

## Back-scratching bovine leads scientists to reassess intelligence of cows

### Level 3: Advanced

#### 1 Warmer

a. Discuss the questions.

1. What are the most popular pets in your country?
2. Have any animals become more common as pets recently?
3. What characteristics make an animal a good pet?
4. Are there any animals that shouldn't be pets? Why?
5. What makes a pet better suited for city life or rural life?

#### 2 Key words

a. Choose the correct word to match each definition. Then find and highlight them in the article to read them in context. Some words may appear in different form in the article.

knack	dexterity	footage	livestock	cattle
bristled	fashion	grasp	prowess	udders
acquire	clamp	idyllic	sharp	wield

1. skill, grace and ease in using the body \_\_\_\_\_
2. having sharp points or stiff hairs \_\_\_\_\_
3. farm animals that contribute to agriculture or production \_\_\_\_\_
4. skill or expertise in a particular area \_\_\_\_\_
5. a group of domestic animals, like cows and bulls \_\_\_\_\_
6. to get, learn or develop \_\_\_\_\_
7. a natural talent, skill or ability \_\_\_\_\_
8. the part of a cow that produces milk \_\_\_\_\_
9. to understand or comprehend completely \_\_\_\_\_
10. to hold something firmly in place \_\_\_\_\_
11. very bright, intelligent or clever \_\_\_\_\_

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### Level 3: Advanced

12. to form or create in a specific way \_\_\_\_\_
13. very beautiful, pleasant, peaceful and happy \_\_\_\_\_
14. to hold and use a tool or other item \_\_\_\_\_
15. a piece of film recording \_\_\_\_\_

**b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity.**

1. We admired his \_\_\_\_\_ and dedication as footballer.
2. The farmers gently cleaned the cows' \_\_\_\_\_.
3. The hair stylist used a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ brush to comb her client's hair.
4. He had to \_\_\_\_\_ the wood in place before he could cut it.
5. Our holiday in the south of France last summer was \_\_\_\_\_.
6. Some people have a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ for languages; they learn very quickly.
7. Horses, pigs, chicken and sheep are examples of \_\_\_\_\_.
8. Cowboys are trained to work with bulls and other \_\_\_\_\_.
9. She found an old video with \_\_\_\_\_ of her first birthday party.
10. My neighbour is kind and helpful, but he isn't very \_\_\_\_\_.

**c. Use the remaining words from task a to write your own sentences.**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

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### Level 3: Advanced

*Brown Swiss in Austria has been discovered using tools in different ways – something only ever seen in humans and chimpanzees*

**Ian Sample**

**19 January 2026**

- 1 Scientists have been forced to rethink the intelligence of cattle after an Austrian cow named Veronika displayed an impressive – and until now undocumented – knack for tool use.
- 2 Witgar Wiegele, an organic farmer and baker from a small town in Carinthia near the Italian border, keeps Veronika as a pet and noticed that she occasionally played with sticks and used them to scratch her body.
- 3 Wiegele said Veronika began playing with pieces of wood years ago, then worked out how to scratch herself with sticks. He said she also recognised family members' voices and hurried to meet them when they called.
- 4 "I was naturally amazed by her extraordinary intelligence and thought how much we could learn from animals: patience, calmness, contentment, and gentleness," he said.
- 5 Word soon got around and before long a video clip of the cow's behaviour reached biologists in Vienna who specialise in animal intelligence. They immediately grasped the importance of the footage. "It was a cow using an actual tool," said Dr Antonio Osuna Mascaró at the city's University of Veterinary Medicine. "We got everything ready and jumped in the car to visit."
- 6 Veronika's home town, Nötsch im Gailtal, is "straight out of the Sound of Music" with green forests, blue lakes, mountains and a church and school near Veronika's meadow, Osuna Mascaró said, adding: "It's the most idyllic place imaginable for an Austrian cow."
- 7 Armed with a deck brush, Osuna Mascaró and his colleague Alice Auersperg set about testing Veronika's skills. Through a series of field trials, the brown Swiss proved she could not only pick up the broom, but wield it according to the job at hand. If the broom was at an awkward angle, Veronika used her tongue to reposition it before clamping it in place with her teeth.
- 8 Veronika favoured the bristled end of the broom to scratch the tough skin on her back. But she switched to the smooth handle and scratched more gently when the itch was on more delicate, lower body areas such as her udders and belly, according to the study in *Current Biology*.
- 9 "At the beginning I thought this was the result of a mistake. Perhaps Veronika was not careful enough when selecting her tool for self-scratching," Osuna Mascaró said. "But after a while we started to observe a pattern: Veronika indeed had a preference for using the broom end, but when she used the handle end, she was doing so in a meaningful way."
- 10 Tool use is well known in chimps, crows, dolphins and even octopuses. The latter have been filmed throwing shells at one another. But livestock have never been considered the sharpest of animals. Gary Larson's 1982 *Far Side* cartoon, *Cow Tools*, shows a cow standing behind a table of oddly shaped objects. It confused scores of readers, including Larson's mother, prompting him to explain: "While I have never met a cow who could make tools, I felt sure that if I did, they (the tools) would lack something in sophistication and resemble the sorry specimens shown."
- 11 Veronika is far from making even misshapen tools, but her prowess in using them has impressed nonetheless. Over seven sessions of 10 trials, the researchers witnessed 76 instances of tool use as she grabbed the broom to scratch otherwise unreachable regions. Using both ends of the brush counts as multi-purpose tool use, the scientists say, which is extraordinarily rare. Beyond humans, it has only been shown convincingly in chimpanzees.
- 12 It is unclear how Veronika acquired her skills, but circumstances have been in her favour. Few cows reach her age of 13 years old or live in such a stimulating environment. That said, the researchers believe cattle may simply be smarter than people have previously realised. Since the study, Osuna Mascaró said other clever cows have come to light. "We don't believe that Veronika is the Einstein of cows," he said.
- 13 "What this tells us is that cows have the potential to innovate tool use, and we have ignored this fact for thousands of years," he added. "It's shocking that we're only discovering this now."

