



**OVERCOMING**  
*Overwhelming*  
**OPHIDIOPHOBIA**



WRITTEN BY GLORIA HILDEBRANDT  
PHOTOS BY MIKE DAVIS  
*except where noted*

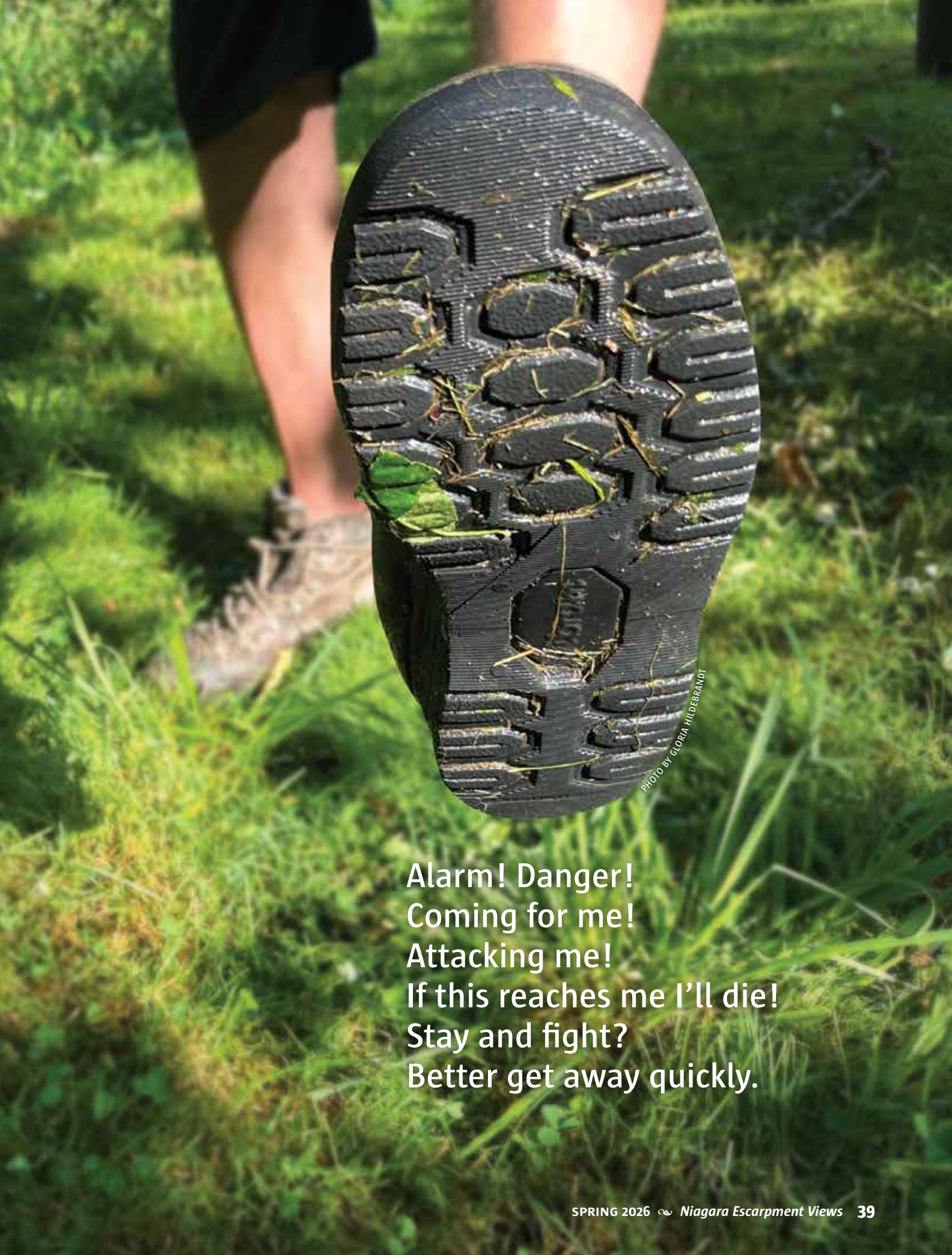


PHOTO BY GLORIA HILDEBRANDT

Alarm! Danger!  
Coming for me!  
Attacking me!  
If this reaches me I'll die!  
Stay and fight?  
Better get away quickly.

