



Highland Lake News

From the Highland Lake Watershed Association - A Nonprofit Organization Dedicated to the Preservation and Protection of Highland Lake and Its Watershed

Winter

2025-26

President's Message *by Candy Perez*



Reflecting and Looking Ahead

As the year draws to a close, this time of year offers a perfect opportunity to reflect on what truly matters and express our deepest gratitude. We continue to be profoundly grateful for our past and present members whose unwavering support has sustained our association and its vital mission since 1959.

A Landmark Achievement: Laurel Ridge

We are extremely grateful that years of dedication, hope, and community effort culminated in the protection of Laurel Ridge. Seeing this land preserved is a testament to what we can achieve together. I

look out at the ridge every day and am deeply touched that this beautiful landscape has been protected for everyone, especially for those who carry on cherished family legacies or create new ones. Thank you for the early and ongoing support, both large and small, that made this incredible achievement possible.

Lake Management Update: Drawdown and Refill

As this newsletter reaches you, we are concluding our current deep drawdown. The primary goal remains crucial - wall repair and infrastructure maintenance. This year, however, the drawdown also afforded us a unique opportunity to study our plant diversity and native mussels.

We need your help! Please send any photos of the exposed lakebed that you feel we should share with our limnologist consultants, especially of plants or mussels. (See the dedicated article on plant life on page 2.)

The Water Level Committee is diligently monitoring the refill rates. This year we will also be updating the significant report, Evaluation of Lake Level Drawdown at Highland Lake 2008-2016, to guide our future management strategies.

Protecting Our Clean Waters

The "secret" is out: interest in Highland Lake has soared, fueled by numerous media articles celebrating our clean waters. Our challenge is to find the right balance in this growth.

The Board continues to work year-round with the Town of Winchester to coordinate with all entities - including our Town Manager, Public Works, Police Chief, Commissions, and the State DEEP - whose jurisdiction helps protect both our water quality and recreational use. Protecting this precious resource is a constant, collaborative effort.

Building Our Community

Our lake community is fortunate to have dedicated members who continue to provide wonderful activities, such as the popular Mix & Mingle, the Boat Parade, and the successful additions this year: Movie Night and a Kayak Trip. We are always looking for new ideas! If you would like to coordinate an activity, please reach out.

We are also actively seeking an interested Board Member to help manage our newsletter and advertiser relations. If you have a passion for communication and community, please email us at hlwa@hlwa.org.

We wish you and your family a safe, restful, and wonderful winter season.

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To see all pages in full color, visit our website - hlwa.org.

Highland Lake Plant Management Update

by Candy Perez

The Highland Lake Watershed Association has been involved in helping the Town and DEEP with the research and coordination of the management of invasive plants at the lake since the 1980s.

In the summer of 2025, DEEP held permits that were up for renewal (Highland Lake was one of them as was Park Pond) due to the controversy of the herbicide diquat. This erupted when the Army Corps of Engineers was going to treat invasive hydrilla in the Connecticut River.

There have been many questions from residents regarding the plant treatment since the summer.

Highland Lake plant management's primary goal is to protect the lake's ecosystem and to maintain water quality by reducing the dominance of invasive species, nuisance species, and promoting the growth of native plant communities. HLWA has worked closely with the Town of Winchester on financial support necessary to manage the 444-acre lake. We have treated invasive plant growth in the lake with herbicide treatments (diquat and ProcellaCOR) over the past 22+/- years in partnership with Northeast Aquatic Research, the State DEEP, and various herbicide applicators. Herbicide treatment requires a State of Connecticut DEEP permit. DEEP consults with fisheries as Highland Lake is a trophy fish lake as well as making sure our Eastern pond mussels are surviving as part of our permit process.

Historically there was once 44 acres of invasive milfoil, and today our June survey showed a few plants of variable milfoil and our end-of-year survey this year showed only a few plants of Eurasian milfoil. We had these removed using divers as any boat contacting it could have spread it by cutting off fragments. We believe the coordinated management of eradicating invasive milfoil has been a very successful although long and arduous process over the past 20+ years.

However, the challenge continues as more Invasive plants such as hydrilla are on our doorstep and weather changes and additional nutrient flow have favored growth of our native plants of which some are classified in our nuisance category.