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### Level 3: Advanced

- 14 There is no suggestion that Veronika's skills are evidence of the evolution of an ominous new species of super-cow. As the scientists write in the study: "She did not fashion tools like the cow in Gary Larson's cartoon, but she selected, adjusted and used one with notable dexterity and flexibility. Perhaps the real absurdity lies not in imagining a tool-using cow, but in assuming such a thing could never exist."

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#### 3 Comprehension check

a. Read the article again. Complete the summary. Use one word for each gap.

Veronika is an extraordinary cow who lives on a beautiful farm in (1) \_\_\_\_\_, surrounded by forests, lakes and mountains. She's a thirteen-year-old pet with unique abilities, like recognising the (2) \_\_\_\_\_ of her owner, Witgar, and his family. Years ago, the family noticed that Veronika used a wooden stick to (3) \_\_\_\_\_ herself. Witgar filmed her using the stick. The video soon got the attention of (4) \_\_\_\_\_ at a university in Vienna. They visited the farm and conducted a number of field (5) \_\_\_\_\_ to study her behaviour. They watched her pick up a broom with her mouth, move it with her tongue and hold it in place with her (6) \_\_\_\_\_. Her movements followed a meaningful pattern. She used the sharp end of the broom on her back and the smooth part on softer areas like her udders and (7) \_\_\_\_\_. Scientists consider this to be (8) \_\_\_\_\_ tool use. Such creative use of tools is usually seen in (9) \_\_\_\_\_ and chimpanzees. Veronika has impressed scientists and made them rethink their assumptions about the (10) \_\_\_\_\_ of cattle.

#### 4 Key language

a. Look back at the article. Complete the table with missing parts of speech. Note that some words have more than one form for each part of speech.

Nouns	Verbs	Adjectives	Adverbs
amazement	amaze	amazing, (1) _____	amazingly
(2) _____	behave	behavioural	behaviourally
calm, (3) _____	calm	calm, calming	calmly, calmingly
(4) _____	---	content, contented	contently, contentedly
gentleness	---	gentle	(5) _____
imagination	imagine	imaginative, (6) _____	imaginatively, imaginably
impression	impress	impressed, (7) _____	impressively
innovative	(8) _____	innovative	innovatively
meaning	mean	(9) _____	meaningfully
nature	---	natural	(10) _____
(11) _____	---	patient	patiently

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**b. Complete sentences with the words from the table in task a. Use the correct part of speech.**

1. Lizzie watched in \_\_\_\_\_ as her favourite singer performed on stage.
2. Remember to \_\_\_\_\_ professionally in your interview.
3. The sound of running water has a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ effect on many people.
4. The parents smiled with \_\_\_\_\_ as they looked at their newborn baby.
5. My grandmother's voice was \_\_\_\_\_ and kind.
6. A famous song says "\_\_\_\_\_ all the people, living life in peace."
7. Pierre plays the guitar and piano \_\_\_\_\_ well.
8. The school uses a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ approach to language learning.
9. I'm sorry, but I just don't understand what you \_\_\_\_\_.
10. We didn't use any chemicals – we let the plants grow \_\_\_\_\_.
11. Try to be \_\_\_\_\_. It will be your turn very soon.

### 5 Discussion

**a. Discuss these questions.**

1. Were you impressed by Veronika's abilities? Why or why not?
2. Do you think tool use is a good way to measure animal intelligence?
3. How else can we measure intelligence in animals?
4. What does the expression "the Einstein of cows" mean?
5. Do you know any other examples of intelligent or highly skilled animals?

## Back-scratching bovine leads scientists to reassess intelligence of cows

Level 3: Advanced

### 6 In your own words

- a. There are a variety of roles available to people who want to work with wild animals or pets, including animal behaviouralists, animal-assisted therapists, biologists, farmers, groomers, trainers and veterinarians. Research a role and prepare a job profile. Include the following information:
- What do they do in their day-to-day role?
  - Where do they typically work?
  - What types of animals do they work with?
  - What skills, education or training are needed?
  - What are the positive impacts of the role?
  - Are there any dangers involved?
  - Are there any controversies or concerns related to this role?
- b. Share your job profile with the class.