

The insect and bird decline against the historical background of our cultural landscape – *and how we can overcome it*

Online lecture by Dr. Herbert Nickel

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Link available from Zeman Šimon (ze.simon@seznam.cz)

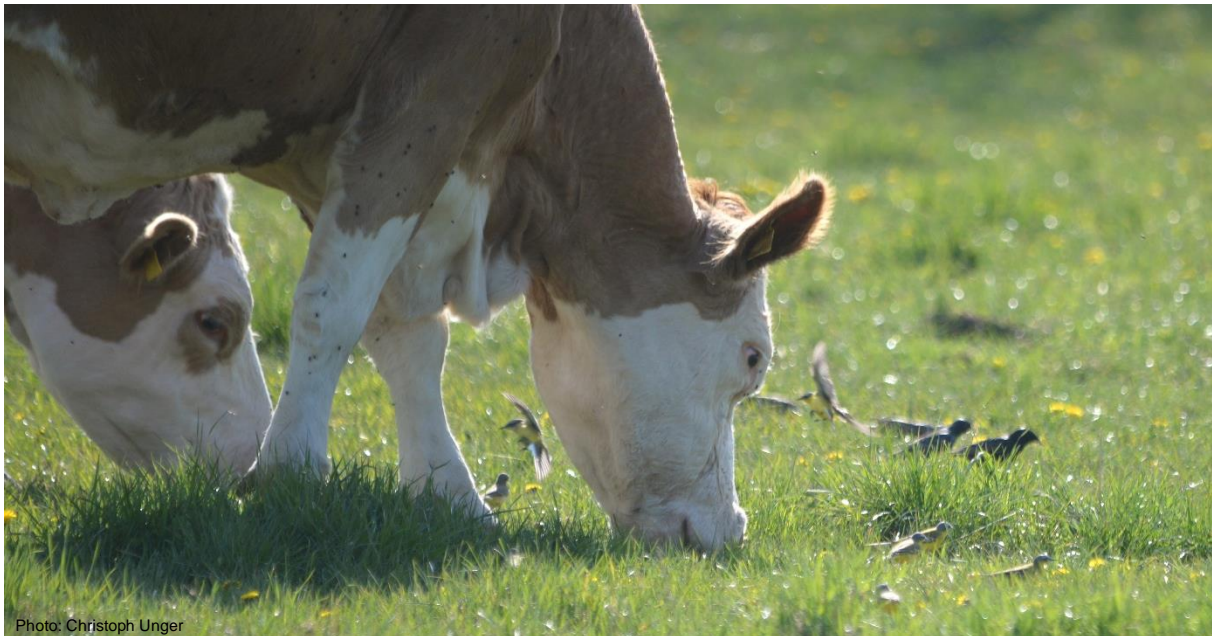


Photo: Christoph Unger

When we walk through our modern fields and meadows today we don't hear the bird and insect songs of our childhood any more. The silent spring predicted by Rachel Carson in 1962 has come true, caused by the intensification of land use, pesticides and homogenization of our landscape which has lost much of its beauty and identity. And there are further serious concerns: the ploughed soils of former grasslands and the production of fertilisers are releasing enormous amounts of CO₂, embanked river floodplains lost their potential to prevent flooding events, nutrients from the globalized fodder market and mineral fertilisers eutrophicate our landscape and formerly free-ranging grazing animals are now intensively managed indoors. Even the poorest sites under frequent risk of flooding are used nowadays, supported by subsidies without any real public gain but with negative ecological impact. And last the number of farms is still decreasing eventually leaving only a few highly industrialized ones.

Since our own countryside has become so monotonous we spend our holidays in the Alps or in Southern or Eastern Europe hiking, coming across roaming cattle and herds of sheep over carpets of flowers amongst butterflies and birds. This world seems to be in harmony and balance, but still we don't realize the paramount correlation between grazing animals and biodiversity. In fact this story goes way back when large grazers were shaping all our landscape by their mere physical power, as selective feeders, vectors of plant seeds and providers of dung which are all underestimated key factors for terrestrial biodiversity. So how can we bring back home those paradises full of flowers and birds?

These considerations may offer a clue for the solution of our recent crisis, reconnect our farming system with biodiversity by re-activating grazers as key factors for landscapes and biodiversity. 21st century conservationists should integrate these points and demand the return of our grazing animals into the landscape, not least in the framework of the current CAP (Common Agricultural Policy) negotiations. Extensive grazing potentially promotes not only biodiversity, but could also contribute substantially to the prevention of climate change and flooding events, to the conservation of soils and water and not least, to survival of traditional farming and animal welfare.

Dr. Herbert Nickel is an independant ecologist and entomologist living in Göttingen. His work focuses on conservation, grazing ecology, landscape history, entomology and ornithology. According to him current explanations of the loss of our biodiversity are incomplete because they neglect the deep economic and social transformations that changed our land use during the last two centuries.