Photo Story

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The beauty of xerothermic vegetation complexes in Ausserberg (Rhone valley, Switzerland)

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Ausserberg (46°19'N 7°51'E) is a village in the Swiss Canton of Valais with about 600 inhabitants. Located at an elevation of about 1000 m a.s.l. on the steep south-facing slopes above the Rhone valley, one of the most continental inneralpine dry valleys, it has a pronounced dry climate (600 mm annual precipitation) and hot summers.

This situation led to the development of rather extensive steppic grasslands with their often rare and sometimes even endemic flora and fauna. These grasslands are embedded into a matrix of other elements of xerothermic vegetation complexes, which makes the slopes of this village overall very species rich and creates a beautiful landscape.

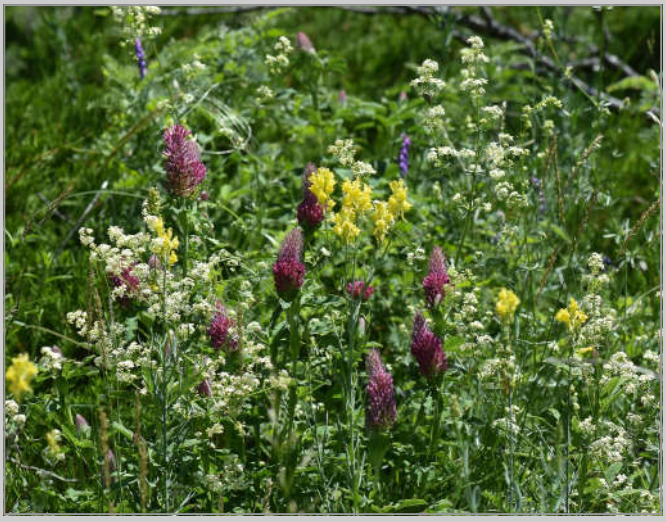
The special physical geographical situation is complemented by a long cultural history. First mentioned in 1378, the village was reachable via mule track only for a long time. Only in the early 20th century it got a railway station at the newly built Lötschberg line and even later a road to Visp in the Rhone valley. This relative isolation contributed to the conservation of typical elements of the cultural landscape of Valais, including the traditional stone houses and the *Suonen*, water channels that transport water over many kilometres from side valleys to irrigate the meadows.

Location of Ausserberg in Switzerland and in the Canton of Valais (copyright Wikipedia).

Centre of the village (the so-called Trogdorf, left) and a Suone (right).




The rocky steppes feature among others *Stipa eriocaulis, Anthericum liliago* and *Centaurea valesiaca.*




Colourful forest-edge communities of the *Geranion sanguinei* with display of *Trifolium rubens*, *Linaria angustissima* and *Galium lucidum* (left) and *Geranium sanguineum* and *Vicia cracca* subsp. *incana* (right).

The xero-thermophilous pine forests host a rich herb layer with rare plants such as *Astragalus exscapus* (left) and *Cephalanthera rubra* (right).

Semi-dry sub-continental grasslands (*Cirsio-Brachypodion*) as well as *Juniperus sabina* shrublands also form part of the vegetation complex…

… as do man-made stone walls (left) and natural rocky outcrops, here with *Sempervivum arachnoideum* (right).

Also the xerothermic insect fauna is extraordinarily species rich, including *Pyrgus carthami*, *Arcyptera fusca*, *Mylabris variabilis*, *Melanargia galathea*, *Hyles euphorbiae* and *Graphosoma lineatum*.