Birds in Ukraine are building nests from drone cable

A remarkable photo from the front line has inspired art, horror and Russian disinformation

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Yuriy Kokhan found this nest made with fibre-optic cable, which is used to protect battlefield drones from jamming

MAXYM MARUSENKO/GETTY IMAGES; YURIY KOKHAN

When Yuriy Kokhan stopped to take a picture of a strange-looking bird's nest on the front lines of the war in Ukraine in June, he did not realise the symbolic load it would bear.

The bird — probably a perching songbird, possibly a finch — had delicately wound a length of fibre-optic cable from a battlefield drone inside its nest. For Kokhan, an engineer with Ukraine's 12th Special Forces Brigade Azov, it was a representation of nature's ingenuity: he was fascinated by the bird's ability to adapt to an increasingly high-tech war.

"When I saw this nest, I was thinking from an engineering point of view, 'That's an interesting decision this bird has made'," Kokhan said. "Nature was adapting to the war, using a mix of natural and unnatural materials."

Yuriy Kokhan with a badge of Mario, his callsign

But as spring comes to the front lines and nesting season returns, fears are growing about the environmental legacy of fibre-optic drones, which are proliferating and leaving a spider's web of cables, potentially snaring animals, birds and chicks.

The Russians began introducing fibre-optic drones in early 2024, and the Ukrainians followed suit soon afterwards. They are used both as guided bombs and for surveillance. Rather than being controlled using radio frequencies, which can be jammed, these drones trail cable from a spool, which holds between 5km and 20km of line, sometimes as much as 50km.

The cables provide a first-person view (FPV) video feed back to drone operators. Every flight leaves a trail of fibres, which typically consist of a silica core clad in polymer. Photographs from the front lines show fields, roofs and treetops glistening with threads. Drones are so prevalent in Ukraine they are estimated to be responsible for between 70 and 80 per cent of casualties on both sides of the war.

Kokhan's photograph of the bird's nest has been turned into a painting — part of a collaborative series by the watercolour artist Lillias August and Douglas Russell, senior curator at the Natural History Museum (NHM), on how birds have incorporated man-made materials into their nests throughout history.

The first tranche of paintings, including the Ukrainian nest, were exhibited at a conference of the British Ornithologists' Union in Nottingham this month. "Nests can be so exciting," said August, 70. "They're like little planets — the closer you look, the more there is to see."

Russell, 53, who is based at the NHM in Tring, Hertfordshire, which houses 5,000 historic bird's nests and 300,000 clutches of eggs, described the Ukrainian nest as "horrific", however. "Each of those fibres was designed with one purpose, to maim and kill," he said. "You couldn't ask for a more ironic contrast to a nest, which is purely about life."

Lillias August's painting of the Ukraine nest
Fibre-optic nest, Ukraine, watercolour 36 x 41cm COURTESY OF LILLIAS AUGUST

Kokhan, 33, a former plumber and civil engineer whose special forces callsign is "Mario", after the video game character, knows all about the darkness of war. He is speaking from a hospital bed in western Ukraine, having lost his left arm in battle in October — the arm that held the nest in the picture he took last summer.

It was June 2, and Mario was clearing a safe passage for his unit through woodland near a reservoir north of the town of Toretsk when he spotted the nest on the ground. There had been explosions close by and he thought it might have been blown out of a tree.

It reminded him of his childhood, growing up in a village near Izyum in Kharkiv. "Birds are not my hobby, but I always connected with animals and nature as a child," he said. "I knew what a nest should look like." This one was clearly different, lined with a fishing line-like cable he recognised from the deadly new type of drone.

Fibre-optic drone cables tangled in a forest on the Sumy front
FRANCISCO RICHART/SOPA IMAGES/LIGHTROCKET/GETTY IMAGES

He took his photo of the nest, holding it in the palm of his left hand, making sure the insignia of the Ukrainian National Guard, of which the Azov Brigade is a part, was visible on his glove. He left the nest where he found it, because "it wasn't mine to take".

He sent the picture to his brother-in-law, a fellow Azov fighter, who posted it on the Brigade's channel on the messaging app Telegram. Kokhan was soon horrified to learn that his photo had been copied and posted on a Russian TikTok account, claiming the nest had been found by a Russian soldier. The Ukrainian National Guard insignia on his glove had been cropped out. "You know, one of the biggest problems we are facing is this cognitive war," a spokesperson for the 1st Azov Corps said. "The enemy is trying to rewrite the history of the war."

YURIY KOKHAN

In October, Kokhan was undertaking infantry duties south of Toretsk and was caught up in artillery fire. "We were just leaving our position, when I was hit by shrapnel from an artillery shell," he said. On our video call,

he showed me his amputated left arm. He mustered a morbid joke. “From that photo, there is nothing left — no nest and no hand.”

Last year, Kokhan’s photograph appeared in a news story about the growing use of fibre-optic drones. It was spotted by the NHM’s Russell, who alerted August, a Royal Institute watercolour painter from Suffolk. She was midway through producing her series of 10 to 12 paintings of nests from the NHM collection at Tring. The earliest nest she had painted was that of a southern fiscal, recovered during the Boer war in 1902, lined with horsehair and cloth, probably scraps of bandages pecked from the battlefield.

Southern Fiscal’s nest, South Africa 1902,
Watercolour 34 x 50cm COURTESY OF LILLIAS AUGUST

They contacted the Azov Brigade that sent August the original photograph. Her watercolour series will now be bookended by nests from two wars. “The fibre-optic line creates this perfect circle, but then sort of bounces out of the top under its own steam. Like the conflict, it seems out of control,” she said. She and Russell hope to exhibit the series in London next year.

Kokhan was surprised to learn about the interest in his picture, 2,000 miles away in the UK. “I feel excited that this painting has been created,” he said. “It shows that people want to know the original source and the real story … It is also very cool that you want to pay attention to our smallest citizens, our birds.”

Ecologists believe this will not be the last fibre-optic nest that is found — indeed, a video of another appears to have surfaced in December. But the danger posed by the drones and inaccessibility of the front lines have made measuring their effect on wildlife almost impossible.

Some are still trying. Volodymyr Novak, 58, is an electronic warfare operator in the 63rd Separate Mechanized Brigade of the Ukrainian army. He is also a biologist and a member of the Ukrainian Society for the Protection of Birds (USPB). “Last year’s nesting season was practically the first when FPV drones with fibre were widely used,” Novak said. “In this nesting season, when fields and forest remnants are covered with fibre, the probability of birds using it is quite high. How exactly the fibre will affect birds, we will find out in a few years. There is a danger of chicks becoming entangled in it, which may lead to their death.”

Nets used to defend against drone attacks are already a threat to birds. Last summer, a young Ukrainian soldier called Ihor Shvachuk sent a picture to the USPB of himself freeing a light blue European roller bird from a net in Kherson. “I couldn’t allow a bird to die in a fishing net that we had set up to protect ourselves from enemy FPV drones,” he wrote. Over several days he said he freed others — “a magpie, a starling, a thrush, and two other birds whose names I don’t know … We risked our lives to save them, because it was dangerous there during the day, so everything had to be done very quickly.”

Kokhan, who is right-handed, is learning to use a specially adapted gaming mouse so he might one day return to work as a civil engineer. He wants to start a family with his wife and, when the war is over, move home to Kharkiv.

The fibre-optic nest, he said, was a symbol of resilience. “There are people in villages on the front line who don’t want to evacuate — they prefer to stay there. And it doesn’t mean they want Russia. It’s like the bird and the nest — it’s their home and they gave all their force to build it.”

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