

Resilient nature amidst the ravages of war

BY BRYAN PFEIFFER

On Feb. 24, the day Russia invaded, mute swans were moving in to ice-free lakes and ponds for the breeding season near Kyiv.

As rockets struck a train station in Kramatorsk on April 8, killing scores of people, European peacock butterflies were on the wing, flashing orange hues and blue eyespots.

And during the siege of Mariupol this week, sweet violets were blooming through crusty earth across much of Ukraine.

While most of us witness this war in news reports from the front lines, I have also been watching a poignant spring unfold in photographs of nature that Ukrainians are sharing on an on-line platform called iNaturalist. Since the war began, more than 300 Ukrainians have posted their photos of plants, animals, fungi, lichens, and other living things. As a biologist here in the relative safety of New England, I'm struggling to reconcile this new life of spring emerging from the horrific shadows of war.

These images are by no means the casual or performative manifestations of social media. Launched in 2008, iNaturalist is one of the most important crowdsourced reservoirs of biological data on the planet. Its two million contributors worldwide range from backyard naturalists to research scientists. Since the start of the war, Ukrainians posting to iNaturalist have so far documented the presence of more than 1,000 species: storks and doves, hyacinths and dandelions, lady beetles and bumblebees.

Many share their images because the bombs and tanks have not yet reached them. Others post out of force of habit or a yearning for normalcy, or as a form of defiance. The scientists are driven by the continuing need to gather

data for research and conservation. Yet perhaps the most powerful motivation among these biologists and citizen naturalists is that even in war, nature offers us refuge.

Oleksii Vasyliuk, a zoologist, told me that for refugees and people in lands under occupation, the familiar — even observations of nature between air-raid alarms — becomes valuable. “Nature inspires those who know how to see it even in the most difficult moments,” he wrote in our exchange of messages through the iNaturalist platform. “In 1918, a well-known Ukrainian ecologist, Professor Pavlo Tutkovsky, said that love of nature was a force stronger than bombs.”

To be sure, many of us find our sense of balance outdoors — in places as magisterial as the Grand Canyon or the coast of Maine, or especially, for me, in the company of solitary living things: the ethereal song of a hermit thrush, the elegance of a maidenhair fern, the glitter on a little metalmark butterfly.

After nearly dying of a heart attack five years ago, I took my first walk in the hospital to the window, toward the sunset and the green. When fearful during the pandemic, I found refuge in forests and in bogs.

Nature is not everyone's respite. We also find escape, comfort, and meaning in music, art, and literature, and, of course, among other people.

For the enslaved in America, for Jews in concentration camps, and for Vedran Smailovic, who played his cello in the rubble of Sarajevo, music has been a means of preserving dignity and humanity.

Still, I am uneasy with the idea of nature as a transcendent source of beauty and solace in a time of war.

Is not my welcoming of spring somehow disrespectful to the victims in Ukraine or to those of the countless



FELIE DANA/AP

“Even as nature becomes a casualty of war, it remains for us a force of its own, like gravity or faith or love.”

horrors playing out elsewhere in the world? Is it valid to treat nature as a lens through which I can express solidarity or empathy?

Nature itself, of course, is dispassionate on the question. Swans unwittingly migrate north among fighter jets. Orchids cannot flee bombs. Butterflies know nothing of bullets and refugees.

In a way, nature's persistence is oddly reassuring to me. Even as we continue to kill one another, and even as nature too becomes a casualty of war, it remains for us a force of its own, like gravity or faith or love.

Faced with the prospect of death, most of us would not rush to the office, seek to boost our Twitter following, or fret the home repairs left undone. Under threat of war, I suspect, I would try

to protect myself, the people I love, and my community — and then I would seek my solace among spring wildflowers and migrating warblers.

Galyna Mykytynets, who studies reptiles and amphibians in Ukraine, told me that she and others had offered support to the Ukrainian military when the war began. Later she fled Melitopol, which fell to Russian occupation, for safety farther west.

“Walking in nature, photographing flowers and animals, distracts from the horrors of war and sad news about what the aggressor is doing in our hometown and in other parts of my country,” she wrote (with assistance to us both from Google Translate). Mykytynets added that she would continue to share images to iNaturalist from her

current position. “I want to show what a wonderful, rich, and peaceful country we are, what passionate people we have — we deserve independence, freedom, liberty, our choice.”

Our bond with nature, however tenuous now, has been hardwired for as long as we have walked this earth. Even in the face of our ghastly inhumanities to one another, that bond has endured — from when we drew crude paintings of wildlife on cave walls to this time of sublime beauty now shared online in photographs by people under attack.

Bryan Pfeiffer is a semi-retired field biologist and a lecturer at the University of Vermont. He lives on a hillside above the North Branch River in Montpelier.