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This handout picture released by the Calanques National Park (Parc national des Calanques) shows a group of dolphins swimming in the Mediterranean Sea at the Calanques National Park, off the coast of southeastern France, on March 19, 2020, after a strict lockdown came into effect in France on March 17 aimed of stopping the spread of COVID-19.—AFP photos



This handout picture released by the Calanques National Park (Parc national des Calanques) shows shows shearwater birds on the Mediterranean Sea at the Calanques National Park.

Nature takes back world's empty city streets

As humans retreat into their homes as more and more countries go under coronavirus lockdown, wild animals are slipping cover to explore the empty streets of some of our biggest cities. Wild boar have descended from the hills around Barcelona while sika deer are nosing their way around the deserted metro stations of Nara, Japan. Indian social media has gone wild about footage of a stag scampering through Dehradun, the capital

quickly. When a place becomes quiet, they're straight in there."

Animals 'spring of love'

Animals and birds that normally live in urban parks, like sparrows and pigeons are also more likely to venture beyond their usual territories. Julliard said, "freeing a space for other animals". While the dawn and dusk choruses have been bringing comfort to many quarantined city dwellers, the museum's acoustics specialist Jerome Sueur said that doesn't mean there are more urban birds than before.

It is more that with reduced traffic noise we can hear them better. Some, however, "stop singing when there is noise, so now they are letting themselves go." "Animals are shaking off human noise pollution," Sueur said. And the timing could not have been better time as they embark on their mating season. With the hunting season suspended in several European countries, this promises to be a spring and possibly a summer of love for the animal kingdom.

It is certainly great news for species like the common toad and the spotted salamander. The amorous amphibians are being spared from being "crushed crossing busy roads" in their haste to find a mate, said Jean-Noel Rieffel, of the French biodiversity office (OFB). With few dog walkers to disturb them, baby fawns are also getting an idyllic start to life while birds like Mediterranean gulls who nest along the sandy banks of rivers are being left undisturbed. In the Calanques National Park overlooking the Mediterranean near France's second city of Marseille, wildlife "is reclaiming its natural habitat with surprising speed", said the park's president, Didier Reault. With walkers and boating banned, "the puffins who used to stay on the islets in the highest protected areas are not gathering on the sea," he said.

Birdwatching to stay sane

And it is the same for plants. Wild orchids — which are supposed to be protected — are often picked by walkers when they blossom in late April and May, said Rieffel. This year they will be spared that fate. And in the cities and

suburbs, unmowed lawns will be a source of "bounty for bees, bumble bees and butterflies", Julliard added. But for him, the biggest change is the effect this is having on humans. "The most important phenomenon perhaps is our relationship with nature changing — with people locked up in their homes realising how much they miss nature," he said.

he told his new-found followers. However, there are also down sides to the lockdown for nature.

Work to limit invasive species has been all but halted, cautioned Loic Obled of the OFB, as well as that to help endangered species. And when the lockdown finally ends, Rieffel warned that "people will have a need of



Picture released by Aton Chile showing an approximately one-year-old puma in the streets of Santiago on March 24, 2020 which according to the Agricultural and Livestock Service (SAG) came down from the nearby mountains in search for food as less people are seen in the streets due to the coronavirus, COVID-19, pandemic.

of the northern state of Uttarakhand. Gangs of wild turkeys have been strutting the streets of Oakland, California, while a puma turned up in the centre of the Chilean capital Santiago, which is under curfew.

"This is the habitat they once had and that we've taken away from them," said Marcelo Giagnoni, the head of Chile's agricultural and livestock service that helped police capture the curious big cat. While sightings of dolphins in Venice's canals turned out to be fanciful, they have been popping up in ports elsewhere in the Mediterranean as emboldened wildlife takes "free rein to wander our cities and towns", said Romain Julliard, head of research at the French Natural History Museum. He told AFP that foxes were at the vanguard of the new urban explorers. "They change their behaviour very



Aerial view of empty Plaza de Armas square in Santiago, Chile.

Stuck indoors, with their worlds reduced to a few square meters (yards), confined urbanites have suddenly become avid birdwatchers. British ornithologist David Lindo, who is known as the "Urban Birder", has been tweeting and live streaming birds he spots from the roof of the building in Spain where he has been quarantined. "The sky is a great arena, anything can fly past and, at the very least, it will give you peace. My message is simple: keep looking up,"

nature and there is a risk of too many visitors (to natural parks), which won't be good for the flora and fauna." The birds which have nested in the yard of an abandoned school or factory will find themselves disturbed, he warned. Nature's respite from man may be rather short-lived.—AFP



Lebanese applaud virus-battling health workers from balconies

People take part in a mass round of applause to show their appreciation for the nurses and frontline healthcare staff during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, in the Lebanese capital Beirut.—AFP

Cheering erupted from balconies and windows in Lebanon on Sunday evening, as the country's citizens celebrated their "heroic" medical workers battling the coronavirus pandemic. The initiative spread online with the Arabic hashtag "a cheer for the heroes", shared by public figures including journalists, actors and the Arab pop star Ragheb Alama. In one Beirut neighborhood, a woman draped in a Lebanese flag sang the national anthem as her neighbors drummed on pots and pans, an AFP journalist said.