How the process works: HLWA provides the volunteer time to analyze the recommendations for management of the plant life with our consultants, advocates for the budget with the Town of Winchester, schedules dates with NEAR for the surveys and AllHabitat for the treatment starting in the winter, coordinates with the Town management and

finance department as plans are implemented, and keeps records of consultant reports year to year. (These can be found on hlwa.org)



Our treatment programs start and end with plant surveys as required by the permit. A pretreatment survey is conducted in June to map and assess the overall aquatic plant population. This survey helps identify problem areas and inform any necessary management actions, such as targeted herbicide treatments. A second survey is conducted in September to evaluate the effectiveness of any summer management efforts and to document the lake's plant communities as winter settles in.

These surveys informed recent recommended plant treatments.

2023: Divers removed a few milfoil plants from Sucker Brook Cove

2024: The entire perimeter of the lake was treated with diquat herbicide and Sucker Brook Cove with diquat and ProcellaCOR

2025: The DEEP did not issue a permit. However, we had divers remove a few variable milfoil plants from Sucker Brook Cove and Eurasian milfoil from Sandy Cove. (We had planned to treat nuisance plants in 2025 where blooms were greatest, but the State DEEP was in the middle of concerns about the use of diquat statewide as described at the start of this article.)

No treatment permit has been received to date by AllHabitat, but we are in constant contact with them as to the progress of this with DEEP, the fisheries department, and the NDDDB. Once we have the permit, it should be active to 2028 when the process starts over again.

2026 Plans: Based on what we know from the summer and fall of 2025, and watching the effects, if any, of the deep

drawdown, we will be seeking herbicide treatment for the entire perimeter of the lake again. We will continue to be particularly vigilant to prevent the introduction of hydrilla and the regrowth of milfoil.

Notes for lakeside residents removing plants: We know many of you have concerns about the plants and what you can do at your properties.

Plants like Eurasian water milfoil, variable leaf milfoil and hydrilla spread through fragmentation, where broken pieces take root. Our other native plants can do the same. Some aquatic plants produce specialized buds or root structures that can survive winter and grow into new plants in the spring.

If you have been pulling plants or raking plants, please be sure to get all the fragments. ***Leaving fragments behind can spread the plants - giving you more than you had!***

Lake residents are discouraged and by law unable to use chemicals in the lake to treat plants. *Water and the chemical do not stay just near your dock but affect neighbors as well. Fines up to \$5,000 can be given if permits are not obtained.*

With climate warming, the pressures of development, and major recreational and economic value, it is more important than ever, to manage invasive plant growth and prevent introduction of new invasive species.

You can help!

Reduce nutrient runoff. Help keep the road area near your house clean of debris. Excessive nutrients can promote the growth of plants. Take part in our rain garden activities planned for 2026 and learn how to install one on your property to absorb runoff nutrients. Maintain unfertilized shoreline buffer zones and minimize fertilizer use on lawns - if it grows grass, it will grow plants.

We appreciate your vigilance on this. If everyone does a little, it will help.



Winchester Police Marine Patrol Unit: Safeguarding Highland Lake

by Sergeant Gerald Hanson and Officer Christopher Tieman

The Winchester Police Marine Patrol Unit would like to wish Officer Daniel Pietrafesa all the best in his future



endeavors. Officer Pietrafesa retired from the police department at the end of the 2025 boating season.

In 2025, the Marine Patrol Unit worked an impressive 320 hours, equating to 80, 4-hour shifts. The officers assigned to the Marine Patrol Unit are dedicated to ensuring safe, courteous, and law-abiding boating on Highland Lake.

In 2025, 8 members of the unit successfully completed the NASBLA (National Association of State Boating Law Administrators), IBO-MPF (Inland Boat Operations & Marine Patrol Fundamentals) 5-day course. This course is designed to prepare the marine patrol officer with the knowledge and skills for solo officer patrol in an inland maritime environment. In addition to classroom instruction, the officers were instructed on patrol operations, including emergency operations, vessel stops, rescue/ recovery operations, and various law enforcement techniques. Many of you saw us out on the lake during the class, and continued practice of these techniques continues. You will see us practicing these maneuvers on the lake as we strive to always improve our skills and pass knowledge to new members of the Maine Patrol Unit.

