Meet Veronika, the tool-using cow

Each time, Veronika used her tongue to lift and position the broom in her mouth, clamping down with her teeth for a stable grip. This enabled her to use the broom to scratch otherwise hard-to-reach areas on the rear half of her body. Veronika seemed to prefer the brush end to the stick end (i.e., the exploitation of distinct properties of a single object for different functions) although which end she used depended on body area. For example, she used the brush end to scratch her upper body using a scrubbing motion, while using the stick end to scratch more sensitive lower areas like her udders and belly skin flaps using precisely targeted gentle forward pushes. She also anticipated the need to adjust her grip.

The authors conclude that this behavior demonstrates "goal-directed, context-sensitive tooling," as well as versatility in her tool-use anticipation, and fine-motor targeting. Veronika's scratching behavior is likely motivated by the desire to relieve itching from insect bites, but her open, complex environment, compared to most livestock, and regular interactions with humans enabled her unusual cognitive abilities to emerge.

The implication is that this kind of technical problem-solving is not confined to species with large brains and hands or beaks. "[Veronika] did not fashion tools like the cow in Gary Larson's cartoon, but she selected, adjusted, and used one with notable dexterity and flexibility," the authors wrote. "Perhaps the real absurdity lies not in imagining a tool-using cow, but in assuming such a thing could never exist."

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