Elsewhere, Lebanese played drums and blew vuvuzelas, sharing videos of

the street performances online. Similar initiatives have gained attention from Italy to France but they have remained rare in the Arab world. Lebanon has reported 438 COVID-19 cases to date, with 10 deaths. To try to contain the spread of the virus, Lebanon has imposed isolation measures on its population until April 12, with a nighttime curfew in effect. Schools, universities, restaurants and bars are closed. Many fear the country's healthcare system could be overwhelmed by cases.—AFP

Country music star Joe Diffie dies of coronavirus

Joe Diffie, a Grammy award-winning country music singer who had several chart-topping hits in the 1990s, has died of coronavirus. He was 61. Diffie's death was announced on his Facebook page, which said he died on Sunday "from complications of coronavirus." His death came just two days after he had announced that he had tested positive for the virus and was receiving medical care. "My family and I are asking for privacy at this time," he said. "We want to remind the public and all my fans to be vigilant, cautious and careful during this pandemic."

Diffie, who was from Oklahoma, had several hit songs during the 1990s including "Pickup Man," "Prop Me Up Beside the Jukebox (If I Die)" and "John Deere Green." His first album, "A Thousand Winding Roads," was released in 1990 and including his hit song "Home." Nearly 137,000 people have tested positive for coronavirus in the United States and there have been more than 2,400 deaths.—AFP



In this file photo Musician Joe Diffie performs during Tootsie's Orchid Lounge 54th Birthday Bash at Tootsie's Orchid Lounge in Nashville, Tennessee.—AFP

Penderecki: Avant-gardist loved by Hollywood

Polish composer and conductor Krzysztof Penderecki, who blazed a trail in classical music with innovative religious and symphonic works, died aged 86 on Sunday in his home city of Krakow after a long illness, his family told local media. Venerated as one of the 20th Century's most influential composers, Penderecki worked with symphony orchestras across the world and won fans among top film directors including Stanley Kubrick, Martin Scorsese and David Lynch who commissioned film scores.

His music appears in Kubrick's The Shining, Scorsese's Shutter Island, Lynch's Twin Peaks and, more recently, in an episode of TV show Black Mirror. A key figure of the 1960s avant-garde, Penderecki remained respectful of great religious and symphonic traditions while blazing a trail in contemporary classical music. Thanks to a temporary political thaw in Poland's communist regime at the time, Penderecki's works managed to break through the Iron Curtain and achieve swift international success.

The composer made use of unusual intervals, tone clusters and glissandi and used the timbres of instruments in innovative ways. Such techniques featured in "Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima", a 1960 work for large string orchestra that won much recognition. Penderecki did

not shy away from unconventional effects: He used sheet metal, whistles, pieces of glass and metal rubbed with a file, rattles, electric sounds, saws, typewriters or alarm bells to add sonic texture to compositions. He also invented music notation symbols to match his original means of expression.



This file photo shows Polish composer Krzysztof Penderecki applauding during the opening of the Krzysztof Penderecki European Centre for Music in Lusławice, southeastern Poland.—AFP

Later, Penderecki gradually abandoned his avant-garde sound. Criticized by some in the musical community for backtracking, this evolution won him applause among non-specialists. He returned to neo-tonal, post-Romantic writing, with content and form more readily accessible to a larger audience.—AFP



In this file photo Britain's Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex (left), and Meghan, Duchess of Sussex leave after attending the Endeavour Fund Awards at Mansion House in London.—AFP

Trump says US won't pay Harry and Meghan security

President Donald Trump said Sunday that the United States would not pay security costs for Prince Harry and his wife Meghan, appearing to confirm that the royal couple have moved to live in California. They reportedly flew by private jet from Canada to Los Angeles before the border between the two countries closed because of the deadly coronavirus outbreak. The couple, who had been living in Canada for several months, rocked the royal family earlier this year with their decision to no longer repre-

sent the British monarchy and to pursue a new, independent life. "I am a great friend and admirer of the Queen & the United Kingdom," Trump tweeted.

"It was reported that Harry and Meghan, who left the Kingdom, would reside permanently in Canada. Now they have left Canada for the US however, the US will not pay for their security protection. They must pay!" Meghan grew up in Los Angeles and her mother, Doria Ragland, still lives in the city. The one-time actress has a network of friends and work contacts in

Los Angeles, where she could now restart her career. Disney announced on Thursday that she will narrate a new film about a family of African elephants. Harry was reportedly caught in a hoax telephone call recently in which he attacked Trump for his stance on climate change. The Duke and Duchess of Sussex will formally step back from royal duties on March 31.—AFP