Even though the lake is "drawn down," and the boats are dry-docked, we are planning for the 2026 boating season. We are in planning stages for a "Marine Patrol Safety Day," which will be sometime in May 2026. Stay tuned.

The Marine Patrol's role extends beyond enforcement; the community makes us effective. When you see us out on the lake, stop by for a chat, or just say Hi! Often, we even have some good swag for the kiddos. The Winchester Marine Patrol is dedicated to safe boating and rule/law compliance. Our focus is on safety and creating an environment where residents and visitors alike enjoy our beautiful Highland Lake.

The team is supervised by Sergeant Gerry Hanson (ghanson@townofwinchester.org) and the assistant team leader is Officer Chris Tieman (ctieman@townofwinchester.org). If you have feedback, concerns, ideas or events related to our Marine Patrol, we'd love to hear from you.

HLWA received a donation from United Way of Salt Lake City, Utah. Unfortunately, the organization was unable to let us know whom the donation was from. If this was from you, please let us know by sending an email to treasurer@hlwa.org so we can properly thank you!

Laurel Ridge: Preparing for Public Access in Spring 2026

by Beth Papermaster

Work is under way to prepare Laurel Ridge for its official opening in Spring 2026! Thanks to an eager group of skilled volunteers, large branches have already been cleared from the track, and even more progress is on the horizon.

Volunteer Update: Boundary and Trail Work

Under the leadership of **Jen Perga, President of the Winchester Land Trust**, a small group is meeting regularly to mark the property boundary. This is detailed, physical work that requires volunteers to trek through unmarked areas, locate boundary markers, and blaze trees for future reference. Small boundary signs are also being installed.

Volunteers will soon begin marking the three main hiking trails as well. Work will continue throughout the winter as conditions allow.



Interested in helping?

Email bethpapermaster@gmail.com to join the effort.

Special Projects: Protecting the Witness Trees and Improving Access

Some tasks require professional expertise - especially the care of the three majestic **Witness Trees** located just off the main track. These old, open-grown trees, known for their wide-reaching branches, will receive support cables and deadwood trimming to help preserve them. Imagine what they have "witnessed" when the track was active in the early 20th century.

Improvements are also planned for the **Pratt Street entrance**. The parking area will soon be improved with an additional gate. These measures will protect Laurel Ridge while maintaining access for emergency vehicles.

Stewardship Fund: Support the Future of Laurel Ridge

As we transition from acquisition to stewardship, significant funding will be required to create, maintain, and sustain Laurel Ridge for generations to come.

There is still time to become a **Proud Protector of Highland Lake** by contributing to the Laurel Ridge Stewardship Fund. Donors who give by **March 1, 2026** will be recognized in HLWA and WLT online and/or print materials.



Donors of \$5,000 or more will be listed on the Donor Appreciation Board at the Pratt Street entrance.

A few naming opportunities remain!

A Community Treasure - Now and for the Future

Laurel Ridge is an incredible gift to our community, offering year-round opportunities for hiking, birdwatching, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, and quiet enjoyment of nature. It is poised to become a recreational treasure for generations to come.

By working together, we made Laurel Ridge a reality. **Together, we will ensure its bright future.**



Active in the early 1900s, the Carey Race Track was on the east side of the lake in the area now known as Laurel Ridge.

On the west side of the lake in the Sucker Brook area was the Lakeside Trotting Park, which served the Highland Lake community's racing scene. It was part of the local fair circuits and featured trotting races before fairs.



A Home for Our Boat

by Melissa Muller

In the spring of 2015, we bought a boat. My husband, however, will further elaborate that our boat is a 18.5 foot Triton fish/ski boat with a level deck for casting, six seats under a canopy, and a fisher finder and tank to hold the catch. Anyway, we bought a boat. Now we needed to find it a home. Thus, the search for our lake home began.

To literally test the waters, we slipped the boat at a marina on Candlewood Lake, near where we lived. We soon learned Candlewood was too big and busy for us. Our ideal lake setting provided for quieter days spent fishing and swimming off the boat with our kids. We then shifted our focus north to Vermont and New Hampshire. This search yielded no viable options either. Spending long hours in the car just didn't appeal, so our boat remained in the yard.

