

Choosing Coexistence

A Photo Essay by River Soderholm



Weed (noun)

1. a valueless plant growing wild.
2. any undesirable or troublesome plant, especially one that grows profusely where it is not wanted.

Pest (noun)

1. an annoying or troublesome person, animal, or thing; a nuisance.
2. an insect or other small animal that harms or destroys desirable things such as garden plants or trees.



Blooming Through a Chain-Link Fence

Too often, modern Western society has a tendency to label anything that lives around us without us putting it there as a “weed” or a “pest” to be rid of. Wildflowers grow in our lawns and by our sidewalks, and we try to weed them out, keeping our fields of monotonous grass and stifling biodiversity by doing so. Perhaps, however, we can better our own lives and the impact we have on our environment with an attitude of coexistence.



A weed is a “valueless plant growing wild.” But what if that plant has aesthetic value? What if it has ecological value? What if there is value inherent in any living thing?

Hidden in grass



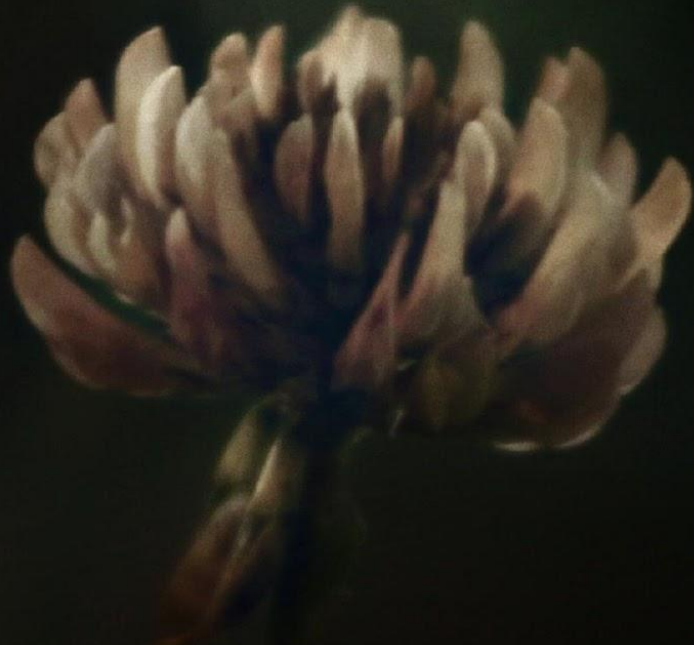
waking by dusk



Most people would agree that bunnies are cute. Their big eyes, long ears, and general fluffiness make them a crowd favorite, but they become “pests” when they chew on gardens and crops.

Rabbits can thrive in green spaces even within a busy city, quietly venturing out to forage at the day’s end.

White Clover with City Lights



A city, an ecosystem



Every place, even cities, has a unique set of living things that call it home. Syracuse, NY is one of the few places

where black, or melanistic, eastern gray squirrels are common. Black squirrels were once common throughout North American temperate forests, but today, they thrive only in urban habitats². It is possible that cities act as refuges for them by reducing predation pressure.



Crows over Syracuse



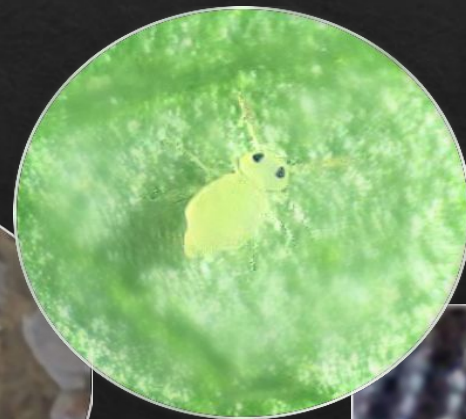
The city of Syracuse is home to huge numbers of crows, which darken the sky as they fly together each evening during the autumn. For some, these birds' migration is a breathtaking phenomenon, but others might say that Syracuse has a "crow problem," based on the mess they make and the fact that they may eat farmers' crops, competing with humans for food³.





Moss Growing in a Sidewalk Crack

Mosses are among the most tenacious of plants. They are able to survive nearly anywhere, even without soil, so long as they occasionally get wet. Moss is also a home for a variety of tiny animals, some barely visible or invisible to the naked eye. Springtails, like those shown here, can be found in a tiny patch of moss or soil, but their tiny size means few people notice them.