The previous page tries to suggest what we humans are like to snakes. We are so much larger and more prevalent than they are, it's no wonder they fear us so. They can't swallow us, which is how they eat their prey, because we're too enormous. If they do manage to strike us, there is only one in Ontario that is venomous and it is only found in certain specific locations, including near some of the less-populated parts of the Niagara Escarpment. It is a threatened species, so sightings of a Massasauga Rattlesnake are rare. The best that all our snakes can do is try to get away

from us. We pose a real threat to them, especially as many of us loathe, hurt and kill them.

Despite the fact that they can't harm us, many of us are so afraid of them that we can't even bear to look at them in person or see them on TV, film, online or even photos of them in books or magazines. Some of us can't even handle seeing toys of them, or cartoon images, or plastic, obviously fake ones in gardening catalogues.

There's a word for this: ophidiophobia. The word comes from the Greek words *ophis*, or serpent, and *phobia*, or fear. It means an overwhelming fear of snakes.

## What's to Fear?

They'll kill me.  
They'll bite me.  
They'll strike me in the face with their heads or mouths.  
They'll wind around me and strangle me.  
They look like no other animal.  
They have no legs but can move very quickly.  
They're ugly, without arms or legs, have no neck, eyes that don't blink, and a forked tongue.  
They shed their skin.  
They're slimy.

**People without a snake phobia realize that these fears are not reasonable.**



Any phobia can negatively affect one's quality of life, if it prevents someone from doing things where the perceived danger is thought to be. A snake phobia can keep you from enjoying the simple pleasures of being outdoors, in nature, doing gardening, having a picnic, walking or hiking on the Escarpment,

swimming in natural, safe bodies of water, and boating in canoes, kayaks, rowboats and other watercrafts.

### **Babies Not Afraid of Snakes**

Phobias are usually learned, even those we assume to be ancient knowledge passed down through our genes to



◀ Tunde Otto, executive director of Willow Park Ecology Centre, giving a talk to the public in the park.

Any phobia can negatively affect one's quality of life.



▲ A DeKay's Brownsnake seen on Manitoulin Island. A very small snake, it grows to only 29 to 33 cm long.

keep us safe. Information on Instagram shares that “In an experiment featured on ABC Science’s program ‘Secret Science,’ researchers placed babies in a controlled room with non-venomous snakes to study natural fear responses. The goal was to see if humans are born with an instinctive fear of

snakes or if it’s learned through experience. “Surprisingly, the infants showed little to no fear. Some even reached toward the snakes with curiosity instead of hesitation. Scientists concluded that while humans may have a biological awareness of snakes, genuine fear usually

develops later, influenced by parents, culture, and personal experience rather than being an automatic reaction from birth.”  
**Conquering Fears**  
If you’d like a phobia to have less power over you, it is possible to diminish fears, no matter how out of control they seem. False beliefs and the

unknown are said to be the root of many fears. Self-help strategies can work, but if the phobia is severe, professional help can be effective.  
With phobias, the perceived threat is non-existent or wildly exaggerated. The best way to deal with a phobia is to be gradually and safely exposed to the trigger. In



▲ The hibernaculum in Willow Park Ecology Centre was created to give snakes underground protection, particularly in winter, when they brumate, which is the reptile's version of hibernating.

the case of snakes or other animals, it may mean first looking at images of them until your response lessens. Deep breathing can help calm you. Knowledge can decrease anxiety, so a next step might be learning to identify photos of our different native snakes. Learning about how and where snakes live may help, all without being close to them. When images of snakes produce less fear, it may be possible to attend an educational presentation on snakes. The professionals will give a completely controlled, safe program discussing the animals they have brought, and will never force anyone to get closer than desired.

Willow Park Ecology Centre (WPEC) in Norval, between Georgetown and

Brampton, occasionally hosts such events.

“Presenters bring animals they have rescued or keep for other reasons, to show guests, to teach them about the beauty, habitat, needs and survival strategies,” says Tunde Otto, executive director of WPEC. “They’ll also teach how to handle snakes, and usually you can hold them.” If people are afraid of snakes, presenters and park staff members help them understand them.

“We offer a place to feel safe, to ask questions and express concerns,” Tunde adds. “Connecting people to animals being just like us, with similar needs for food, shelter and community, helps reduce fears.”

### How Snakes Behave

When WPEC was created

in 1998, a hibernaculum or winter shelter was put together for snakes. In a discrete place near the wetland, rocks and tree stumps were piled, creating small open spaces between them, and then buried to provide protection below where frost can reach.