We then decided to look closer at Highland Lake. We knew about Highland because family friends have lived there for years. As everyone knows, Highland is a beautiful, clean lake known for excellent fishing. It was the perfect size and the location worked for us too. We had a Goldilocks moment and began looking at properties that very weekend.

The first property needed work and was located across the street from the lake. The second home reeked terribly of stale cigarette smoke and repelled us from even crossing the threshold. The last house, however, had a great deal of charm. It was a quaint yellow cape with white pillars and a wide porch facing the water. We became quietly excited as we explored the rooms and took in views of the lake. The yard was flat, and it was situated on a side street on the East side. It wasn't too big and it wasn't too small. We had yet another Goldilocks moment. This house was just right.

While mulling over our potential offer, my parents called, curious to hear if we'd seen anything of interest. My husband, unable to contain his excitement, filled them in on the details of the quaint yellow cape. My father wondered which one it was, so we forwarded the listing. To our amazement, he had an incredible story to share. He explained the home we had just toured had once been his family's summer cottage!

Every summer, they traded "city life" in Torrington for the tranquility of Highland Lake. There, he, his four sisters and all their friends spent carefree days enjoying all the lake has to offer. They fished for trout in the early morning quiet. They played, swam and went boating all day, waiting impatiently for the ice cream man to supply them with cool treats on hot afternoons. They enjoyed backyard cookouts featuring fat hot dogs and juicy hamburgers sizzling over charcoal and picnic salads for supper. They delighted in catching fireflies and watching fireworks after sundown on the 4th of July. These fond memories depicted an idyllic time in his young life, and he explained how devastated he was to learn the cottage had been sold.

Did fate step in or was this mere coincidence? I'm not sure, but we went forward with our offer and purchased the quaint, yellow cape. Our boat finally has a home and it's just right. For years now, we've been blessed to enjoy our little slice of heaven and continue our family legacy here on Highland Lake.

Drawdown Information

Next Step: If gate is not already closed, DPW must close the gate on December 30 and allow the water to rise to the normal winter level of 36 inches, as much as possible, until ice is sufficiently off the lake. Then allow the lake to refill to usual over-spillway level (approx. 11.9 feet)



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The Flood of '55: The Night that Changed Winsted - Part 1

by Benjamin Cruson, MLIS; Local History & Genealogy Librarian at the Beardsley & Memorial Library

The weather forecast for the night of August 18 into August 19, 1955 called for scattered showers petering out as the evening wore on. Like the rain that had been dropped several days before by the remnants of Hurricane Connie, the on-and-off showers of August 18 were a welcome respite from the heat of the summer, but as the day grew late, the rain continued to fall, and the Mad and Still Rivers began to grow. Nobody expected what was about to happen.

Flooding was nothing new to Winsted - it was the price the city regularly paid for the advantages of the waterpower which had made it the industrial center of Litchfield County. Like in the past, the rising water was a signal to those living along the river to begin moving their prized possessions out of their basements and into the higher floors of their house where the water would not bother them. With this done, many went to sleep expecting a mostly normal day to follow in the morning.

Shortly after midnight, the residents of Winsted were roused from their beds by emergency sirens and knocks at their doors. All along Main Street, people were finding



"View from Main and High" - Looking across Main Street from the Methodist Church.

water running over their floors as they descended the stairs to answer the door. They were looking out their windows to see a river two feet deep where Winsted's Main Street should have been. At the door were firemen and police officers urging them to evacuate their homes and seek higher ground. And then, the power went out.



Main Street before the flood. The Hotel Winchester, which still stands today at the corner of Elm Street, is on the left.

In the following hours, the water continued to rise, trapping those who did not heed the warnings in their homes. At the base of High Street, firemen Roger McKie, "Slim" Zordan and Wayne White from Engine Co. No. 1 were trying to figure out how to rescue a family trapped in their home on the other side of Main Street (in 1955, there were buildings along both sides of Main Street - see photo). The family lived on the second floor of a short wooden building, above a store that sold fruits and vegetables. As chance would have it, a town truck driven by a veteran driver came down High Street and offered his assistance to the rescuers.

