

Welcome to the Schlossinsel!



- 1 European Pond Turtle
- 2 Amphibian Pond
- 3 Beaver Trees
- 4 Insect Hotels
- 5 Tracks and Droppings
- 6 On the Backwaters
- 7 Underwater Observatory
- 8 Death and Life
- 9 Moor Oak
- 10 Native Colubrids
- 11 Wildlife on the Pond
- 12 Dry Grassland
- 13 Wildflower Meadow
- 14 Deadwood Habitat
- 15 Nature's Playground
- 16 European Ground Squirrels

The Austrian National Forests, or ÖBf, have put the Schlossinsel grounds at our disposal at no cost.



This overview will help you plan your own route on the Schlossinsel. The navigational system points out the various stations along the way. Signs and info booklets relate interesting knowledge about flora, fauna and ecology. Be sure to pay special attention to the kingfisher pins: our mascot points out all our current highlights. Stay a while! It doesn't take long to get to know a part of the wetlands with all your senses.

We wish you much fun on your journey of observation and discovery!

Visitors:

As part of the schlossORTH National Park Centre, the Schlossinsel may only be entered with a valid admission ticket. Dogs are not allowed on the Schlossinsel.

Please remain on the paths and away from the banks.

For safety reasons, parents should always supervise their children at play.



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LE 07-13
Entwicklung für ein Ländliches Raum



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Discovery Stations on the Schlossinsel

Located on the grounds of schlossORTH National Park Centre, the Schlossinsel is the place to experience the Danube wetlands. Within a relatively small area, animals, plants and entire habitats characteristic of so-called riparian landscapes can be experienced up close.

1 European Pond Turtle

One characteristic animal of the National Park is the European pond turtle (*Emys orbicularis*). This species has inhabited Europe since time immemorial and was once common across all of Austria, but today, the Danube wetlands have become its last refuge. As cold-blooded creatures, these turtles require heat from external sources; this is why they sun themselves on banks and on logs partly submerged in the waters. In the wild, one may spot these shy reptiles in the Danube backwaters from a lookout point on the Hochwasserschutzdamm, but here on the Schlossinsel it is possible to observe these fascinating creatures up close. Specimens of various ages are represented here. The best time to observe the turtles is starting late morning in sunny weather.

2 Amphibian Pond

Thirteen different species of newts, toads and frogs inhabit the Danube wetlands. Shallow waters and ponds without fish offer the best environments for these amphibians. In the amphibian pond you can see frogspawn developing into tadpoles and beyond. In and near the waters and on the banks you may observe the species Fire-Bellied Toad (*Bombina orientalis*), Edible Frog (*Rana esculenta*), Agile Frog (*Rana dalmatina*) and the European Common Tree Frog (*Hyla arborea arborea*).

3 Beaver Trees

Gnawed-upon tree stumps are sure signs of one typical wetlands inhabitant: the Eurasian beaver (*Castor fiber*). The beaver's teeth are coated on the front with tough enamel and grow continuously. In winter, the beaver often fells trees near banks of water in order to get to the tasty shoots and tender buds; in warmer seasons it dines on herbaceous aquatic plants. The beaver was hunted to extinction in Austria toward the end of the 19th century and was only re-introduced around 1975. In the meantime, an impressive population of these swimming rodents lives in the Danube wetlands. As a natural logger, the beaver actively shapes the wetlands habitat: felled tree crowns in the water offer precious shelter to young fish and places to perch for the kingfisher.

4 Insect Hotels

The true importance of the activity of wild bees is rarely appreciated. Without these diligent species – to which the bumblebee also belongs – we would have far less bountiful harvests of fruit and vegetables. The National Park offers ample natural nesting grounds for these insects, much in contrast to the landscapes cultivated by man. Yet the "insect hotel" structure, which consists of pieces of wood with holes and hollow stems of varying diameters, offers ideal breeding burrows for numerous underappreciated bee and wasp

species. An insect hotel is very easy to create yourself in a variety of sizes; it can be put in your garden, or even on a small balcony. In a very short time you will be able to observe first hand life in an insect family – and you will have helped support endangered animal species!

5 Tracks and Droppings

Spotting wild animals in the great outdoors can be difficult. But sometimes tracks and droppings can provide evidence of their presence. The "legacies" of typical Danube wetlands mammals are on exhibit at this station. There are also tracks of other kinds of animals displayed which reveal which animal was where: for example, dropped deer antlers indicate the presence of the mighty stags of the wetlands, which can be up to 100 kg heavier than their Alpine relatives. Feeding tracks of various Danube wetlands animals are also on display.

6 On the Backwaters

When water levels allow, this station on the Fadenbach Creek provides the chance to observe snakes hunting their prey, dragonflies, swarms of young fish, birds and much more. You may even be able to detect beaver tracks in the vegetation along the banks. The chorus of frogs in springtime can also be experienced up close and personal in these backwaters!

7 Underwater Observatory

The "heart" of the Schlossinsel allows you to go underwater without getting wet! Under water, fish and bivalves as well as aquatic plants such as Hornwort and Nuphar may be observed in their natural habitat. If you observe the goings on behind the glass long enough, you will glimpse a large number of the creatures which inhabit the waters of the National Park. Explanatory illustrations help to identify fish species. A special feature of the observatory is the wood structures lying on the bottom: dating back to the 16th century, they were likely part of a pier at the moated Orth Castle and were unearthed during the construction of the underwater observatory.

