

Russia's war in Ukraine has been devastating for animals—but they've also given the nation reason for hope

July 24 2024, by Iryna Skubii



Tyhra, after arriving in Australia this year and going through quarantine. Credit: Iryna Skubii

Russia's war in Ukraine has caused immense suffering to the civilian population. Tens of thousands are believed to have been killed, though an exact figure is impossible to know. Russia's aggression has also sparked the biggest refugee crisis in Europe since the second World War, with [6.5 million people](#) fleeing Ukraine since February 2022.

What has received far less attention has been the impact of the war on the country's animal population.

With an [estimated 25% of Ukraine's protected nature areas](#) occupied by Russian forces, [entire ecosystems have been disrupted or destroyed](#). Some biologists believe [tens of thousands of Black Sea dolphins](#) have been killed, though verifying this has proved to be [difficult](#).

Given the destruction to [natural landscapes](#) and wildlife, Ukrainian authorities have [discussed ways to pursue a war crimes](#) case against Russia based on "[ecocide](#)"—unlawful attacks on the environment that can lead to long-term impact on ecosystems and wildlife.

As for domestic animals, there were approximately [5.5 million cats and 750,000 dogs](#) in Ukraine before the war. Many have been killed or abandoned by their owners, causing the stray population to explode.

In response, many [organizations](#) have [launched efforts](#) to help shelter and treat wounded animals.

When Russia launched a new offensive in the Kharkiv region [in May](#), for instance, local authorities and volunteers leapt into action to try to

evacuate pets left behind, some locked in cages or chained in yards, others roaming free.

Many Ukrainians fleeing the country, meanwhile, have taken their pets with them, as the only remaining [connections to their homes and their pasts](#).

Animal refugees and evacuation efforts

Within days of Russia's invasion in February 2022, [instructions](#) were being circulated to residents on how to prepare to evacuate with their pets in tow.

For those fleeing abroad, animals were initially allowed to pass through borders [without meeting European Union veterinary requirements](#). The regulations were tightened again, however, after a fierce debate over the [biosecurity risks](#), given the prevalence of rabies in Ukraine.

Although it is hard to provide an exact number of refugee animals, in 2022 alone, more than [10,000 animals](#) are believed to have crossed the Ukrainian-Polish border. Some pets later came back to Ukraine with their owners, while others stayed in Europe or were moved further around the globe.

Among them was my cat Tyhra, a female cat named after her tiger-colored fur (tyhr means tiger in Ukrainian), who was evacuated in September 2022 from the Kharkiv region. Her story is unique, as she was initially taken to Canada, and recently relocated with me to Australia.

A few of the more fortunate animals have even become social media celebrities. A cat named Stepan, whose fame on Instagram (with [1.5 million followers](#)), for example, helped its owners to escape from

Kharkiv to Monaco when it was intensively shelled in early 2022.

And in June 2023, when Russia's army destroyed the [Kakhovka Dam on the Dnipro River](#), an image of a [rescued dog](#) hugging the leg of a man went viral, becoming a vivid illustration of how the war has affected Ukraine's animals.

After the dam was blown up, [animal rights activists](#) asked people to take their pets with them if possible, and if not, to "untie them and let them go. Give them a chance to save themselves."

Evacuating animals from the frontline is not enough. It is becoming even more important to provide those who have been abandoned with accommodation and food.

Most [shelters are now very overcrowded](#). And in some cities and villages near the frontline, the [problem of stray dogs](#) is becoming a major problem.

Animals and the army

Some of the [cats](#) and dogs that have been left in the combat zone have even become "active members" of the Ukrainian army. Many were rescued by soldiers from abandoned houses or after their owners had been killed in the fighting.

Cats are particularly valued for their skills in preventing the [spread of mice](#) in trenches. Cats are also excellent for [fundraising](#)—so much so, they've been called "Ukraine's secret weapon."

Trained dogs, meanwhile, are adept in demining. One of the most widely known examples is the [terrier dog Patron](#) (which means bullet or cartridge in Ukrainian). After the Chernihiv region was liberated in

2022, Patron became a celebrity for his skills in [sniffing out landmines](#).

Livestock become targets

The fate of livestock is much grimmer. Many barns, for example, have become direct targets of Russian army shelling and missiles.

In March 2022, for example, the Russian army [killed 100 cows and calves on a farm](#) as they advanced in the Chernihiv region. Later that year, a missile strike [killed 45 cows](#) and injured a dozen and a half in another village in the region.

Earlier this year, a dairy industry figure [estimated](#) that some 200,000 cows in total had been killed.

And at a chicken factory in the Kherson region—then the biggest in Europe—[4 million chickens](#) died when the feeding system was disabled due to the destruction of a nearby power station.

There are many more tragic stories like these about the ecological toll of the war across the entire frontline area of Ukraine.

And despite the efforts being made in Ukraine and on the international level to help these animals, they still remain in dire need of care and protection.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Russia's war in Ukraine has been devastating for animals—but they've also given the

nation reason for hope (2024, July 24) retrieved 24 July 2024 from
<https://phys.org/news/2024-07-russia-war-ukraine-devastating-animals.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.