Graciously accepting, the three firemen piled into the back of the truck. The driver backed the truck across Main Street up against the building, and with little difficulty, the family was lowered into the truck.



"1955 Flood - Main and Lake Streets" - Main Street after the worst of the flooding had passed, looking south from near the library. The arrow points to the end of Lake Street.

The hard part of the rescue being done, the truck started back across the street but only got about halfway before it began to slip and lose traction. The driver was able to compensate and bring everyone safely to the rising slope of High Street, but as one firefighter looked back to the place where the truck had struggled, he saw a large section of pavement lift up from under the water and tumbled end over end downstream in the powerful current.

As damaging as the flooding already was, it was about to get even worse. Since heavy rains were not anticipated,



"Flood - Elm and Main" - Looking east from the Hotel Winchester at the corner of Elm and Main, taken shortly before the lights went out early in the morning of August 19.

the water level of Highland Lake had not been lowered. At about 3:00 a.m., Highland Lake had absorbed all the water it could and began to catastrophically overflow its dam. Thousands of gallons of water rushed into the already swollen lake stream and surged out into the surrounding neighborhood, washing away most of Lake Street and putting a large swath of Meadow Street under water. When the deluge reached Main Street at the bottom, it took virtually no time to raise the water from its previous height of two or three feet up to eight feet above the pavement.

Down at the town hall, a team of 42 police and volunteers had gathered to move town records and police equipment out of the basement to the upper floors. No sooner had they completed their task than the waters of Highland Lake arrived, inundating the first floor of the building and trapping them all inside. The water was rapidly tearing up the pavement and all the infrastructure underneath, leaving the group trapped inside without water, gas, or sewers for nearly twelve hours until they were finally rescued on the afternoon of August 19 around 2:30 p.m.

Outside, the tremendous force of the water was carrying away cars, oil tanks, slabs of pavement, and pieces of buildings and turning them into devastating battering rams.

As objects collided with buildings whose foundations had already been weakened by the rushing water, the edifices came tumbling down.

Anyone still trapped in their homes on Main Street were aware the floor under their feet could give way at any moment, making them all the more desperate for rescue. At the base of Chestnut Street, the most dramatic rescue of the flood was taking place. Firemen working from a rooftop had been trying to toss a rope across Main Street to Joe and Josephine Cornelio who were trapped on the second floor of their tenement on the south side of the street. Every throw fell short of its goal.

Dewey Plank, an avid fisherman, came to the rescue with his trusty rod and reel. He was able to cast his fishing line across the raging waters, getting it caught on a telephone pole near the Cornelio's window where Joe could reach it with the help of a broom. The rescuers were now able to run a safety rope across the roiling torrent so a boat could safely be guided across. Joe Horte, Steve Jackson, and George Newman volunteered to go across in a boat to perform the rescue. Secured to each other and to the boat by safety ropes, the three rescuers made their way across and easily loaded the Cornelios into the boat. On the way back everything was going smoothly until Mrs. Cornelio panicked and stood up in the boat.

The boat capsized, dumping the five people into the swift current. Josephine was swept away, but not before Joe Horte was able to grab her. When he did, his safety rope broke, and the two went downriver together. Horte was able to grab a telephone pole, but when he did, Josephine Cornelio was ripped from his grasp. Horte eventually made his way back to safety. Mrs. Cornelio did not. Her body was found several days later near South Main Street. She was one of seven Winsted residents claimed by the flood. The stories of the others - and the aftermath of the flood - will be told in Part 2.



Meeting at the Merri Mac's

by *Melissa Muller*

"We met right here at the Merri Mac's cottage," the sweet elderly lady said dreamily. She was reminiscing about the introduction that culminated in a great love affair and marriage lasting for decades. The fruits of this marriage bore five children and a wonderful family legacy of Highland Lake traditions. "We rolled up the rug and danced over here," she murmured. She pointed to a corner of the four-season home that the little yellow cottage with the white pillars and wide porch had become over the years. "That was the living room and there was a fireplace just here," she continued. She turned around, slowly giving us a tour of our home. As she marveled at the changes, memories of her youth in the 1950s delighted her.