“We do not know if that is where they hibernate,” explains Tunde, but the park as a whole is home to several species of snakes that have been observed there: Common Gartersnake, Common Water Snake, Dekay’s Brown Snake, Eastern Foxsnake, Eastern Milksnake, Grey Rat Snake, Northern Red Belly.

“All animals have a place in keeping an ecosystem healthy and a role to play in food chains,” adds Tunde. “Snakes aren’t ‘after us,’ they’re just

busy doing their own thing to survive and have young, just like people. They eat a wide variety of prey, including rodents, insects, birds, amphibians, and other snakes, depending on the species. They help ecosystems by controlling pest populations, acting as a food source for other animals, and contributing to nutrient cycling. Snakes help us and ecosystems by controlling rodents, which means they also indirectly help reduce the spread of diseases like Lyme Disease carried by ticks, because rodents act as a host for larvae and nymph ticks.”

Snakes want to be left alone. Any threatening behaviour they might display, like shaking their tail, coiling up and lifting their head,



▲ A little Eastern Milksnake winds harmlessly around Mike Davis's hand. This specially protected snake has often been persecuted because of a slight resemblance to the Massasauga Rattlesnake.



▲ Gloria Hildebrandt touching a ball of two snakes a few years ago, held by professional presenter Jenny Pearce of the former Sciensation Ssnakes!!

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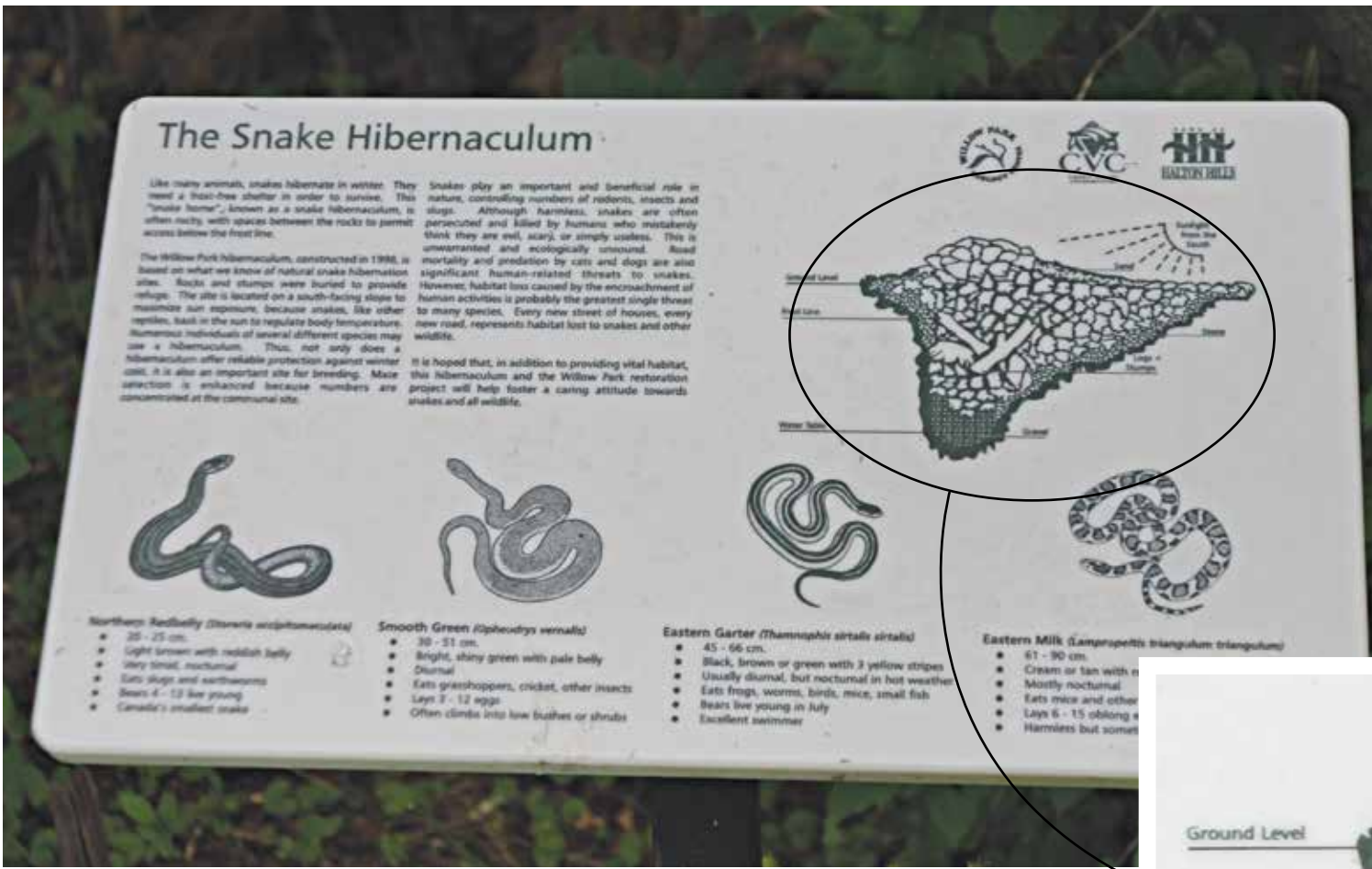
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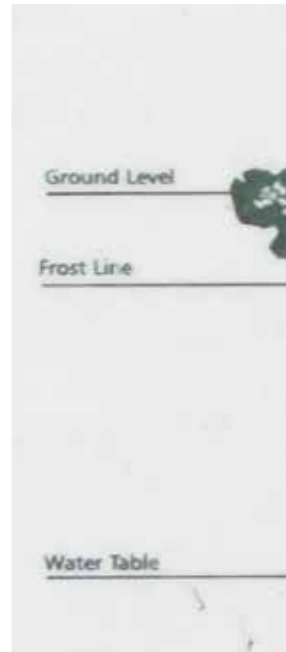
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▲ A good educational opportunity is provided by this sign near the hibernaculum in the park.



