The Guardian

one stop english

Back-scratching bovine leads scientists to reassess intelligence of cows

Level 2: Intermediate

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the questions.

1. What are the most popular pets in your country?

2. Have any animals become more or less common as pets recently?

3. What characteristics make an animal a good pet?

4. Are there any animals that shouldn't be pets? Why?

2 Key words

a. Choose the correct word or expression 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.

livestock	work out	meadow	pattern
awkward	extraordinary	notable	cattle
delicate	field trials	circumstances	udders

1. something important and worthy of special attention _____

2. a group of domestic animals, like cows and bulls _____

3. an area of grass where animals walk and eat _____

4. very unusual, special or unexpected _____

5. the part of a cow that produces milk _____

6. tests or experiments in a natural environment _____

7. inconvenient, uncomfortable or difficult to deal with _____

8. farm animals that contribute to agriculture or production _____

9. something that repeats in a consistent way _____

10. facts or conditions related to particular situation _____

11. to solve a problem or realise how to do something _____

12. sensitive, fine or easily breakable _____

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

1. We noticed that there was a(n) _____ to the puppies' behaviour.

2. The researchers conducted _____ to study the local birds.

3. I tripped and fell during my presentation. It was _____.

4. The farmers gently cleaned the cows' _____.

5. Billy got lost and couldn't _____ his way home.

6. Please don't drop the glasses. They're very _____.

7. Horses, pigs, chicken and sheep are examples of _____.

8. Cowboys are trained to work with bulls and other _____.

9. The professor made a(n) _____ contribution to the field of marine biology.

10. Julia tried her best to finish the project, but there were _____ out of her control.

11. We took a walk along the river and watched the cows sleeping in the _____.

12. We went on safari on holiday. It was a(n) _____ experience.

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 – talent 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 Soon, a video clip of the cow's behaviour reached biologists in Vienna who specialise in animal intelligence. They immediately realized the importance of the clip. "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, has green forests, blue lakes, mountains and a church and school near Veronika's meadow, Osuna Mascaró said, adding: "It's the most beautiful place imaginable for an Austrian cow."

7 Osuna Mascaró and his colleague Alice Auersperg decided to test Veronika's skills. Through a series of field trials, the brown Swiss proved she could not only pick up the broom, but use it in different ways depending on her needs. If the broom was at an awkward angle, Veronika used her tongue to move it before holding it in place with her teeth.

8 Veronika preferred the sharp 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.

9 "At the beginning I thought this was the result of a mistake. Maybe Veronika was not careful enough when selecting her tool for self-scratching," Osuna Mascaró said. "But after a while we started to see a pattern: Veronika had a preference for using the broom end. When she used the handle end, she was doing it in a meaningful way."

10 Tool use is well known in chimps, crows, dolphins and even octopuses. But livestock have never been considered the most intelligent of animals.

11 Over seven sessions of 10 trials, the researchers saw 76 instances of tool use as she grabbed the broom to scratch areas she couldn't reach on her own. Using both ends of the brush counts as multi-purpose tool use, the scientists say, which is extremely rare. Beyond humans, it has only been seen in chimpanzees.

12 It is unclear how Veronika learned her skills, but circumstances have been in her favour. Few cows reach her age of 13 years old or live in such an interesting environment. Also, the researchers believe cattle may simply be smarter than people have previously realised. Since the study, Osuna Mascaró has heard about other clever cows. "We don't believe that Veronika is the Einstein of cows," he said.

13 "This tells us 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."

14 Veronika's skills don't suggest that there is of a new species of super-cow. The scientists say: "She did not create tools like the cow, but she selected, adjusted and used one with notable ability and flexibility. It isn't crazy to imagine that cows can use tools – it was crazy to assume they couldn't."

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3 Comprehension check

a. Read the article again. Use the words in the box to complete the summary.

belly	**intelligence**	**scratch**	**voices**
teeth	**multi-purpose**	**trials**	
biologists	**Austria**	**humans**	

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.

Nouns	Verbs	Adjectives	Adverbs
amazement	amaze	amazing, (1) _____	amazingly
(2) _____	behave	behavioural	behaviourally
gentleness	---	gentle	(3) _____
impression	impress	(4) _____	impressively
innovative	(5) _____	innovative	innovatively
meaning	mean	(6) _____	meaningfully
nature	---	natural	(7) _____
(8) _____	---	patient	patiently

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Level 2: Intermediate

a. Complete sentences 1-8 with the words from the table above. 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. My grandmother's voice was _____ and kind.

4. Pierre plays the guitar and piano _____ well.

5. The school uses a(n) _____ approach to language learning.

6. I'm sorry, but I just don't understand what you _____.

7. We didn't use any chemicals – we let the plants grow _____.

8. 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 test animal intelligence?

3. What does the expression "the Einstein of cows" mean?

4. Do you know any other examples of intelligent or highly skilled animals?

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?

Level 2: Intermediate

- What skills, education or training are needed?

- What are the positive impacts of the role?

- Are there any dangers involved?

b. **Share your job profile with the class.**