"My friend, Ann, invited me to the party, and I was so excited," she explained. She described summers at the lake with family and friends. There were cookouts and parties and dancing under the stars. She recalled roller skating at the Pavilion, fireworks on the 4th of July and the much anticipated Sailing Club Ball. She continued, "I paddled my canoe up from First Bay." The festivities were already under way. Little kids darted about the yard playing tag, their shouts high and shrill. Later, they'd cottage-hop through kitchens, raiding cookie jars for homemade treats. It was a simpler time when no one locked doors and neighbors were neighborly. "I miss those days," she said wistfully.

She joined the teens who gravitated to the docks, a gaggle of girls to one side, sneaking peeks at the boys across the way. They giggled loudly and tossed their hair to catch some attention. Taking notice, the boys broke off their debate over the

best spots to fish and began to engage. The girls flirted shamelessly, enticing the boys to join them. As the boys became bolder, some good-natured ribbing and jostling ensued. One by one, the girls were pushed into the lake, shrieks echoing off the water. The boys then cannonballed off the dock and they frolicked until supertime. Soon, they'd be paired off into summer couples.

It was he with whom she found herself paired, and they soon discovered much in common. Both were very active; they loved boating and shared a passion for waterskiing. Two peas in a pod, they were inseparable for the rest of the party. When the evening ended, they were disappointed to part. Just then, thunder rumbled, and lightning flashed. He offered her a ride home and the rest is history.

In time, they built a forever home at the lake. They marveled at how each season altered its landscape. The quiet that winter brought was a welcome respite. When ice formed, they watched as ice fishermen dotted the blustery lake surface to fish for sport. They supported the Polar Plunge and looked forward to spring when flowers bloomed and opening day for fishing appeared on the calendar. Memorial Day harkened the arrival of summer crowds and lots of boats and jet skis bobbing about. They taught generations to waterski, the family having grown. With lots of love and laughter, they hosted picnics. Their 4th of July party became legendary, spilling into neighboring yards. September brought a morning chill, the task of picking the last tomatoes from withering vines and a myriad of fall hues coloring the trees. The boisterous summer revelers now long gone ushered in space for peaceful reflection. They were grateful to have met and grown their family in love and faith, spending their lives in God's country, here at Highland Lake.

**UPCOMING
EVENTS 2026**

March 1 *Winter Social*

Mix & Mingle **June 5**

July 11 *Annual Meeting*

General Ice Thickness Guidelines

These guidelines are for new, clear (blue) ice on lakes and ponds. White ice or "snow ice" is only about half as strong as new clear ice.



Ice Thickness (in inches)

Under 4" - STAY OFF

4" -- Ice fishing or other activities on foot

5" - 7" -- Snowmobile or ATV

Note: It is illegal to drive a car or truck on the ice in Connecticut.

<https://portal.ct.gov/deep/outdoor-recreation/ice-safety?os=ios>

Annual Membership Application

The Highland Lake Watershed Association is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to the preservation and protection of Highland Lake and its watershed. Your membership (and additional donation) supports the important work of protecting our beautiful lake.

Annual Membership Dues:	\$ <u>50</u>	Jan 1 – Dec 31
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(Dues and donations to HLWA qualify for IRS consideration as a contribution to a charitable organization and may be tax deductible)

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Membership Information

Name(s): _____

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Do you want the summer newsletter mailed to your lake address? Yes No

Preferred Phone: (____) _____

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Volunteers are the backbone of HLWA. We need you!

Yes I want to volunteer. <input type="checkbox"/> Please have someone contact me (check all that apply)		
<input type="checkbox"/> Become an HLWA Director	<input type="checkbox"/> Welcome new residents	<input type="checkbox"/> Cleanup campaigns
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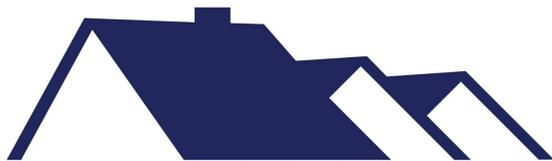
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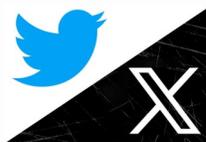
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