

More often than not, steppe grasslands are interspersed with submediterranean orchid-rich oligotrophic calcareous grasslands and calcareous areas colonized by pioneer species. In the Bottendorfer Hügel nature conservation area, they also occur in areas adjacent to calaminarian grasslands.

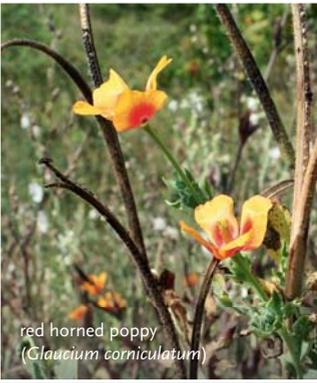
In central Europe, there are only very small areas of natural woodless dry and semi-dry grasslands. They are limited to very steep, rocky, dry and warm sites. Far more often, we find “secondary” dry and semi-dry grasslands that have developed on abandoned fields and vineyards with shallow soils over the last centuries. Their biodiversity can only be conserved if they are subject to sheep and goat grazing on a regular basis.

What is LIFE+? Launched in 1992, LIFE (*L'instrument financier pour l'environnement* – The Financial Instrument for the Environment) is the financial instrument of the European Union supporting environmental and nature conservation projects. The funding within the programme part LIFE+ nature serves to protect habitats and animal and plant species that are regarded as European Natural Heritage. The funding is therefore restricted to areas proposed to be identified and designated by the European Commission as Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) under the Habitats Directive or Special Protection Areas (SPAs) under the Birds Directive. Thus Life projects contribute to securing the European Natura 2000 network of protected sites.

Ministry for Agriculture,
Forestry, Environment
and Nature Conservation



steppic grassland to gypsum hill



red horned poppy
(*Glaucium corniculatum*)

needle grass
(*Stipa capillata*)



LIFE project Conservation and development of the steppe grasslands in Thuringia

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What are steppe grasslands and where can they be found?

Steppe grasslands are dry grasslands and semi-dry grasslands dominated by great feather grass, spring pheasant's eye and other species that are continentally distributed. They predominantly occur in areas with an average annual precipitation of less than 500 millimetres. In Thuringia, they are mainly found on the Keuper hills of the Thuringian Basin and in the Zechstein belt of the Kyffhäuser Mountain and of the Bottendorfer Höhe. Small areas of steppe grasslands also occur on dry and warm lime stone hillsides and on the loess islands of the Hainleite area. They can be regarded as the “outposts” of the steppe of eastern Europe. The steppe grasslands on slopes with shallow gypsum, clay or lime marl Rendzina soil that are exposed to south and west sites often live under extreme conditions: drought stress, weak soil development, wind and water erosion, and they can even turn into “Badlands” – like those in the Drei-Gleichen area and the Schwellenburg nature conservation area.



The LIFE+ nature project is managed by the Thuringian Ministry for Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Nature Conservation (Thüringer Ministerium für Landwirtschaft, Forsten, Umwelt und Naturschutz – TMLFVN). It comprises 13 project areas in the rural districts Kyffhäuserkreis (excluding the Kyffhäuser Mountain), Sömmerda, Unstrut-Hainich-Kreis, Gotha, Ilmkreis and Erfurt, the state capital. With a duration of six years (2009-2014) and a total budget of five million Euros, more than 90 individual projects will be implemented. Due to the outstanding significance of this project, the maximum funding rate of 75 percent has been granted by the European Commission. The remaining 25 percent is funded by the Free State of Thuringia.

The project aims at the upgrading, the enlargement and the long-term protection of the steppe grasslands. They shelter a multitude of rare and endangered species of European conservation concern.



small land snail
(*Trochoidea geyeri*)



stemless mil vetch (*Astragalus exscapus*) – a steppe relict species

What are the threats to steppe grasslands habitats?

Nowadays, the major threat is posed by the abandonment of traditional land use and by declining grazing intensity. This results in woody plant succession: shrubs and trees reconquer the sites and supplant those species that need light and a warm climate. Further threats include:

- pesticide and fertilizer depositions from adjacent fields that are subject to intensive farming
- forestation
- quarrying
- leisure activities (e.g. motocross)

PROJECT AREAS WITH STEPPE GRASSLANDS IN THURINGIA



How can steppe grasslands be conserved?

The conservation will be assured by re-establishing and improving sheep and goat grazing. Therefore the LIFE project includes measures for biotope development such as

- cutting woody plants
- removing deposits
- preserving heavily matted grasslands through the use of fire
- creating new habitats for highly endangered species (species protection measures)

The sheep-farming infrastructure will be improved by

- restoring cattle tracks
- building wells and drinking troughs
- providing fences

If necessary, the above-mentioned measures will be supported and safeguarded by land purchase. The good coordination of maintenance and development plans will ensure the sustainable use of the funds.



goats at the Drachenschwanz



spring pheasant's eye
(*Adonis vernalis*)

The LIFE project will be supplemented by a comprehensive awareness campaign:

- creating information points and nature trails
- establishing a permanent exhibition in Sömmerda
- producing a film and a brochure
- organising and conducting meetings and natural history tours.