extinction Plan: Ten Species Imperiled by the Trump Administration,” 2018

Scientists are writing a new and exciting chapter for the threatened western yellow-billed cuckoo. In 2024, researchers found western yellow-billed cuckoos nesting in arid groves of oak, mesquite, and juniper trees. As droughts become more common in the western United States, this adaptability is exciting. New science about the species would inform updates to critical habitat protections, but not if politicians in Congress have their way. They are trying to prevent new information like this from being used to modify habitat protections. When every altered river, every forest cleared, and every acre grazed by livestock diminishes the western yellow-billed cuckoo's chances of survival, we should be using the best, most updated science – not forbidding its use.

Population

680 to 1,025 breeding pairs remain

Status

Threatened

Range

Southwestern United States

Habitat

Riparian Woodlands



8 Monarch butterfly



"If we don't have milkweed, we won't have monarchs."

-Wendy Caldwell, Executive Director of Monarch Joint Venture

Monarch butterfly

Danaus plexippus

Not long ago, up to a billion monarch butterflies painted our skies each summer. Curtains of tawny orange and black against a blue sky were a sight to behold. Their collapse into crisis has made headlines for the past 20 years, with 80% of monarchs gone. California counted millions of these painted pollinators in the late 1990s; but by 2020, only 2,000 were spotted in the state—a count likely signaling pending extinction.

Monarchs are the only butterflies known to make a round-trip migration. Those west of the Rockies travel hundreds of miles to winter in southern California, while monarchs in the east fly thousands of miles, from Canada to central Mexico. Even more astonishing, a monarch can return to the very tree that sheltered its great-great-grandparent the winter before. But that's not the end of the story for this remarkable feat.

The return trip in the spring is completed by several generations that hatch at milkweed-rich stops along the way. This milkweed is the only thing the caterpillars eat; it's essential for a successful return. With the introduction of glyphosate (commonly known as Roundup®) in the mid-1970s, milkweed has nearly disappeared from the U.S. agricultural heartland, over which the majority of monarchs migrate. Without milkweed, no new generations can survive the energetically expensive trip.

Excerpt adapted from “Last Chance: Ten U.S. Species Already Imperiled by Climate Change,” 2021

The monarch butterfly is currently being reviewed for protection under the Endangered Species Act. National-level protections would bring more resources and cross-state coordination to restore milkweed habitats and reduce pesticide use. While many meaningful voluntary efforts to plant milkweed and nectar plants are underway in communities across the country, historic large-scale milkweed loss and pesticide-poisoned plants continue to outpace these restoration efforts.

Politicians in Congress are doing big agriculture's bidding to gut the Endangered Species Act, so that the law would no longer be able to put limits on the industry's use of chemicals like glyphosate and other pesticides. If they change the ESA, it would put all the power in industry's hands over whether we will ever again see skies full of Monarch butterflies.

Population

Fluctuating: population has declined by approximately 80% over the last 20 years

Status

Under review for listing

Range


United States, Mexico, and parts of Canada

Habitat

Summer in open meadows, gardens, and agricultural areas; Winter in protected, temperate forests



9 Southern Sea Otter



“Sea otters encourage healthy marine systems. They keep kelp-grazing sea urchin populations in check, which otherwise decimate kelp forests that provide homes to a wide variety of unique marine life.”

*-Andrew Johnson, California Representative,
Defenders of Wildlife*

Southern Sea Otter

Enhydra lutris nereis

The sea otter is a keystone species. As an ecosystem engineer, its job is to keep its entire ecosystem healthy and balanced.

Without sea otters, sea urchins and crabs – its favorite prey – decimate kelp forests, wiping out food and shelter for countless species. Thousands of invertebrates, fish, birds, and mammals are affected, as are fisheries and nearby coastal communities. It's a classic example of trophic cascades: removing them compromises everything from near-shore biodiversity to local economies.



Sea otters have the densest fur of any mammal on Earth – up to a million hairs per square inch. Fur traders called it “soft gold,” and their obsession with it nearly wiped out otters. By the late 1800s, fewer than 2,000 remained. By 1920, California’s population was believed to be extinct. In 1937, a raft of 50 otters was spotted off the rocky cliffs at Big Sur, 2,000 miles from their nearest relatives. An immediate stop to direct exploitation is what saved them. Hunting, harvesting, and fishing species faster than they can reproduce is one of the top drivers of extinction on Earth.