▲ An educational presentation on snakes and other animals is sometimes offered at Willow Park Ecology Centre in Norval.



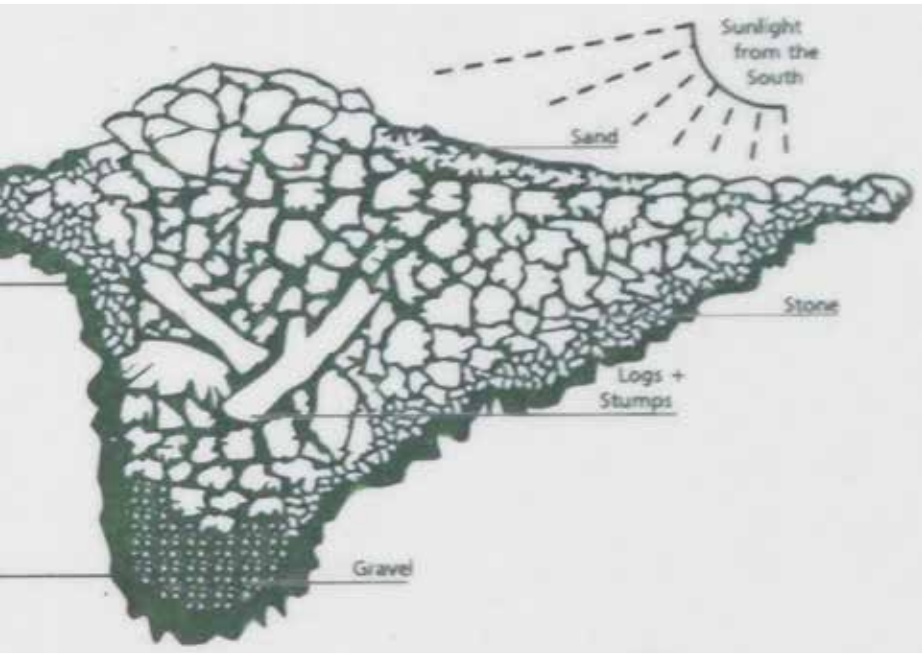
even darting their head at us, is likely because they feel threatened or cornered. When not harassed, they tend to move away from us and hide. They do not seek us out to do us harm.

your fear. Just being able to live and let snakes live in your environment can give you an increased quality of life, letting you enjoy the pleasures of the natural world. **NEV**

**Take Control**

If you want to improve your quality of life by decreasing your phobia about snakes, you can begin to take control by gradually and safely facing your fear. Try to breathe calmly after being startled by a snake in images or reality. Challenge your negative thoughts about snakes. Have someone who's not afraid of them, support you as you see a snake. Realize that you never have to get to the point of touching or handling a snake. You don't need to have a snake slung around your neck to prove that you've conquered

Foster a caring attitude towards all wildlife.



▲ This diagram shows the structure of the hibernaculum and how it provides safe, frost-free spaces for animals to shelter through the winter.

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Issue out by June 1

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