Seagull With Clouds and Power Lines

Gulls have earned something of a bad reputation for eating human garbage and scraps, but for a lot of our animal neighbors, the food we throw away is a feast. Not only are seagulls intelligent enough to make an attempt at swiping your fries, they've learned to crack open hard-shelled mollusks by flying into the air with them and dropping them onto hard rocks or hard pavement⁴. Some will even change the surface they use to get at a more difficult meal.



Sparrow in a Busy Square





Insect Blankets, Mislaid on a Stairway

Fallen leaves allow many insects and other small creatures, such as the large underwing moth caterpillar, to survive the winter by providing insulation. While it's not practical to leave them on the stairs, allowing a blanket of leaves to cover a lawn or a smaller area under a tree provides animals like baby moths a little winter warmth.



Pigeon With Fountain



City pigeons are sometimes referred to derisively as "winged rats," which I think is an insult to both the pigeons and the rats. They're beautiful birds, known otherwise as rock doves, rock pigeons, or feral pigeons, this last because US populations actually came from domesticated birds. Breeding "fancy pigeons" was popular during the Victorian era, and the many pigeon breeds produced by artificial selection were part of the evidence Darwin used for his theory of natural selection⁵.

Two Bees Enjoying Dandelion Nectar

While dandelions may be considered a “weed” in lawns, they are a food source for pollinators that can grow in otherwise hostile places, and their roots can help prevent erosion⁶. Although some of the dandelions commonly seen in the US are introduced from Europe, there are native species here as well. Even the introduced ones are largely harmless, and might provide a net benefit for ecosystems.





A Bee On My Hand

Bees and wasps are feared for their stings, but rarely do they resort to using them, and I feel comfortable holding these insects with a gentle hand. I found both of these lovely creatures moving slowly on a cold autumn day, and held them briefly to warm them with my body heat and give them a higher perch to take off from.

Contrary to popular belief, many wasps, like bees, are pollinators. Some are also quite intelligent and social, being able to recognize wasps they know by their faces, as well as distinguish between human individuals⁷.

A Wasp At My Fingertips



Dandelion by City Lights





Fly in Metallic Blue

Many flies, like this blow fly, have varied tastes in food, acting both as pollinators and as decomposers. Other types of flies, such as hover flies, specialize and feed exclusively on nectar. I believe the little friend in this picture may have been tasting my salty sweat.