Excerpt adapted from “Ten Stories of Hope: The Endangered Species Act at 50,” 2023

Powerful tools exist to stop direct exploitation. We have enforceable laws to combat the illegal wildlife trade and proven methods of restoring habitats, both of which are critical for saving species. Sea otters first gained protection in 1911 when four countries signed the first international wildlife protection treaty. In the 1970s, they received even stronger safeguards after the Endangered Species and Marine Mammal Protection Acts were passed. Their population has grown slowly since receiving these protections.

But now, proposed changes to the Endangered Species Act aim to weaken these protections. “Incidental take permits” would no longer be required to undergo any meaningful review, allowing the southern sea otter and other listed species to be harmed or even killed by industrial activity in their ocean habitats. Worse, they could lose their habitat altogether—creating a real danger of extinction for these critical ecosystem engineers.

Population

3,000 individuals

Status

Endangered

Range

Central California coast from San Matteo County in the north to near Santa Barbara in the south

Habitat

Nearshore kelp forests



10 Grizzly bear



“Grizzly bears are one of the slowest reproducing mammals on the planet, and a population decline can take decades to reverse.”

-Derek Goldman, former National Field Director, Endangered Species Coalition

Grizzly bear

Ursus arctos horribilis

Grizzly bears used to roam throughout the American West, but by the early 1900s, they'd been shot, poisoned, and trapped out of most of the country. When the grizzly bear was listed under the Endangered Species Act in 1975, only about 150 remained in the Yellowstone National Park area. Today, about 1,000 bears live in and around the park.



The Yellowstone grizzly bear's comeback is a success story of the Endangered Species Act. But Yellowstone's bears are still isolated from other grizzlies, which spells trouble for their genetic diversity and long-term viability. Genetic diversity helps animals fight off diseases and adapt to other threats. The Yellowstone bears need safe wildlife corridors so they can breed with other grizzly bears in Montana, Idaho, and Washington.

Excerpt adapted from "No Room to Roam: 10 American Species in Need of Connectivity and Corridors," 2015

Logging, development, and roads fragment grizzly habitat, breaking up forests and meadows and reducing access to food sources such as berries, nuts, deer, and elk. In January 2025, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recognized that more work needs to be done to connect grizzly bear populations and reintroduce bears to suitable habitats, including Washington's North Cascades and the Bitterroot ecosystem in Idaho. Keeping grizzly bears protected under the Endangered Species Act is crucial to this next step of their recovery. Short-sighted politicians are pushing to eliminate protections for Yellowstone's grizzlies and cancel reintroduction plans. If successful, bears outside of Yellowstone would be the target of trophy hunters, and these majestic bears would never return to the wild places they once roamed. Today, grizzlies continue to be threatened by habitat loss, weakened protections, human conflict, and ecological stress, all of which hinder recovery and increase the risk of extinction.

Population

Approximately 1,500 in the lower 48 states

Status

Threatened, delisting efforts continue

Range

Alaska, pockets in the northwest including Washington, Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming; Historically ranged from Canada to Mexico.

Habitat

Forests, meadows, proximity to streams and rivers



Select Additional Resources

- Conservation Letters “*Support for the U.S. Endangered Species Act Is High and Steady Over the Past Three Decades*,” June 14, 2025
- USFWS Fact Sheet “*West Indian Manatee*”
- Data Zone Birdlife Fact Sheet “*Piping Plover*”
- USFWS Fact Sheet “*Hellbender*”
- Virginia DWR Fact Sheet “*Rusty Patched Bumble Bee*,” Colorado State University, April 4, 2024
- Living With Wolves Museum “*Gray Wolf*”
- Earthjustice “*A New Vision for Grizzly Recovery*,” January 8, 2025
- University of British Columbia Institute for the Oceans and Fisheries “*Southern Sea Otter*”
- Middle Rio Grande Endangered Species Collaborative Program “*Yellow-Billed Cuckoo*”
- Center for Biological Diversity, Natural History Fact Sheet: Loggerhead Turtle; “*The Importance of Sea Turtles to Marine Ecosystems*” (Wilson, E.G., Miller, K.L., Allison, D. and Magliocca, M.)
- VOX “*The fate of this beloved American creature is in Trump’s hands. Will his Administration protect its most iconic butterfly?*” by Benji Jones, Apr 17, 2025

Acknowledgements

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Photo Credits

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