

Juniper Heath and Chalk Grassland – Our Local Biodiversity

You will encounter one of the most biodiverse habitats of Central Europe on your hike across the wide, sun-drenched slopes of the Altmühl river valley. A large variety of rare animals and plants are native to the apparently barren hillsides. Orchids, thyme, and juniper emit their spicy scents in the months of summer. Butterflies, grasshoppers, and lizards love the grasslands for the climate conditions that are usually found further south, in the Mediterranean region.

The German term Magerrasen – lean grassland – for these areas seems incongruous in view of Nature's abundance. But chalk grasslands and juniper heaths are challenging habitats. The life-giving humus layer is thin and poor in nutrients. Rain quickly drains away through the soil, making this habitat arid and hot. Ground temperatures of over 40 degrees Celsius are not uncommon.

The biodiversity here is actually human-made. When people first settled in this area, they started to clear the vast forests for their own purposes. They built houses, cultivated fields, and grazed their livestock. Plots outside settlements were used as pastures for pigs, cattle, sheep, and goats in the early Middle Ages. The communal shepherd usually drove the sheep out of town. The sheep sidestepped the juniper, which was too prickly for their soft mouths. The shepherd would therefore remove any emerging shrubs to make space for grazing land. The juniper heaths we appreciate so much today were a sign of poorly kept grasslands back then.

Centuries of clearing away shrubs and trees for grazing led to more and more of the lean grasslands developing. Over time, the distinctive Altmühl landscape with its forestless, rocky slopes was formed. In the mid-20th century, the grassland pastures were gradually abandoned, and shrubs, trees and forests spread again. The special climate created by grazing changed, and much of the biodiversity disappeared from the hillsides.

The end of the 1980s saw the onset of restoration of this exceptional habitat. In line with nature conservation, bushes were removed and shepherds brought their flocks back to the hillsides, as they still do nowadays. Some of Bavaria's largest contiguous chalk grasslands and juniper heaths so typical of the Altmühl valley today are found in the area of Riedenburg.