Alley weeds

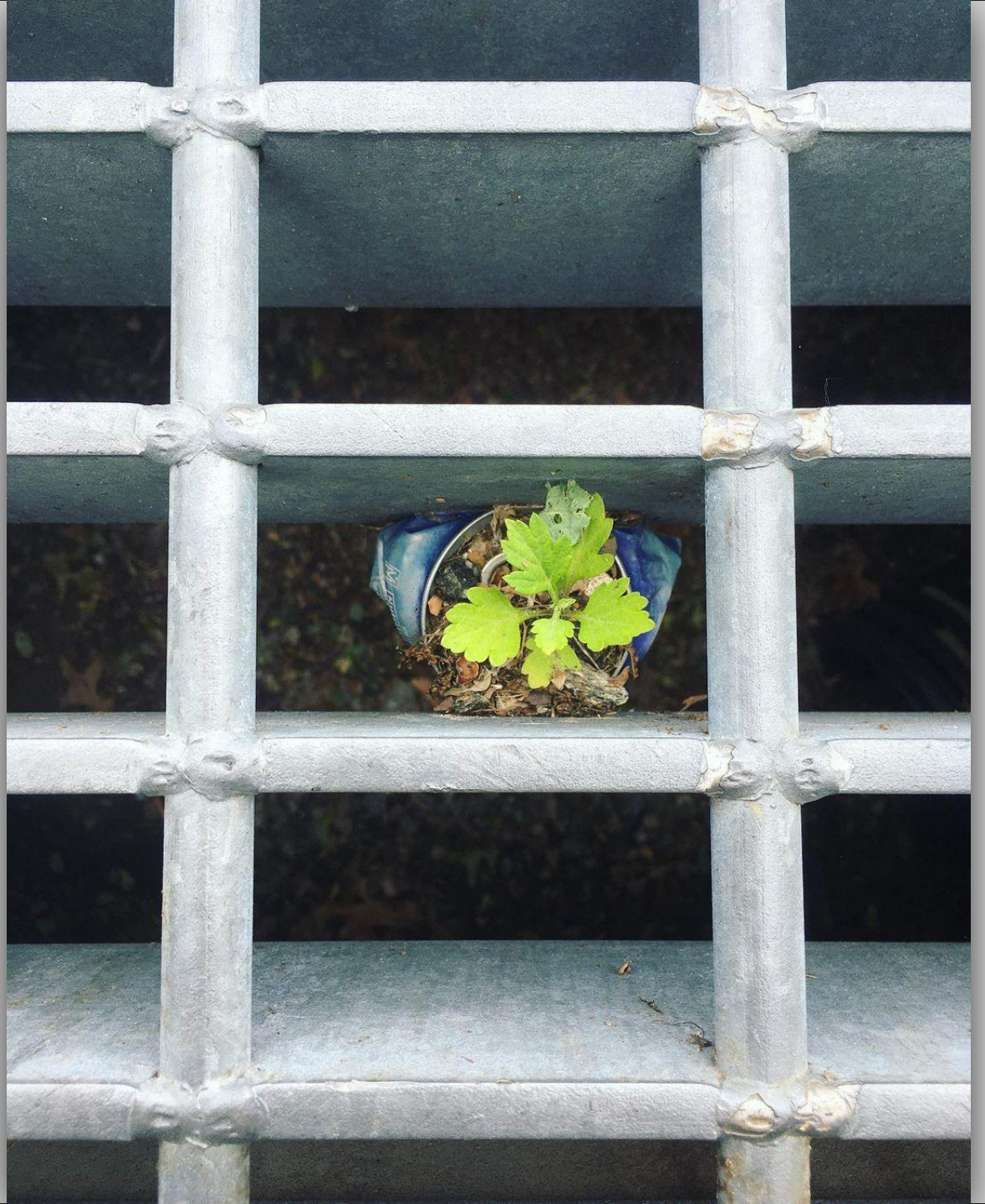
Whenever
we ignore a
place...
life grows
there.

Eight Innocent Eyes

Even small spiders tend to inspire outsized fears in people, but some find that on closer examination, the little creatures might even be considered cute. Spiders often eat the kinds of insects that are parasites of humans, such as mosquitoes, so the one building a web in the corner of your house might actually be doing you a service.



Life Finds a
Way



A Roach Pausing On My Sleeve

People, for the most part, hate cockroaches. They're viewed as disgusting bugs and a sign of filth. However, roaches are surprisingly intelligent and social animals; they forage together in groups and recognize individual roaches they know⁸. In the right light, perhaps these small survivors might even be considered beautiful.



In the end, what is a “weed” or a “pest” depends ultimately on what we humans desire and value. Do we value sterility and conformity over biodiversity and “perfect” lawns over pollinators? Or should we instead learn about and respect the living things around us, becoming more careful stewards of the urban ecosystems we create? A place dense with human life need not be devoid of other life. As a child, insects inspired a sense of wonder in me and ignited a passion for preserving our natural world. Children, and adults, should be able to grow with flowers, birds, insects, and wonder. We should all recognize: the Earth is “closer to home” than one might think.

Footnotes/Sources

1. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>

2. As explained to me by Jess Proctor in an informal presentation of her research on the subject.

3. In 1949 a group unsuccessfully attempted to blow up Syracuse's "crow problem" with dynamite.

<https://www.syracuse.com/living/2019/03/1949-montezumas-operation-crow-extermination-ends-in-dismal-failure.html>

4. This behavior is exhibited by many birds, and is arguably an example of tool use.

<https://www.audubon.org/news/gravity-gives-these-birds-drop-tough-crack-foods>

5. Pigeons have also been used to deliver messages, including during World War I.

<https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/54844/history-pigeon>

6. Dandelions provide food for humans as well with their edible leaves.

<https://www.grunge.com/841689/the-untold-truth-of-dandelions/>

7. Like humans, they look at the whole face rather than individual features.

<https://www.science.org/content/article/humans-wasps-seem-recognize-faces-more-sum-their-part>

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8. They also have individual personalities, as explained here.

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/cockroaches-have-personalities-too-180954140/>

Some researchers think they might even possess a sense of self.

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/if-cockroaches-are-conscious-would-that-stop-you-from-smushing-them-180947876/>