



Where I work Lilla Lovász

Just inside France's border with Germany, enclosed between the Rhine River and the Grand Canal of Alsace, lies an island that is becoming a haven for biodiversity. The site, to the north of Basel, Switzerland, is being made into a conservation area in a joint project between the National Nature Reserve of the Petite Camargue and the French energy company EDF. The aim is to create a self-sustaining mosaic of forest and meadows that can host many species of flora and fauna.

As part of my PhD programme in zoology, I study how the landscape of a 32-hectare test area of the island changes over time. I and my colleagues are documenting the diversity of birds, amphibians, butterflies and plants.

Meadows are a rare and precious habitat in central Europe. Without floods, fires or large grazing animals, meadows typically have to be maintained through mowing or grazing. The reserve's managers use cows and horses as grazers to prevent forests from taking over the island.

In 2018, we introduced Konik horses, which might be direct descendants of

wild horses, followed by Highland cows. Currently, we have seven of each.

I conduct vegetation surveys between June and September and do bird surveys year round. In this picture, I'm carrying on with one of my responsibilities – attending to the horses' GPS collars and replacing batteries. I have to be in a calm state to take a horse's collar off and put it back on, because they are so sensitive to human moods. They have to be in the right mood, too, or I'll get a warning kick.

It's been fascinating to watch the changes here over the past three years. Nature is returning, and more species are coming back. In particular, the common starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) and Eurasian skylarks (*Alauda arvensis*), whose populations are declining in Europe, are benefiting here from the horses and cows. We think that the grazers help starlings – for example, by flushing out the insects that they feed on.

Lilla Lovász is a PhD student in zoology at the University of Basel, Switzerland. **Interview by Virginia Gewin.**

Photographed for *Nature*
by Clara Tuma.