8 Death and Life

Death is also part of life. And even in death, animals make an important contribution to biodiversity and the nutrient cycle. Carcasses serve as source of nutrition, place for breeding, and habitat. Within a short time, a carcass will be colonised by a variety of specialised insects such as blow and flesh flies as well as rove, checkered and carrion beetles. These arrive in a strictly timed sequence and enable the near complete exploitation of the carcass. This station depicts the rapid "decompositional" work done by scavengers and allows you to get to know this habitat on the other side of life.

9 Moor Oak

In 2005, a stately oak was washed up onto the shore near Hainburg. Using tree-ring dating, it was determined that the tree had lived from 1321 to 1383 before it fell and was buried in the gravel bed of the Danube. Thanks to oxygen deprivation the tree was conserved, as it would have been in a moor – thus leading it to be named the "Moor Oak". For over 600 years the mighty trunk had been preserved before being washed up, then recovered by the via donau (formerly known as the Austrian Waterways Authority) and subsequently put on display at the Schlossinsel, much to the delight of visitors.

10 Native Colubrids

Four of the six native snake species live in the Danube wetlands: the Aesculapian, Grass, Dice, and Smooth snakes. The first three species may be seen at this station. With a length of up to 2 meters, the Aesculapian Snake (*Zamenis longissimus*) is Austria's largest snake as well as a great climber. The well-known Grass Snake (*Natrix natrix*) is often seen near waters and can be identified by its half-moon shaped yellow markings in the neck area. The Dice Snake (*Natrix tessellata*) is the true "water snake" among native Colubrids and is an excellent swimmer and diver. Our snakes may be best observed on the pond sunning themselves on drift wood or in the pond, hunting their prey.

11 Wildlife on the Pond

A narrow path leads along the water back to the so-called "Mühl-dumpf", a pond. Along this short path you can see deadwood in the form of fallen White Willow trees which are now home to carpenter bees and other deadwood inhabitants. The observation station on the pond's banks can be reached by crossing the boardwalk. Northern Pike and swarms of young fish – and with luck, maybe even the European pond turtle – may be spotted from the path and the bridge. Take a moment to listen to the wind in the trees and the songs of the birds.

12 Dry Grassland

The so-called xeric habitats of the Lobau and the crests of the flood protection dams are especially dry, nutrient-poor areas of the National Park. Here, dry grassland habitats with an astonishing number and variety of species have evolved. Specialized plants such as Stipa grasses, Sea Buckthorn, flowering plants of the Spurge family, orchids as well as rare lichens and moss thrive in this hot and barren environment. Numerous grasshoppers, ground beetles, bees, butterflies, spiders and all sorts of bugs may be found here in addition to lizards, rodents and a variety of birds. Typical dry grassland flora of the Danube wetlands may be found along the stone wall near the snake pen.

13 Wildflower Meadow

A wealth of wildflowers and field weeds used to dominate our meadows and field borders. But due to extensive agricultural activity and the use of herbicides, these plants have now all but disappeared.

The wildflower meadow of the Schlossinsel is meant to convey an impression of the biodiversity of these blooming communities. The huge variety of plants attracts many insects, including moths, flies, bees and beetles. The meadow is mown twice each year in order to make flowering and seed maturation possible.

14 Deadwood Habitat

Ageing trees and deadwood may be found at various spots on the Schlossinsel. Even though we humans may find them untidy and worthless, they in fact shelter a cornucopia of life and are among the most valuable habitats of the wetlands forest. Mushrooms, lichen and moss colonise deadwood and aid in decay. Trees offer themselves up as a source of food, nesting place, shelter and hibernation quarters. Woodpeckers search for insects under the bark and build their nests in old standing trees; these in turn are used by Strix owls, squirrels and bats. Over 100 beetle species, many exceedingly rare, are dependent upon deadwood in their development phases, as are in fact the Stag and the Great Capricorn beetles.

15 Nature's Playground

Here young wetlands explorers can experience all sorts of fascinating things and test themselves. Find out what a chick feels like in a bird's nest. Run through a willow tunnel. Test your skills on the obstacle course. Step across the suspension bridge and the stumps of the nature path near the other end of the Schlossinsel.

16 Ground Squirrels

Long ago, ground squirrels (*Spermophilus citellus*) lived in large numbers in and around the National Park. But today, after years of persecution as would-be seed robbers and habitat deprivation, only isolated colonies still exist – and these are threatened with extinction. Ground squirrels typically inhabit steppe and meadow habitats, live in burrows under the earth, and eat seeds, roots and fruits. These small rodents hibernate in the winter. Typical for the species is the way they rise up on their hind legs to better view their surroundings and the shrill cry they make when danger is near.

A small colony lives in the enclosure and we are hoping for lots of baby squirrels at the beginning of summer! They can be best observed while playing near their nests.

Recreational Tips:

The multimedia "DonAuräume" exhibit at the schlossORTH National Park Centre offers other interesting impressions of the Danube wetlands. In four separate rooms, unusual perspectives of the National Park – its ecological significance, history and current situation – are presented in an entertaining and informative way.

The Schlossinsel is also literally the "gate to the wetlands". Crossing a bridge, visitors arrive at the Fadenbach Creek nature path and continue on into the riparian forest all the way to the Hochwasserschutzdamm and then back again to Schloss Orth. Longer walking paths in the immediate vicinity continue on deep into the wetlands, all the way to the Danube.