

Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 74 (2008)
Heft: [6]

Rubrik: Carolyn Lane : Bodensee Bulletin

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Bodensee Bulletin

Last Bodensee Bulletin, we'd been enjoying the spring blossom. Now I've seen something that to me is even more glorious, perhaps because the only human intervention is to leave things alone. All around our part of the old Rhein and its entrance into Bodensee is a wildlife protection area. One of our favourite cycle-paths runs along its edge. Cycling through there I glimpsed something that had me back on foot, with camera. Irises, gold and purple, growing on the edges of the *Schilf* (tall grasses) that border the lake made the area



Lawn with marguerites mowed around

a hazy wash of colours that any impressionist would struggle to paint. In one part, they were accompanied by tiny field orchids, in another by yellow clover and pink *Rossnägeli*. Now as those fade and die, they're being replaced with cornflowers, and many other wildflowers that I need a book to name. The other wonder of that long walk was a long talk. I exchanged an "isn't this wonderful" comment with a woman, which turned into a conversation about the benefits for body and soul of being in nature, and into a discovery that she had been at Sunday School with Mani so many years ago, and so on and on ... and it wasn't until we'd parted that I realised we'd had a long chat, and mainly understood each other. Sure there was a bit of arm-waving, and some abandoned lines of discussion when neither of us could get any sense – but we talked!

Times like that I think the hours of deck-chair time with

"German for Beginners" is paying off. Other times I despair when nothing, including me, makes sense.

More on spring: it seems that the burst of changes in nature are matched by all sorts of other possibilities of change.

A few weeks ago the head of a farmers' organisation was reported as saying that subsidies were addictive, and it was time Swiss farmers weaned themselves off them. You might have heard a NZ farmer's daughter cheer from your place! Everyone makes an exception for the mountain farmers of course. It seems very civilised, and rational too, to say "we're prepared to subsidise those un-economic units for the sake of having people care for that land" – regardless of whether you're arguing the scenic values or reduction of avalanche danger through keeping long grass from becoming a snow-slide.

The treasured cantonal differences are under pressure too. Coop (one of the main Swiss-owned supermarket chains) have announced that they're standardising on a minimum age of 18 for liquor sales, countrywide, regardless of the local laws. It was just too hard to manage all the different cantons' variations, with everything from staff training to checkout till programming affected, so they've taken a business decision to standardise. Will we see incremental erosion of those precious differences? Would Switzerland as a whole ever find itself looking at the cost to the nation of cantonal independence? I suspect that's a long way off and the country would need to be in unimaginable financial straits before they would dare start a cost-benefit analysis of multiple tax systems, to name just one candidate. Those of you who know about my business background might be just saying "once a consultant always a consultant....!"

We've been having some very hot days and nights: the *Föhn* has been in operation. I of course am ridiculously delighted by the concept of a warm southerly wind. It

has been blowing from the desert, and bringing with it a very fine powder of sand to dust our car-roof and windows. Desert sand around Bodensee! On its way the *Föhn* has flown over the Alps, doing its seasonal task of melting the snow and feeding the rivers and cooling a little as it does, but then warming again as it compresses to rush through the valleys and topple a few trees. Some people find it wears on their temper too – Cantabrians know the nor-wester syndrome – though I don't think that here it can be used as a defence in crimes of passion as has been argued in hotter-blooded France and Spain. Now the weather has changed, and it's raining on the Europameisterschaft 2008 fans ... seems to be keeping the hot-headed soccer fans cool!

Around our place, it's the maintenance season. The community "rule" is that work that requires loud banging, power-sawing, and other disturbances of the peace must be done before the main holiday season, so that people can lie in their deckchairs, play cards, talk, and generally relax undisturbed through summer. Even the unavoidable loud noises, like lawn-mowing, are constrained year-round. You absolutely would not mow between midday and two o'clock – people are lunching and might be taking a little nap. The after-lunch rest is a serious business, though not everyone takes it as seriously as a friend of ours from Friedrichshafen across the lake, who puts on his pyjamas after lunch for a lie down. Many of the shops and businesses still close from 12.00 till 1.30 so the staff can go home for lunch. Most times I find that quaint and commendable – except for the times when it's extremely inconvenient!

Our loud noises have been about re-doing our lean-to, so that it's now Perspex-walled, light and airy, and with an extension to the roof that makes it an all-weather outdoors area. On the "any excuse for a party" principle, the gang is asking when the official opening will be.